



REBELS OF SANDLAND

RECKLESS

Lies

NIKKI J SUMMERS

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Rebels of Sandland Series

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The Psycho

The Reaper

The Joker

Stand-Alone

Luca

This Cruel Love

Hurt to Love

All books are available on Amazon with Kindle Unlimited.

Only suitable for readers 18+ due to adult content.

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PLAYLIST

Available to download on [Spotify](#).

One Step Closer – Linkin Park

Boulevard of Broken Dreams – Green Day

When I Grow Up – Garbage

Painkiller – Three Days Grace

Mastermind – Taylor Swift

Trustfall – Pink

I'll Stand by You – Pretenders

My Immortal – Evanescence

Someone You Loved – Lewis Capaldi

Turbulence – Pink

White Flag – Dido

How to Save a Life – The Fray

This Woman's Work – Kate Bush

Don't Give Up On Me – Andy Grammer

The Scientist – Coldplay

Rule The World – Take That

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TRIGGER WARNING

Reckless Lies tells the story of Zak Atwood, a hero who was burned in a fire. At the beginning of the story, he sees and describes himself as a victim. At the end, he realises he's a survivor and a warrior.

This story deals with the issues surrounding his trauma and how he's coped with the fallout of the accident that left him scarred for life. Depression, attempted suicide (not the main characters), issues around self-image and self-confidence are all depicted in this story, as well as childhood neglect and mental cruelty.

There are also scenes of a sexual nature and some light bondage, praise, and degradation. Therefore, this book is intended for readers eighteen years and over.

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“Too often we underestimate the power of a touch, a smile, a kind word, a listening ear, an honest compliment, or the smallest act of caring, all of which have the potential to turn a life around.”

— LEO BUSCAGLIA

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PROLOGUE



They say when you die, your whole life plays over in your mind like a Hallmark movie. All rose-tinted bullshit to remind you what a great life you've led. But for me, that wasn't the case. There was no romantic, nostalgic ending for me. All I had was pain, darkness, and despair on the day I died.

ZAK ATWOOD

Five Years Ago

Clarkson's Plastics Factory, Brinton Manor

You'd think after running illegal parties, bare-knuckle boxing matches, and gambling syndicates in Sandland, we'd be used to all the bullshit that followed us around. We were no strangers to running from the police, the do-gooders of the town, angry punters trying to get their money back, or alcohol-crazed groupies who thought we owed them something. It was par for the course in our line of work. But nothing could prepare us for what would happen on the night we took the party to Brinton Manor.

"YOU NEED TO GET OUT. Just go. You're not getting your money back," I snapped angrily at the group of irate men standing before me.

As parties went, tonight's wasn't one of our finest. And here I was, trying to calm an angry mob who felt like they'd

been duped. The night hadn't gone how they'd wanted it to. Well, surprise, surprise. It hadn't gone to plan for us either, and we'd organised it. Everyone was a loser tonight.

The men squared their shoulders, getting ready to fight, baring their teeth as their cheeks grew redder at the realisation that they'd lost a shit-ton of money. They'd bet on Brandon Mathers to win his fight tonight, and after watching him go down in the first round, they were pissed off.

He was their hero.

The undefeated champion on the bare-knuckle boxing circuit.

But he was also my best friend, and if he could be here to face off with them himself, he would, but he'd had to leave. He'd been called away earlier, after finding out his girlfriend, Harper, had gone into labour. He had more important things to do, and so did I. Arguing with these drunken mugs wasn't on my agenda for tonight, and this needed wrapping up.

Clearly, they weren't going to leave here without their money, and I was never going to back down. A bet's a bet. Okay, Brandon *had* thrown the fight on purpose, but they didn't need to know that. It was complicated. It'd been a shitty night all round. He didn't want to lose, but life doesn't always work out the way you want it to, and the sooner these men realised that, the better. Brandon threw the fight because he had no choice. Some things in life are more important than money.

The stockiest guy in the group charged at me, his face uncomfortably close to mine as he gritted his teeth. "You either pay up or we'll beat it out of you. Either way, we're getting our money back."

I wasn't scared of him and I pushed back, staring him right in the face. I was about to tell him to go for it, do his worst, when I heard a bang coming from the main area where my DJ set and laptop were set up. My attention shifted briefly to the doors leading into that room, where my mate, Kian, was standing. This clown standing in front of me made the most of my distraction and smacked his fist into the side of my face,

causing my head to jerk backwards, forcing my attention back to this ridiculous stand-off.

“You owe us three hundred, *mate*. And you will fucking pay. Or do you want me to beat you unconscious and take it from you that way?” he growled, oblivious to the struggle that’d started behind him at the entrance to the dance hall. My jaw ached from where he’d punched me, and in any other circumstance I’d have made him pay for it. But something bigger was happening. People were panicking, rushing to leave, pushing each other as they jostled to get out of the way.

What the fuck was going on?

Anxious about what was happening behind us, I put my hand in my pocket and fished out three coins, throwing them to the concrete floor and gesturing to them with a sneer.

“There’s three pence. That’s all you’re getting from me.” I didn’t know if they were pennies, but I didn’t care. I wanted to disrespect and distract him at the same time.

The guy shook his head; the mean stare that seemed to be permanently etched onto his face burned redder as he pumped his fist. He was getting ready for round two, and so was I, until a group of men charged past us and barrelled into him.

“Smithy,” one of them said, panting breathlessly and pulling on this guy’s jacket to try and force him to follow them. “We need to go. The fucking place is on fire. It’s gonna burn to the ground. You need to get out. Now.”

“What the fuck are you talking about?” Smithy replied, shaking the guy off. “I’m not leaving here without my money.”

“It’s gonna fucking blow,” the guy shouted, a look of utter disbelief on his face as he edged away. He wanted to run, but he was struggling with the guilt of leaving his friends behind. “This whole place is going up.” He paused, then common sense kicked in, and he bolted. He was panicked and obviously didn’t want to take the chance and wait another minute to argue his case. He was that desperate to get away.

Smithy watched him leave, flexing his jaw as he weighed up his options. Then the rusty cogs in his brain kicked into

action, and he decided his friend had a better plan after all.

He nodded to the rest of his gang and turned to leave, pointing at me over his shoulder. "I'm coming for you," he snarled and then he fled with the rest of his crew.

Good luck with that. You'll have to catch me first.

I spun around, faltering momentarily as I took in the chaos playing out in front of me. They were like rats scurrying from a sinking ship, and as I took a deep breath, I could already smell the smoke coming from that ship.

Our ship.

And it was burning.

The realisation of what was happening, coupled with the sheer panic on people's faces as the mass exodus grew more frantic, made the dread in the pit of my stomach turn into a twisted, agonising fear.

What the fuck was happening?

What had gone wrong?

Scores of people were stumbling over each other to get out, heading for the exits as smoke billowed behind them. I should've followed them, gone to the exit and forgotten about this shitshow of a night, but my equipment was in there. Thousands of pounds worth of gear that'd taken me years to collect. Call me a fool, but I had to try and save it. I couldn't leave it behind.

I pushed through the sea of people going in the opposite direction, forcing my way into the main hall. Once I reached the entrance, I put my arm over my face to protect myself from the toxic, overwhelming fumes, but it was hopeless. The thick fog of smoke made it impossible to see my hand in front of me, let alone what was happening around me. I tried to walk forward, but my movement slowed, hindering me as I felt the heat from the room holding me back. I gasped, trying to breathe, but there was no oxygen. As my lungs filled, they instantly ached. It was like I was drowning, swallowing water, submerged in a sea with no escape. But this wasn't water; it was burning, scolding smoke. The more I battled to move

forward, the harder it became. The room choked me, burning my skin, and all I could hear was the crackling, spitting flames and screams as death drew near.

I dropped to my knees, unable to stand in the unbearable heat, and then I crawled, getting lower to the ground where I knew the air would be cooler, cleaner, better. But even that was a struggle.

What was I doing?

Why did I come in here?

I wanted to cry out, but I could only cough, gasp, and pray to God that I got out of here alive. What the fuck had I been thinking, running into a burning room? Because my DJ equipment was the last thing on my mind as my survival instincts kicked in.

I stayed as close to the ground as I could, attempting to crawl in a direction that I hoped would lead me to safety. The burning room had sucked me in, trapped me, and it was ready to consume my body and soul, chew me up and spit me out. It was all happening so fast, and there was nothing I could do to stop it.

Suddenly, I heard the building groan and then an almighty crash from above. And in that instant, pain seared through my legs like nothing I'd ever felt before. The building was collapsing, and something was pinning me to the floor, ripping my body in half.

This was it.

This was how I was going to die.

I tried to move, but I had nothing left; I was helpless. My lungs were raw from trying to breathe when breathing was impossible. My skin was on fire, burning and melting from the indescribable heat. I was trapped.

This was the end.

I realised in that moment that I'd never see my family or friends again. After tonight, I'd be nothing but a memory to them. Gone. And with the passing of time, I'd eventually be

forgotten. Nothing more than a face in a photograph or a name uttered with regret.

But then, as my body and mind began to shut down, and I felt the weight of my soul being dragged down to the devil's door, I was conscious of another pull, a tug on my arms. The darkness was trying to take me, but a force from this room was working hard to bring me back.

I felt that pull become more frantic, and in my head, I gasped, 'It's too late.' Over and over, my mind repeated the words I couldn't say out loud, telling this hero, 'Don't stay to help me; save yourself.'

A silent plea, until eventually, the worst side won.

All hope was lost.

The darkness finally took me.

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ONE

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ZAK



Five Years Later

(Present Day)

I drove down the dark country lane that led to my cottage. Gravel crunched under my tyres as I navigated through the narrow stretch of secluded land that I and only a select few ever ventured down. There were no streetlights to guide my way, only the moon and my headlights bouncing off the bushes and trees lining the side of the road, and that was enough. The gloomy countryside surrounding me would probably appear eerie to some. Scary, even. Like the backdrop to a horror movie where the bad guy lies in wait, watching. But I liked it. It was comforting to be alone. Secluded. The darkness was like a blanket that protected me from the rest of the world. The screen that separated my life from theirs. For me, it was perfect.

My cottage in the village of Willowbrook had been a haven ever since the fire. I'd left Sandland as soon as I could after months turned into years of treatment, therapy, and physio that'd taken their toll mentally, physically, and emotionally. It was a life I didn't ask for. One I didn't want. And one I was all too happy to walk away from.

When I said I died in that fire all those years ago, I meant it. The old Zak, the one who lived like he didn't have a care in the world, he was long gone. And I didn't want to stay in a place that meant living with the constant reminder of what I'd lost. So, I'd walked away. I found that easier than staying and living in limbo to please others. Because ultimately, all I was

doing was making everyone miserable, myself included. They didn't like that I'd changed. They thought they could bring me back. But I wasn't a phoenix ready to rise from the ashes like a fucking fairy tale. I was a man, scarred and tainted. Broken.

Leaving Sandland meant walking away from my family and friends to start a new life. Or at least to pretend that I had a life. I found it hard to trust people and open up. Actually, it'd be more accurate to say I didn't trust people at all, and I didn't want to open up. Coming here meant I could be whoever I wanted to be, and right now, that was invisible. My own man. Pleasing myself without any expectation. Sandland came with expectations. They remembered the old Zak. They had hope. Willowbrook had none. To the people here, I was a nobody. I liked being a nobody. This version of myself could be as aloof, rude, and standoffish as I damn well wanted to be, and most of the time, I was.

I turned the steering wheel, navigating a sharp corner, as I thought about how my life had changed. Having no one to please but myself was all I wanted now. My body might be scarred, my legs were a mess, and the right side of my torso still held reminders of what'd happened to me that night, but it was my mess to deal with. No one else's. Some days, particularly in the darker times when I was going through rehab, I wished I'd died. That someone hadn't managed to drag me closer to a fire exit and alert the emergency services to come and rescue me. According to the doctors, I was moments away from death. I was lucky to be alive. But that was their opinion.

Lucky?

It was all about perspective. And I felt anything but lucky about the way my life had turned out.

Pain.

It was something I'd learned to live with. Only, my pain had altered over time. The skin and bone-deep agony I felt in the early years morphed into something more visceral as time moved on. It became a searing pain that lived inside me. It was a part of me, shaping the way I saw the world and the way I

felt about myself. People talk about depression as being like a black dog, following you around, dragging you under. But for most people, that black dog can be tamed, if only for a little while. That wasn't the case for me. No therapy could fix what'd shattered inside, and lord knows I'd tried every therapy going. Okay, maybe I hadn't given some avenues the full attention they deserved, but what was the point? Nothing would change what I'd been through. My darkness would always be with me. It was just something I had to accept.

So, over the years, I'd learned to live with it, embrace it even. Hell, I even liked it sometimes when I could use it as a shield to keep people away. I was living in my own dark, twisted movie, and like any good villain, I had a vicious superpower. One look, one scowl, one scathing comment, and I'd make anyone wish they'd avoided me like the plague. That suited me just fine. I think it suited them too, because no one ever knows what to do or say around a guy like me. A victim. It was easier for everyone if they avoided me altogether.

My cottage came into view at the end of the lane, my headlights lighting up the outside as the windows showcased the darkness from within. As I pulled onto the driveway, I decided to head to my outhouse first, the hub for my online business. The small wooden cabin I'd built at the back of my cottage was where I spent most of my days working. However, when I reached the back of the cottage, I noticed a car parked up there. An empty car that I didn't recognise, and right away, the bottom dropped out of my stomach.

Someone was here.

I never had visitors, so who the fuck was it?

I parked up and shut off the engine, nerves sparking to life as I took a moment to glance around the dense treeline that surrounded this side of my property, but I couldn't see anything; it was too dark. Adrenaline coursed through me as I took a deep breath and slowly opened my car door, stepping out. I felt tense as my nerves fully kicked in, my senses on high alert as I tried to stay focused. My heart was racing, beating like a drum in my ears. And even though every one of

my instincts were screaming at me to get back in the car and call the police, I didn't.

Maybe I could overpower the intruder?

I did have the element of surprise in my favour... unless they were lying in wait.

I closed the car door as quietly as I could and picked my way carefully across the pathway, each step slow and measured so I wouldn't make a noise. I decided to head down to the outhouse first and cursed myself for not fixing the security light back here, like I should've done months ago. I'd gotten lazy, and security had taken a back seat. I didn't think I'd need it. No one ever came out here.

I walked cautiously, pushing my hand into the pocket of my jeans to retrieve my keys. My hands were shaking, and I tried to take a few deep breaths to calm myself, but the ringing in my ears wouldn't go away. The air around me was eerily quiet, but my head was blasting a warning that resonated right through my soul. Someone was here and I needed to protect myself. This could turn nasty, and I had to be ready to fight. I held the keys firmly in my fist. Positioned correctly, even they could be used as a weapon, and I needed to arm myself and prepare for the worst.

When I reached the door, I slowly turned the handle, afraid of what I might find, but it was locked. The raw terror eating away at me wouldn't dissipate, in fact, it was getting worse. My rapid heartbeats increased with every second that passed, and in turn, so did my fear. I slid the key into the lock and creaked the door open, but all I saw was darkness. There was no one here. Tentatively, I reached forward to grab a torch and spanner from the shelving to the side. Then, I closed the door again, hoping my stealthy moves hadn't been detected by the intruder. Peering around the side of the building, I shone the torch into the undergrowth, holding my breath as I did, but there was no one there either. I stayed silent though, vigilant, holding the spanner in a death-like grip, ready to use it as viciously as I could to defend myself when the time came.

I turned and crept cautiously towards my house, stepping onto my porch but keeping my wits about me. I wasn't going to let anyone jump me from behind. I'd be ready for them.

I strained to listen for any suspicious noises around me or in the house, but all I could hear were the familiar country sounds I was used to. Whoever this was, they wanted to stay hidden until they were ready to come out. Too bad I was about to ruin that for them and make them pay for coming here in the first place. I'd enjoy teaching them a lesson.

I pushed down the front door handle, and surprisingly, it opened. I knew I'd locked it when I left earlier.

They were inside.

Waiting.

My adrenaline turned to panic as basic survival instincts set in, and then blind fury.

How dare they come into my home.

How dare they make me feel like this.

I decided to go in all guns blazing and let them know I wasn't going down without a fight. If they thought they could break into my home, steal my things and ruin my peace of mind, they had another thing coming.

I slammed the door open, letting it bang off the plaster of the wall behind it, and I wielded my spanner in the air as I shouted, "Get the fuck out of my house!"

Instantly, the side light in my living room switched on. And there, sitting boldly like this was a normal, everyday occurrence, were my three best friends, Ryan, Finn, and Brandon.

I stood there for a moment, trying to calm my racing heart and frantic breaths and understand why they thought breaking in and surprising me in my home was a good idea.

What the fuck were they thinking?

I knew I hadn't seen them in a while, but this was taking it to the fucking extreme, not to mention absolutely fucking

rude. I was mad, and all I wanted to do was swear and shout and tell them to get the fuck out of my house. We weren't eighteen anymore. They couldn't just waltz in here, invading my space like it was nothing. My privacy was the most important thing to me. Some days, it felt like all I had.

Once I'd regained some degree of self-control, I cursed under my breath, slammed my spanner down onto the side table by the door and asked, "What the fuck are you doing?"

I didn't need to tell them their unexpected visit was unwelcome; it was written all over my face. From the frown etched into my forehead, to the scowl scorched into my eyes. The dent I'd made in the wall and the side table was a pretty good indicator too. I folded my arms and stayed by the front door, waiting to see who'd speak first. Who'd have the nerve to try and justify themselves.

"I told you this was a bad idea." Finn sighed, taking a set of keys from his pocket and throwing them onto the coffee table in front of him. Then he glanced back at me with a look of contrition. "Your mum lent us your spare keys. I did say we should've waited in the car, but—"

Brandon cut him off, sitting forward in my armchair and shaking his head with a smug grin. "But where's the fun in that?"

"Fun?" I spat back. "You think giving me a fucking heart attack on top of everything else I've been through is fun?"

Guilt flickered on their faces, but I didn't care. They deserved to feel that guilt. What sort of friends pulled a stunt like this?

"We didn't mean to scare you," Ryan apologised, but it fell on deaf ears. "We thought you'd recognise the car."

I huffed at his feeble effort at making an apology.

"Why would I? I've never seen it before."

Brandon clucked his tongue and added sarcastically, "You would if you made the effort to visit us or let us see you more than once a year." Then he nodded at Finn. "He's your business partner, and even he doesn't see you anymore."

I ignored Brandon's dig. I didn't need to explain myself to anyone.

"What are you doing here? It's a Wednesday night, I'm tired, and I don't have time for your bullshit." I stared at each of them in turn and then turned around, closing my front door and wandering over to the kitchen to get myself a beer.

"We thought it was time for a catch up. We never see you," Ryan stated.

I shook my head, berating his naivety.

"Most civilised people would call or send a text to get my attention," I replied, throwing my keys onto the kitchen worktop and opening the fridge. "But then I guess civilised rules you out, seeing as you think breaking and entering is fucking normal." I slammed the fridge door closed and opened my beer, swigging as I watched Ryan and Finn squirm in their seats. Brandon sat back lazily and spread his legs wide, like he was settling in for the night. I didn't bother to offer them a beer. They wouldn't be staying long.

"Most people answer a call or respond to a text," Brandon replied. "But from our experience lately, you don't do either of those." He shrugged and looked at Finn, then Ryan, and then back at me. "So, we took matters into our own hands. We got creative. We did think about jumping you outside, or bundling you into the back of a van, but we thought that'd be a step too far."

"And skulking in my living room in the dark like a bunch of fucking psychos isn't too far?" I shook my head and glowered at them, leaning against the kitchen counter to show I wasn't willing to play the dutiful host.

"I'll admit, this hasn't been one of our finest moments," Ryan added with remorse. "But come on, mate. It's just us."

I pushed off the counter and took a few steps into the living room, sipping my beer to calm my still shredded nerves. "And this is my home. My space. If you want to speak to me..."

“Call or text so you can ignore it. Right. We got it.” Brandon glared at me; the humour he’d shown before had evaporated, replaced by anger and irritation. “I guess we got our answer. We know where we stand.”

He went to stand up, but Ryan put his arm up as Finn gave him a warning stare.

“Shut up and sit down,” Ryan barked at him. “We came here for a reason. Getting pissed off and leaving things like this isn’t going to help.”

The old Brandon would’ve stood up to Ryan, squared up to him to exert his power in this stand-off. But he didn’t. Brandon had mellowed a lot since meeting Harper and having kids. He was still a hothead, but the level went from simmering to bubbling, not simmering to fireball these days.

Ryan shifted his attention to me. “We miss you, mate. We worry about you. Okay, so we have a shit way of showing it and getting your attention, but...” He shrugged. “We tried.”

I’d be lying if I didn’t say he’d hit a very small nerve. I didn’t show it, but the ripple of something that felt like guilt sparked in me.

“So, what do you want?” I asked, knowing exactly why they were here but still feeling the urge to be a twat and make them jump through hoops.

“The wedding,” Ryan stated, as if it needed saying.

“Finn and Effy’s wedding,” Brandon added, nodding as he spoke in affirmation. “How many invites have you had now? Three? Four? And you’ve ignored every single one. Emails? All gone unanswered, and we know you’ve read them. Text messages? You ignore those too. But you can’t hide from us now. You need to be there, Zak. You *have* to be there.”

I looked over at Finn and tried to think what to say, so it didn’t sound so bad. Out of all the lads, Finn was the one I really didn’t want to upset because he took it so damn well. He was used to people letting him down in life, and I hated that I’d become one of those people, especially after everything he’d done for me.

You see, when I said I'd given up on therapy after the accident, I wasn't being one hundred percent truthful. There was one course of therapy I enjoyed. It had been Finn's idea to give art therapy a go. I wasn't really into painting or drawing, not like he was, but pottery; that was something else entirely. What started out as a way to channel my aggression, pounding the clay mindlessly to give my fists a target they could legitimately lose their shit with, turned into moulding, shaping, and creating. It gave me a purpose. Working with the clay let me switch my brain off, and focus on nothing but the feel of it beneath my fingers. My mind filled with endless possibilities about what I could create.

In the early days, my work wasn't anything to write home about. My skills had taken a little longer to perfect, but I'd enjoyed doing it. But now, my therapy had become quite a lucrative business. A business that I ran from my outhouse.

I'd used my computer skills to set up a website and social media. I did some posts, created a few videos of what I'd made and how I'd made them. Seems people were fascinated watching a guy's hands mould clay on a potter's wheel, and a lot of those videos went viral. After that, orders started to roll in. One particular company, florapetal.net, had placed regular large orders ever since, and my company, AK Designs, had taken off. Finn had helped me in the business, painting intricate designs onto my creations, hence why I'd called it AK Designs. Atwood and Knowles. I'd made him a partner, but he liked to stay silent. That was who he was. The silent support in the shadows, and I'd let him down.

"We get why you couldn't make it to our weddings," Ryan added, filling the silence in the room. "That was understandable, but come on, man. You can't keep avoiding us all like this."

When Brandon and Harper got married, I was still in the hospital. I had an excuse. He'd wanted to wait until I got out, but I talked him around. As for Ryan and Emily's, that one I'd managed to get out of after a hiccup in physiotherapy meant I was on bed rest for a while. But this one was getting trickier to avoid. It wasn't that I didn't want to see my friends get

married. I was happy for them. Truly. It was that I didn't do large crowds. Big gatherings with people and socialising were a massive no for me. It was my worst nightmare.

"I'm not avoiding you," I said, sighing. "I've been busy." It was the worst excuse, but it was all I could think of to say.

"A text takes seconds to write. That's all you had to do," Brandon replied, his cockiness from earlier now gone, replaced by sincerity. "We don't expect anything from you. Just reply. Speak to us. Let us know what we can do to help. The day won't be the same for Finn, for any of us, if you aren't there. You've missed out on enough. Don't miss out on this. You'll regret it."

"And Effy wants you there too," Finn added. "I want you there. You've always been there for me, and I want you by my side on the most important day of my life."

"And he is your business partner," Ryan reminded me, piling on the guilt. "You owe him."

"AK Designs," Brandon added, as if I didn't know what my own company was called. "I still think you should've called it Fifty Shades of Clay."

"And I think you're full of fifty shades of bullshit half the time," I snapped back before my brain could engage, but Brandon threw his head back and laughed.

"God, I've missed this. I've missed us. Get us a beer too. I could do this all night." Brandon chuckled. "It's about time we reconnected."

"Or better yet, bring your own beers next time," I told him. "Maybe that'd get my attention." I hesitated, then put my can down on the table, walking back to the fridge to fetch three more beers.

"Look, I get that you don't like being around people," Finn said, his eyes shining with empathy. "But you don't have to speak to anyone else. Just be there. If you don't want to stay after the vows, you don't have to. You can leave. But Ryan and Brandon are in the wedding party, and I want you to be a part of it too."

“And Emily has mentioned that if you’re not there, Effy may uproot the whole wedding and have it in your field out the back there,” Ryan said, gesturing to the window overlooking the farmer’s fields behind my cottage. “You need to face it,” he said, turning back to me. “You’re coming, even if we have to put a sack over your head and smuggle you out of here to get you there.”

I took a deep breath and mentally weighed up my options.

There were no options.

I couldn’t let Finn down. I had to go. I didn’t have to stay long, but I had to make an effort. He’d done enough for me. It was time to suck it up, at least for one day.

“Fine. I’ll be there,” I stated. “But I’ll wear my own suit. I don’t want any fuss.”

“See...” Brandon pushed himself up out of the armchair. “I knew this was the right course of action. You just needed a nudge in the right direction.” I rolled my eyes, but he came over to me and patted my shoulder. Then he took one of the beers out of my hand and opened it, taking a huge swig. “That’s better.” He gasped. “All this breaking and entering is thirsty work. Have you got any nachos to go with this?”

A few hours and a few beers later, they left. I’d agreed that I’d be there to help with the wedding on Saturday, and they’d agreed to keep the weird-ass stalking to a minimum. There were no other expectations. When I wanted to leave, I could leave. I guessed I’d play it by ear. Finn was a good guy, a true friend. I had to do my best to be what he needed me to be.

It was only one day, after all.

What could possibly go wrong?

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Two

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ZAK



I always knew Finn was an old romantic, but if I were ever in any doubt about that, today would've set the record straight. The grounds of Chattleton Manor, where the wedding was being held, had been transformed into a magical wonderland. There were huge flower arrangements around the marquee that'd been set up for the reception later, with messages and symbols of love hidden in the branches and foliage. I watched as people gathered around to read them and smiled, revelling in the emotions of the day. I wouldn't be reading them. I didn't go in for all that sentimental bull crap.

There was also a graffiti wall at the entrance to the marquee, with the names Finn and Effy painted bold and bright. There was a blank canvas too, with a message asking guests to add their words and drawings to share their memories of the day. I wondered if 'I had no choice, I had to be here' would spoil the canvas, or 'Life sucks, and so does love'. It was probably better I didn't partake in that exercise. I don't think they'd appreciate my contribution.

I strolled past the marquee and headed across the grass with a few of the other guests towards the grove. The shady little retreat at the bottom of the gardens was where the vows were being held. Somewhere more private and intimate than the extravagant manor house or marquee. Somewhere much more representative of who Finn and Effy really were. Humble yet welcoming, unassuming yet open. The purest example of true love.

When the grove came into view, I stopped to take a moment and appreciate how stunning it was. Willow trees bowed over the grove, giving it a secret garden feel, and the blossom from overhead danced on the breeze and then settled on the woodland floor, decorating the path with delicate beauty—a floor that would serve as the aisle for their wedding. There was a small metal wishing well at the entrance to the grove, with Finn and Effy’s names carved into it, along with today’s date and the message,

Make a wish on our special day, and with a sprinkle of hope, the wish will come your way.

It was corny, and I had to fight the urge to roll my eyes. I could tell those were Effy’s words on Finn’s art. They really were made for each other. It was sweet and kind of sickening, but I’d never admit that out loud. I reached into my pocket and pulled out a coin, throwing it into the well. I didn’t make a wish though. That was fucking pointless.

I headed into the grove and glanced around. Effy would be walking down the aisle today, watched by only a handful of friends and family. At a guess, there were only thirty or so chairs set out down here, and each one was decorated with a white lace sash tied to the back, and pale blue flowers, I think they were peonies, woven into the lace. Underneath each chair was an opaque mason jar with tiny holes in the lid. I was just about to bend down and pick one up when I saw Ryan stalking towards me.

“That’s one of our jobs,” he said, nodding to the jars under the seats. “They aren’t allowed to open those until after the vows. Make sure everyone seated knows that.”

“Hello to you too,” I replied dryly. “So, no touching the jars until you’re told. Got it. What’s in them, anyway?”

“I don’t know. Effy wants it to be a surprise.”

I really didn’t care enough to push further. Everything about today was so far out of my comfort zone, and the quicker it was finished and I was back at home, the better. Random mason jars under the chairs were the least of my problems.

I peered over Ryan's shoulder and saw a nervous-looking Finn at the bottom of the grove, standing under the vines, talking to Brandon and another man I assumed was the registrar.

"How's he doing?" I asked Ryan.

Ryan turned to look at them.

"He's nervous, but I don't know why. They've been counting down to this day for months now. Years, probably."

"He doesn't like being in the spotlight," I told him, totally getting where Finn was coming from. "He's going to be the centre of attention today, and for someone like Finn, that's torture."

"But he's marrying the girl he's crazy about. There's no torture involved."

Ryan didn't get it. And I'd bet if I asked Finn how he'd want to get married today, it'd be in a room with just Effy. No one else. Nothing else mattered. But he was doing this for her. He knew this was what she wanted.

At that moment, Finn and Brandon came over to us, and with a nod, Brandon said, "Nice to see you made it. I bet the moths appreciated the fresh air when you got that suit out of your wardrobe."

To be fair, I wasn't really a suit guy. I preferred to be casual, so he wasn't that far off the mark.

"They'll be joining the moths flying out of your wallet later when you finally open it and buy us all a drink," I shot back.

Brandon laughed, but Finn barely cracked a smile.

"You okay?" I asked him, and he nodded.

"I just want to get to the part where it's me and her, and we can say our vows and then get a pint in and relax. The greeting guests part, not so much. It's not my thing."

"That's what you have three best men for," Brandon said, giving him a reassuring pat on the back. "We're here to do the

greeting. All you have to do is stand up there and look nervous. I think you've got that part nailed already."

Finn huffed a laugh and bobbed his head in agreement. Then, giving his excuses, he wandered back down. He was even struggling to chat with us today. I felt for the guy. I knew what that was like.

As for what Brandon said, it wasn't entirely true. We knew Brandon was the best man. Ryan and I were ushers, and we were okay with that; at least, I was. Finn and Brandon had a bond that was different to what the rest of us had. Plus, I'd hardly been the best or most reliable friend lately. In a way, I felt a bit of a fraud being in the wedding party at all. I wasn't really part of this group anymore. I wasn't part of anything.

The guests started making their way into the seats, and Ryan and I did what we were here to do, guiding them, making sure everything ran smoothly. I thought I was doing an okay job until Ryan came up beside me.

"Smile. It's a wedding," he muttered under his breath.

Until then, I hadn't realised I looked miserable. I sighed, staring at the ground as I rocked on the balls of my feet.

"If you want to get your seat and leave the last few guests to me, that's fine," he added, and that was music to my ears.

"I think that's probably for the best," I replied a little too eagerly. "I was hoping to get a seat somewhere at the back, and I'd hate to miss out on the best one."

"To hide yourself, so..." Ryan went to say something else, then thought better of it. When he reached forward and patted my shoulder, saying, "You did a good thing today, coming here. We all appreciate it," I knew he could tell how uneasy I felt.

"I didn't have much choice, did I?" I responded, and as soon as the words were out of my mouth, I regretted them. "I mean... I'm happy to be here, I just... I'd prefer..."

"No need to explain. I know it's been tough for you."

I didn't want to say anything else, so I turned and took a seat on the back row, right in the corner. The best seat they had.

As I fumbled about with my phone, tapping to unlock the screen and check my emails, I felt eyes on me. Someone was watching. But when I looked up, I couldn't see anyone, only guests around me, facing forward, getting ready to enjoy the ceremony. I glanced back at my phone and felt a jolt as something or someone knocked my chair. I looked up to see a little kid, a boy about two or three years old, staring at me. He squinted, cocked his head, then pointed at the right side of my neck, the scarred side. Fuck. I knew what was coming.

"What's that?" he asked, the innocence of his childhood making him oblivious to how his curiosity affected me. "Why is your skin all bumpy and pink there?" He pointed to his own neck to highlight where he meant.

I didn't answer straight away. Instead, I took a moment to look around and see where his parents were.

Would someone pull him away?

See that he was bothering the unfriendly guy sitting on his own and save me from having to answer him?

No.

I wasn't that lucky.

The kid stood still, staring, waiting for me to reply. He wasn't going anywhere.

"You need to sit down," I said gruffly, ignoring him and looking at my phone, but he wasn't deterred.

"It hasn't started yet." He shrugged, then moving closer to me, he put his hand on my leg and repeated. "What's that?" He pointed again. "What happened to you?"

I wanted to tell him I'd died, and these were my death scars. If I was really honest, I wanted to stand up and walk away, ignoring him altogether. This was what I hated about being around new people, little people, or any people. They didn't know my boundaries, and even if they did, they

wouldn't respect them. They thought they had a right to look, stare, and the kids, they felt like they could ask questions. The adults tended to develop a panicked look in their eyes and then scuttle away. I didn't know which was worse, but I hated them all.

In the time it took for me to try and form a sentence or be saved by one of his adults, he'd clambered onto the seat next to me and pressed himself against my side. I think he expected me to pull him onto my lap, cuddle him, and talk to him like normal people would. But I didn't. I turned to peer down at him, my body rigid as he cosied up to me.

"My friend, Leon, in my class at school, he's got skin like that on his arm," he announced proudly. "He was burned. Is that what happened to you?" His little eyes shone, waiting for me to reply.

I opened my mouth to speak, but as I tried to answer my throat became dry. I knew he was only a kid, and he was curious, but admitting anything about my story would involve more questions. Kids loved asking questions, and I hated answering them. Answers meant opening wounds. I preferred to keep those hidden, unlike the scars I couldn't always conceal.

"It was my pet dragon," I eventually replied in a bored tone. Then I gestured to my mouth, adding, "He gets a little excited when he's toasting kids for his breakfast." I leaned a little closer. "Kids are his favourite."

The boy's eyes grew wide, but instead of taking the hint and bugging off after I'd told him I had a kid-eating dragon, he smiled.

"Can I see your dragon?" he begged.

"No." I kept my eyes forward and prayed for a miracle. Ten seconds later, that miracle happened, and Effy's mum came over to save the day.

"Come on, Ted. Your mum's looking for you. Leave Zak alone. You need to sit down ready for when Effy walks down

the aisle.” She smiled at me, and in return, I gave a slight nod of gratitude.

“But I want to see the man’s dragon,” Ted moaned as Effy’s mum took his hand and pulled him away.

“Plenty of time for dragons later,” she replied, then over her shoulder, she said, “Nice to see you here, Zak.”

Nice wasn’t the word I’d use. Uncomfortable, maybe. Awkward, definitely. But not nice. Nice didn’t make you feel like your stomach was lined with shards of glass and your nerves were sparking like a fucking lightning storm.

Nice would be the pint I drank after this was over. The one in my living room, when I could close the curtains and block out the world again. No. Nothing about today was nice.

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THREE

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ZAK



The gentle sound of *Eva Cassidy's 'Songbird'* filled the air around us as Effy appeared at the entrance to the grove. Even I had to admit she looked absolutely stunning in her ivory lace dress with delicate flowers woven into her hair. Her dad stood proudly at her side, and everyone seated gasped and smiled as she swept past them. I watched too, but then I noticed from the corner of my eye a guest that made my stomach turn. Adam Noble was sitting at the back on the opposite side of the aisle from me. He had his baby daughter, Poppy, in his arms, and he was smiling as he watched a pregnant Liv, dressed in a pale blue bridesmaid dress, walking down the aisle behind Effy. Finn's sister, Alice, and Emily were walking with her, wearing the same strapless floor-length gowns. Harper was the last bridesmaid to walk down the aisle, along with her twin daughters, Phoebe and Esme, who were throwing blue petals from their baskets onto the woodland floor, and her son, Tommy, dressed in an identical suit to his dad, Brandon.

The warm breeze blew around us, but even that couldn't stop the cold chill from running through me at the realisation that he was here. Adam fucking Noble. Sitting there like he didn't have a care in the world. He swore he hadn't started the fire, and maybe he didn't, but that didn't change the fact that he'd hurt Finn. I couldn't believe he had the nerve to be here, acting like nothing had happened. But then, maybe I was more out of the loop than I realised. Had Finn made his peace with Adam?

If he had, no one had told me.

I tried to block him out. Watching him with his baby in his arms, grinning like a fucking idiot at his wife, only made me want to stand up and walk over there to wipe that smile off his face.

Why did he deserve to get a happily ever after?

What had he ever done other than be a fucking psycho, making everyone's lives a misery?

I gritted my teeth and looked over the rest of the guests here, trying to distract myself. Ryan was sitting next to Emily's mum at the front. Their baby son, Kai, squirming and moving from her lap to his. As soon as Emily got to the front of the aisle, his little arms reached out for her, and she took a seat next to them, taking Kai into her arms and letting him settle his blond head on her shoulder. Brandon's girls, Phoebe and Esme, and his son, Tommy, sat on the front row with their mum, Harper. Their little legs swung from the chairs as they watched their dad at the front with Finn and Effy, who grinned and stared into each other's eyes as the ceremony began.

And me?

I was here alone.

That was what my world consisted of. No family, at least, not like they all had. No love. Just me. Life wasn't fair, but I was done wishing it was otherwise.

The ceremony passed in a daze. I'd zoned out. But when Finn and Effy said their vows and the registrar announced that they were husband and wife, I was jolted back to the here and now as everyone cheered and clapped. They kissed, and then Effy beamed as she turned to face us all.

"Thank you, everyone, for coming and sharing this special day with us. We have one last surprise for you all." She seemed nervous as she stood up there, talking to everyone, and she glanced at Finn before turning back to her audience. "Under your seats, you'll find a jar."

There was a rumble of chatter as the guests reached down to retrieve their mason jars. I picked mine up too.

“This has all been done safely and ethically, so please don’t worry,” Effy continued. “But on the count of three, we’d like you to open your jars.”

Lids were tentatively unscrewed as Effy counted, “Three, two, one, release.”

And in that moment, magic happened.

From every jar, a blue butterfly appeared, fluttering into the grove and then off into the trees overhead. Everyone gasped and cooed over the spectacle. Everyone but me. I was still clutching my unopened jar.

“We decided to release butterflies today because we thought they were the perfect symbol of growth and new beginnings... of us. These butterflies symbolise the power of transformation and the incredible things we can achieve if we believe and trust in ourselves.” She turned to face Finn again. “And each other.” She took a moment to take a breath, and with tears welling in her eyes, she added, “Beauty can be found in the darkest places. It just needs time, care, and love to thrive.” Then she turned back to her guests and said, “Blue butterflies are rare, they’re supposed to be lucky. As an artist, Finn knows all about colour, and blue is the colour of peace, calm, and healing. But today, these blue butterflies are so much more. They are strength and support. Love.”

And mine was still trapped.

I looked down at the jar that I held in my hands.

Should I release it now?

I swallowed and placed my jar back on the ground with the lid firmly in place. The moment had passed. It wasn’t the right time. My jar would stay closed until someone else opened it. But not me.

MORE GUESTS GATHERED in the marquee later in the day, and I stood out of the way by the bar with Ryan, Brandon, and Kian. Kian and I had a shared trauma. We’d both been trapped in the

fire five years ago. But that's where the similarities ended. Where he'd escaped without extensive injuries, I'd been left with nothing but the shadow of a life I used to have. Burns that'd scarred me, and pain that scorched deeper than any scars ever could.

Finn was busy with his new bride, mingling amongst the guests, not looking the least bit upset about it. He was beaming. Maybe the spotlight suited him after all.

"I still think he did it," Brandon sneered, sipping his pint as he eyed Adam and Liv across the marquee.

"No." Ryan shook his head. "Liv's adamant he didn't, but if he did, we'd know by now. He'd have slipped up, admitted it to her, or the police would've found something. He thinks he's good at covering his tracks, but he's not that good."

But Brandon wouldn't have it. "The CCTV wasn't working. What are they supposed to find? Charred fingerprints?" He turned to me then and added, "Sorry, Zak."

I shrugged it off.

"He likes to brag about his work," I replied. "I don't think he did it." And I didn't.

The soldiers of Brinton Manor always maintained they'd had nothing to do with what happened at the plastics factory that night, and there was one thing I knew about the soldiers. They might be vicious motherfuckers, but they weren't liars.

"I hate him," Brandon hissed, as if we didn't already know that.

Adam was the reason Brandon didn't box anymore. Not in the way he wanted to, anyway. That had to sting. Adam had humiliated Brandon, and that was something he'd never forgive or forget. "One day," he went on. "I'm gonna get him alone and show him exactly how much I hate him. He's got it coming."

"Let's not do that at Finn's wedding though, hey?" Ryan warned. "Stay away from him today. You two locking horns won't do anyone any good."

“It’d make me feel better,” Brandon said, his nostrils flaring as he no doubt pictured what it’d feel like to pound his fists into Adam Noble’s face after holding back for so long.

“That first punch might feel good, but you’d spend a hell of a lot longer regretting it when you realised what it’d do to Finn and Effy.”

“I’d make sure they never found out. There’s plenty of places outside that I can drag him to. Give him the pounding of his life. He deserves it.”

Ryan gave Brandon a pointed stare. “This is their day. If Finn can get over him being here, we can too... for now.”

“I’m not making any promises,” Brandon whispered into his pint.

“What about the guys that Emily’s dad worked for?” Kian butted in, taking the focus off Noble. “Maybe it was them? The money launderers? You ruined their scam, cost them a lot of money when you exposed Alec Winters and got him put away.”

“No.” Brandon shook his head vehemently. “I asked my sperm donor about that. He did some digging, but he came up empty.”

“And let’s not forget, Don Lockwood told us himself that he’d set up a ring of protection around Brandon and Harper. He didn’t want what’d happened back then with Alec Winters to ever come back on his son,” Ryan reminded him.

Six years ago, we’d exposed Emily’s dad, Alec Winters, as the corrupt politician he was by announcing to the people of Sandland, in the local community centre, that he’d been involved in fraud, as well as the murder of his own son. The courts labelled it manslaughter or some other bullshit title, but it was murder; we knew that much. He was arrested in front of everyone, and for a time, it really affected our relationship with Emily. But she forgave us. We hadn’t gone about exposing him in the best way, but she knew what he’d done needed to be made public. She wanted him behind bars as much as we did, and after that day, she became as close a

friend to us all as any of us boys were. She was one of us. Even more so now she was married to Ryan. She wasn't a Winters anymore; she was a Hardy.

"But Brandon left just before the fire started," Kian stated with a puzzled look on his face. "He wasn't even on the premises."

"We can't rule them out one hundred percent," Brandon replied. "But we've found no evidence. Nothing."

"You just need to forget about it," I snapped, growing tired of the conversation. "There were a lot of pissed off people there that night. It could've been anyone. If you spend your life obsessing over it, you'll go crazy. It happened. The police found nothing. Case closed."

"Not for us," Brandon said, his eyes burning as he drained the last dregs of his pint and sneered like he was readying himself for a fight.

"It is for me," I added, stepping away and leaning against the bar to show I was done with it all.

"Did Chase Lockwood ever show up? He's been missing for a few years now, hasn't he? Maybe guilt got the better of him?" Kian, the persistent little shit, wasn't letting this one go. He was like a dog with a fucking bone, and I wanted to smack him with that bone and tell him to shut the fuck up. It might be a random conversation for him, but for me, it was old wounds, painful memories, and a life I didn't want to keep reliving.

"That's one of Sandland's biggest mysteries." Ryan shrugged. "It's as if he was abducted by aliens. One day he's there, and the next, poof, gone. No one's heard anything from him since."

And no one really cared, apart from his immediate family. The guy was a menace, and everywhere he went he caused trouble.

"Good riddance, I say," Brandon growled, mirroring my own thoughts. Then he noticed Harper calling him onto the dance floor, so he put his glass on the bar behind him. "And as riveting as you lot are, I'd much rather spend my night

grinding up against my wife,” he said, and sauntered off, dancing towards her, grabbing her into his arms and swaying, holding her tight.

“Yeah, I think Em needs me too.” Ryan grinned, heading in the same direction to take his place next to Emily.

Kian lingered and looked uncomfortable. He didn’t want to be stuck standing next to me, and the feeling was mutual.

“I think I’m going to...” he stuttered and pointed at nothing.

“Yeah, see you later,” I replied, giving him the out he needed as I walked over to an empty table and sat down.

I scanned the room, contemplating my exit, despite the fact I’d found a dark, secluded corner where no one would bother me. The music was pumping, and people were laughing and dancing without a care in the world. They wouldn’t notice if I slipped out.

Just as I was about to get up and leave, a woman appeared from nowhere and plonked herself down on my lap. Long, straight, dark brown hair ran down her back, and her huge hazel eyes sparkled with mischief. If Megan Fox had a younger, hotter sister, then she was it. God knows what she was doing in my lap, but I had a feeling things were about to take a strange turn.

“Pretend you know me,” she said, her face beaming as her eyes scanned my face like she was taking in every little detail. And then, before I could respond, she threw her arms around my neck and kissed me.

FOUR

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ZAK



Time froze as this woman clung to me, kissing me like her life depended on it. As if I was a soldier returning from war, and she was my long-lost love.

What in the actual fuck was happening?

I kept my hand on her back, not sure what to do with myself.

Did I kiss her back?

Yes. Yes, I did.

I might be a cold-hearted bastard these days, but I was still a red-blooded man. When a pretty brunette throws herself into your lap and gives you the best kiss of your life, the last thing you're going to do is push her off. But I was fucking confused.

'Pretend you know me', she'd said.

What was all that about?

After a minute of tangling her fingers through my hair and sliding her tongue into my mouth to tease mine, she broke the kiss and grinned wickedly.

"Is he looking?" she asked, not taking her eyes off mine.

"Is who looking?" I replied, not taking my eyes off her either.

"The redhead." She cocked her head to the side to indicate where. "Three o'clock. The one who hasn't left me alone all night and won't take no for an answer."

I glanced over her shoulder to the three o'clock she'd mentioned, but there was no redhead.

"I think you're safe," I told her, my eyes coming back to hers, and the way she was staring at me, her eyes alive, sparkling like she wanted a replay, made something stir inside me. But I fought it down and shuffled in my chair, trying to hint that she should stand up. She didn't.

"I think we might need to kiss again, just to make sure." She smirked and went in for another kiss, but this time, I leant my head back and frowned at her.

"What the fuck are you doing?"

She quirked her brow at me, and that smirk spread wider on her face.

"Solving a problem by being creative. I wanted to shrug that creep off, and you looked so lonely sitting here all on your own."

"I like my own company," I said in a bored tone, hoping she'd get the hint that the kiss was all well and good, she'd caught me off guard, but I wasn't here to chat. If she wanted to find someone's lap to sit in, there were better candidates here than me. Today was not the day, and I was not the one.

"But you'll like it even more if I join you." She winked and wriggled in my lap, adding to my discomfort.

"I really won't." I stood up, forcing her off my lap.

She didn't take offence, though. She just bounced on her feet next to me, grinning like a crazy woman.

"Do you want to dance?" she asked.

"Do I look like the kind of guy who dances?"

She flicked her poker-straight long brown hair. "Wanna get a drink instead then?"

"I've just had one."

She huffed out a laugh.

"You're not the easiest guy to chat up, are you?"

I kept my expression neutral, surly even.

“Better go back to Mister Redhead, then. You might have better luck.”

“But I like a challenge,” she purred, playing with the strands of her hair as she tried to change my mind with her sultry stare.

“Some things aren’t a challenge. They’re damn near impossible.”

“Then call me Ethan Hunt.” She grinned as she referenced Tom Cruise’s Mission Impossible character.

“Or I could call you Pluto, because you’re barking up the wrong tree.”

“Oh.” Her face dropped. “Are you gay? You didn’t seem gay when I kissed you just now. Or are you bisexual?”

“I’m not interested, is what I am. I don’t need to put a label on it. It’d be better for you if you moved on and found someone here who *is* interested. You’re wasting your time with me.”

She bit her lip and gave me a reluctant nod, but that sparkle stayed in her eyes.

“Kissing a good-looking guy like you is never a waste of my time.”

And with that, she turned slowly and walked away, swaying her hips and glancing over her shoulder at me one last time before she disappeared into the crowd on the dance floor.

Watching her, I realised I hadn’t even asked her what her name was. She hadn’t asked for mine either. And not once, in all the time she was staring at me, did her eyes wander down to the scars on the side of my neck.

FIVE

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ZAK



I hadn't expected to stay at the wedding as long as I did. But one pint turned into four or five, and the shots followed soon after that. Going through my emails and seeing another substantial order had just been placed by florapetal.net helped to lighten my mood. That, and we'd just sold an expensive piece through one of our stockists in Willowbrook that'd been sitting on their shelves for months. It was an amphora vase that Finn painted with the scene from Alice in Wonderland where she falls down the rabbit hole. The commission from both sales was enough to put a smile on my face; okay, maybe just a smirk, but it wasn't a scowl. That was something.

Before I knew it, I'd drunk too much and my head was spinning. I found myself wandering outside the marquee for some much-needed fresh air. I knew I was one more drink away from making some very bad decisions. Alcohol lowered my defences, and I didn't like being out of control.

The cool night air hit me as I stood at the entrance to the marquee. I took a deep breath, trying to fight the dizziness, but all it did was make my head spin even more.

Maybe I needed to walk this off?

There were a few people standing outside, smoking and chatting, away from the noise of the music inside. I didn't want to be around them, so I headed down the field, towards the grove where the vows had been made earlier in the day. It was darker, quieter, and more secluded down here. The buzz of the wedding was a distant hum behind me. It was perfect.

All alone with just my thoughts and the gentle breeze blowing through the branches of the trees, making the wind chimes tinkle as they danced above my head. I stopped, leaning against the trunk of an old oak tree, and I closed my eyes. As ridiculous as it sounded, I felt proud of myself for making it through today, for lasting as long as I had. But this life wasn't for me. The sooner I said my goodbyes and left, the better.

I heard the crack of a twig to my right, and my eyes shot open, my body tensing as I saw a dark figure step slowly towards me. As she came into the moonlight, I breathed a sigh of relief. The lap girl from earlier had followed me down here, and she stared at me with a smile before flicking her long brown hair over her shoulder and peering up at the sky.

"Gets a bit much, doesn't it?" she said, but I didn't speak. I didn't need to. My silence said it all. "I don't think I'd want a big wedding. Although, this one has been one of the sweetest weddings I've ever been to." She gave a contented sigh, like she was imagining something magical. "I'd want a beach wedding. Or something intimate. A cabin, maybe. Or a vineyard. Wouldn't it be awesome to get married and get pissed at the same time?" She turned to look at me, an amused, questioning look on her face. "Do you think you'll be next?" she asked, gesturing to the marquee in the distance behind us.

"Hell no," I replied, breaking my silence, and she grinned.

"That was a quick response. Are you the eternal bachelor?" She grinned smugly, a twinkle glittering in her eyes as she stepped closer to where I stood.

"I like my own company," I reminded her, hoping she might get the hint and leave me to sober up, but she didn't.

"I like your company too." She edged closer, putting her arm out and running her fingers across the bark of the tree trunk just inches from where I stood.

Who the hell was this girl, and why was she following me?

"You don't even know me," I snapped.

"I don't need to know you to enjoy being with you."

And if you spent any time with me, you'd realise what kind of person I really was, and you'd walk away. Please, just leave me alone. Save us both the disappointment.

But despite my frosty demeanour, she wouldn't be deterred. Instead, I sensed her nearness as she edged even closer towards me, the scent of her floral perfume, the heat from her body, and the burn of her stare as she looked up at me.

"You should go back up there," I stated, my eyes flickering to the party and then settling back on her.

If you know what's good for you.

"I'd rather be down here."

She reached for my jacket and slid her hand inside to run her fingers over my chest, and I flinched, pulling away. I didn't want her to touch me. Not there. It felt too invasive. Too intimate, and I wasn't comfortable with it.

"You *can* trust me," she urged, moulding her petite little body to mine. My obvious aversion to her touch hadn't put her off.

That was new.

Most women flinched as much as I did when it happened. They didn't like discovering my body confidence was below zero. Sub-zero, even. An arctic ice blast to dampen any desires they might've had. Their heated touch felt like a touch of frost to me. But it wasn't deterring this girl.

"I don't trust anyone," I told her, peering down as she gave me her best puppy dog stare with her big brown eyes. The kind of eyes I would've gotten lost in five years ago.

"Okay." She pressed her body even closer to mine. "Don't trust me, then." And leaning up to whisper in my ear, she gasped, "You don't have to trust me to fuck me."

Those words were the spark that ignited my interest. The red rag to a bull that might be unfriendly, but he still had needs. I didn't like to be touched, and I hated to be seen. But I'd found my ways around that where sex was concerned.

Faceless, nameless, no-strings sex. I had my ways. And it helped that the amount I'd drunk had lowered my defences.

“What? Here against a tree?” I hadn't turned her down yet, and judging from the way she smiled seductively up at me, she was thankful for that. “It's not the most comfortable place to fuck.”

“Maybe not.” She sighed longingly. “But it's risky and fun. I like taking chances. Anyone could come down here and see us.”

Her tempting words and the mixture of alcohol in my system made my rational brain switch off, and I reached down to grab her ass, pulling her closer to me, taking a chance I didn't usually take. The eyes had drawn me in, the words had twisted my senses, but feeling her, holding her in my arms, made every ounce of reason evaporate to dust. She was beyond sexy, and so was this moment.

I wanted her.

And she knew I wanted her.

“Stop over-thinking,” she begged. “It's a wedding. People fuck at a wedding.”

“If all you want is a fuck, I can give you that,” I growled, all logic and reason damned to hell. “But don't expect anything else from me. If you're looking for something more, you're rubbing yourself up against the wrong guy at the wrong tree.”

She smiled and bit her lip, and when she gave me a wink, I couldn't help myself. I pushed her against the trunk, trapping her with my body. This way, I was in full control. She would do what I wanted and keep her hands where I could see them. She wanted to get fucked, and I loved sex, but on my terms. She needed to do what I said.

A tiny part of my brain whispered that this was a bad idea, but that part was drowned out by the screams of desire. I needed this. I really fucking needed it.

Her dress was short, tight, and when I reached down to pull it up, it rolled easily to her waist, revealing the sexy black

lace G-string she had on underneath. Her stomach was toned, tanned, and I had to fight the urge to get on my knees and bury my face between her legs. Bite and nip as I pulled her G-string off with my teeth. This woman was a mindfuck that I hadn't seen coming. How could I? She'd fallen into my lap, literally, and now I couldn't stop myself.

I pulled, ripping her G-string off, and she moaned, lifting her leg to wrap it around my waist.

“What the fuck am I doing?” I gasped, knowing I didn't need an answer. I was throwing caution and every sane and rational thought out of the proverbial window. Taking a fucking chance, that's what I was doing. And yes, that was the alcohol talking.

“Overthinking,” she moaned. Then she put her arms around my neck, pulling me to her, covering my mouth with hers.

I kissed her back, my tongue tasting the thrill and excitement of having her pressed against this tree, so needy and ready for me.

I moved to her neck, kissing her soft, flawless skin as I groaned, “I don't want to think. I just want to feel.”

She smiled and guided my lips back to hers.

“Then just feel,” she whispered, sliding my hand between her legs.

She was warm and wet, and the way she teased me, gently rocking her hips as my fingers explored drove me crazy.

I traced my fingers along her pussy, rubbing over her clit and giving it the attention I knew she needed before pushing my fingers inside her. Setting a slow but steady pace, I fucked her with my hand against the tree as she panted, begging for more. She was clinging to me, little cries spurring me on as I used my thumb to stroke her clit, my fingers buried deep inside her, stroking her walls.

“More,” she pleaded as she clung to me. But I pulled my hand away, reaching for both of hers and pinning them above her head.

“Keep your hands where I can see them,” I demanded, holding her in place as I bit down on her neck.

This girl made me feral. Gentle bites were just the start of what I wanted to do to her.

“Give me what I want then,” she purred, lifting her knee to graze against my cock that was now straining in my trousers.

“How do you want it?” I asked, my face pressed into her neck as I ground my hips against her bare pussy.

“Hard,” she gasped. “So fucking hard.”

“It’s already hard, baby.” I smirked to myself.

“Hard and fast,” she begged, so needy and desperate to be fucked.

“Better hold on tight then.”

I pulled down the zip of my trousers, but I didn’t drop them. I might be drunk, but I wasn’t about to expose my greatest weakness. My legs. They’d taken the brunt of the damage in the fire, and to say they were ugly was an understatement. I wanted to rock this girl’s world, not traumatise it.

A little voice in my head told me, ‘It’s not that bad. She won’t hate you because you have scarring. You’re not the first guy to get burned.’ But I ignored it. The voice that told me I had to protect my scars at all costs was the one that always won out. The one that reminded me how fickle people could be. That the shame from exposing myself would hurt just as much as the scars themselves. I’d become an expert at fucking without showing any part of my body that I didn’t want them to see. Tonight would be no different.

Fighting my demons and getting lost in the moment, I lifted her in my arms, and instinctively, she wrapped her legs around me. Reaching down, I ran my cock along her wet pussy, and she sighed. Then I pushed into her soft, warm, and incredibly tight heat, and she gave the sexiest groan I’d ever heard as I entered her. She felt fucking perfect, and it took every bit of strength I had not to blow my load in that first

second. Her velvet walls gripped me like she was holding on for dear life. Like she'd found me and wouldn't let me go.

"Do you like that?" I growled. "Do you like the way my cock feels inside you?"

"Yes," she gasped. "It's fucking perfect."

I held myself steady as I pushed all the way inside of her. Then I pulled out and pushed back in again, rocking into her harder and faster as she clung to my shoulders, her nails digging into me through my clothes.

"Oh yes," she cried.

"You're so fucking wet," I hissed, pounding harder and harder. Fucking her mercilessly against the tree. "I want to feel you coming on my cock, baby. Show me how good I make you feel."

"I will," she gasped. "Please. Fuck me harder," she begged, and so I did. Thrusting into her. Rolling my hips to hit the spot inside that I knew would drive her wild.

I slammed my cock into her, over and over, as we moaned and panted, biting and kissing, nibbling and scratching like animals chasing that high.

"I'm coming," she groaned, and I felt her walls start to tighten and contract around my cock.

It was the best feeling ever. Knowing I was making her feel like this. That she couldn't hold back anymore, and then she cried out as her legs began to shake around me. She came hard on my cock, gripping me as I thrust my hips and felt the build-up of my own release.

"That's it," I moaned. "Good girl. Soak my cock. Squeeze it with your pretty little pussy and make me come."

It'd been so long since I'd felt like this, and I savoured every minute as it washed over me. The shocks running down my spine made me cry out as I came hard, filling her with everything I had to give.

"Such a good girl," I praised her as I rode out my orgasm. "You took my cock so well."

I slowed down, but I held her close in my arms, my cock still buried deep inside her as we both caught our breath and came back down to earth.

In that moment, I wasn't Zak, the burns victim. I was Zak, the guy who took chances. Who lived life the way he wanted. The guy who felt.

But then, it was gone.

Her legs dropped to the ground, and I took a step back, tucking myself back into my trousers as my eyes scanned the area, looking everywhere but at her. I couldn't stand to see the disappointment on her face.

But then, I felt her hands gently touch my face, coaxing me to look at her. And so, I did. And all I saw there was a smile. A genuine, heartfelt smile.

"Thank you," she said on a quiet breath. "I needed that tonight. I think we both did."

I didn't know what to say, so I just stood there, watching her shimmy her dress back down. Then, with a wicked grin, she turned and walked away from me. I don't know why; maybe the alcohol was more in control than I'd realised, but I found myself calling out to her.

"Where do you live? Would you like a lift home?"

She spun around, taking slow steps away from me as she laughed gently and said, "We fucked. That doesn't mean we have to share post codes. Let's call this what it is and walk away." Then she turned and headed back to the marquee, shouting over her shoulder, "It was nice to meet you, Mister Likes-His-Own-Company." And then she was gone, and I was left standing under a tree in the middle of the grove. A tree that had totally transformed my night.

Before coming down here, I'd thought that I was one drink away from a bad decision. Seems that drink had already been drunk. But which one was the bad decision? Taking her against a fucking tree trunk or letting her walk away without even finding out her name?

SIX

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ZAK



I didn't make it home after the wedding. I crashed at a local hotel. And when I found out the next morning that they didn't serve breakfast, and there weren't any decent cafés nearby, I headed to the one place I knew I'd get something to help cure my hangover. Ryan and Emily's.

"I can't believe you missed the fight," Ryan said, with all the enthusiasm of a kid recalling a schoolyard fight.

He poured me a coffee in their kitchen and sat with me at the table.

"Adam Noble shamed Brandon in front of everyone. Called him a washed-up, shitty boxer who couldn't hack it in the real world." Ryan's eyes grew wider as he spoke. "Brandon snapped. You couldn't blame him. And he smacked Noble right in the face. How he didn't get knocked out, I'll never know. Let alone come back to land a punch just as hard on Brandon. I swear, it'd be a fight to the death between those two. We'd have seen it last night if Harper and Liv hadn't stepped in."

Ryan took a sip of his coffee and shook his head regretfully.

"If Liv wasn't pregnant," he continued. "I think Noble would've pushed her to the side and carried on. They both would've."

"Maybe that's what they need," I added between mouthfuls of the bacon and eggs he'd given me. "They're never gonna get on, but it might help ease some of the pressure if they're

left to sort it out the way they both know how... with their fists.”

But Ryan was still stuck on the first point he'd made.

“Where were you? I came looking for you, but I couldn't find you anywhere. You used to love a fight. You'd be front row every time, without fail.”

I shrugged.

“It probably happened when I went for a walk to clear my head. I'd had a lot to drink.” I speared a piece of scrambled egg onto my fork and popped it into my mouth. “And that was the old me. I have no desire to stand and watch Brandon or anyone else fight. I have better things to do with my time than get a hard-on over pointless Sandland dramas.”

Ryan stared at me like I'd just told him something he couldn't quite believe, and that's when I heard a familiar voice from the doorway say, “I'd like to know what those better things are, exactly.” And the blood in my veins froze.

I tried to swallow my mouthful, but my throat had closed up, and my hands had started to shake. Slowly, I placed my knife and fork down on the plate and turned to look behind me, although I already knew what I'd see. The churn in my stomach was warning enough.

My mystery girl from the wedding was standing in the doorway, wearing a floaty yellow sundress and smiling like butter wouldn't melt. She took one look at me, then strolled over to the table and sat down opposite me, a shit-eating grin plastered on her face.

“What the fuck are you doing here?” I said, forgetting there was anyone else in the room.

“What do you think she's doing here?” Ryan replied, a frown etched deep into his forehead. “She's come to see Kai, and... you know... she is Emily's sister, my sister-in-law. That's what she's doing here. She practically lives here.” Ryan obviously didn't like that I was questioning her, but he didn't know what'd happened last night. He didn't know that her being here had sent my already banging head into a spin.

So, that was my mystery girl.

Emily's sister.

"Megan?" I asked, honestly struggling to remember her name.

"Morgan," they both replied at the same time.

I stared across the table at her, my appetite long gone, but my curiosity peaked.

She stared back, but the playfulness in her eyes had me second-guessing what she might say next.

Fuck.

I didn't know much about Morgan. Only that she was Emily's secret half-sister. A fact that we'd brutally exposed to the world six years ago when we'd gathered the town into the community centre and exposed Emily's father as the lying, cheating fucker he was. I knew Emily had reconnected with her, but I had no idea about their relationship now, or hers with Ryan, for that matter, but from the way his burning gaze was firing daggers into me from his side of the table, it was a lot stronger than it had been six years ago.

I tried to ignore his intensely scrutinising glare and focus on the girl in front of me. Despite my beer goggles last night, I'd known she was gorgeous. But sitting opposite her this morning, I could see exactly how stunning she was. She had long brown, poker-straight hair that she kept sweeping to the side as she stared back at me. Her big brown eyes sparkled, showing me that she was probably remembering last night too, and from the quirk of her smile, I guessed she liked the memory. Her cheeks were flushed pink, and when she bit her lip, I felt something stir inside me.

I needed to leave.

Staying here would only lead to trouble, and this girl had trouble written all over her.

"Well, it's nice to meet you, Morgan." I nodded, shifting my gaze from hers to Ryan, and then I stood up abruptly,

knocking the chair back as I did. “I need to get going,” I told him as I righted the chair and then headed for the door.

“Aren’t you going to wait for Emily and Kai to come down?” he asked, frowning at me as I made my hasty departure.

“Another time,” I lied. “I’ve got to get back.”

I turned my back just as Ryan muttered, “Get back to what? Sitting in that fucking house on your own?” But I ignored him. Let him think what he wanted. If I wanted to leave, I would.

I made my way down the path towards where my car was parked, and just as I opened the car door, I heard her call out.

“Wait. Was it really that bad?”

I stood frozen to the spot as she did a slow jog down the path to join me.

“What?” I hissed impatiently, looking and sounding pissed off.

“I don’t think I’ve ever seen someone bolt so fast after spending the night with me.”

“I didn’t spend the night with you.”

“You did something with me.”

I’d avoided her gaze until now, and when she said that, I peered up at her. She wasn’t here to argue; that much was clear. But what was she out here for? I’d made it crystal clear last night that I had nothing to offer her.

“I let the alcohol take control. But I’m back in the driving seat now.” The minute the words spilled out, I cringed. That sounded so bad, and I didn’t mean to make her feel like she was a mistake. Even if a part of me felt like I shouldn’t have lowered my guard last night. She wasn’t a mistake. She was a memory I’d be filing away. One I’d never forget.

“You really know how to flatter a girl, don’t you?” She gave a short laugh and then stopped when she was standing opposite me, next to the passenger side of my car.

“Not really.”

We stood in silence for a moment, neither one of us knowing what to say next.

“I think we should start again,” she said, thrusting her arm forward across the hood of my car. “Hi, I’m Morgan. I’m twenty-two, and I like art, watching horror movies, and reading romance novels. I think pineapple on pizza is highly underrated, and my favourite James Bond is Sean Connery. I listen to rap music and think Machine Gun Kelly was out of line, dissing Eminem. Eminem is God and you don’t fuck with God. I don’t play an instrument, but I can bake...”

I let her ramble on, telling me her favourite drink (tea), the TV show she was currently binge-watching (Yellowstone), and her favourite person in the world (her nephew Kai, but it was a close run between him and Emily). When she finally ran out of steam, she stopped and stared at me, waiting for my response.

“I’m Zak,” I told her. “And I’m leaving.”

I climbed into my car and shut the door. When the passenger side opened, and she dropped herself into the seat next to me, I frowned. “What are you doing?”

She shrugged, like her getting into my car was nothing. “I’m getting to know you better.”

“Get out.” I gripped the steering wheel and trained my eyes ahead, waiting to hear the door open again, but it never did. So, I turned to see if the coldness in my eyes might encourage her to bail on me.

“Let’s go and get some lunch,” she said, fastening her seatbelt to show she wasn’t moving.

“I just had breakfast,” I replied.

“I know.” She rested her head on the headrest and side-eyed me. “But you left half of it, and I built up a real appetite last night. I’m starving.”

I had two options here. I could get out. Go around to her side and open the door, effectively forcing her out of my car. Or I could humour her. Take her for lunch and show her how

dull and tedious my company was. Bore her to the brink of insanity, ensuring I'd never see her again. There was a third option. Call Ryan or Emily out here. But that was a no-go. Judging from Ryan's reaction earlier and how protective he seemed, the last thing I wanted to do was make this more of an issue than it already was.

"Fine," I huffed, starting the engine. "One lunch. Then that's it."

"You're really spoiling me now, Mr Atwood." I could see her smirking as she settled into her seat beside me. "How will I be able to control myself at lunch with all this teasing and sexual tension you're throwing my way?"

"I'm sure you'll cope."

I drove us to the local drive-through and waited in line with the other cars. I did it on purpose. I expected her to call me out for my shitty choice of lunch venue, but she didn't.

"What do you want?" I asked, indicating to the menu behind the Perspex stand at the side of the car.

"Choices, choices," she replied, sitting taller in her seat. "I'll have... coffee. White, no sugar."

I turned slowly to stare at her, raising my eyebrow in disbelief.

"I thought you were hungry?"

"I am. But not for food."

I rolled my eyes and moved the car forward, shaking my head as I spoke into the machine, asking for two white coffees. This girl had played me. Worse yet, I'd let her.

The server passed the coffees to me at the next window, and I took them, passing them to Morgan before pulling the car back around to the car park, choosing a space hidden in the corner, so that we were shielded from the other customers parked up. Even in my car, I preferred to be away from everyone else.

I shut the engine off, and Morgan handed me my coffee.

“Do you always jump into cars with strange men?” I asked.

“Don’t put yourself down,” she replied cheekily. “You might be a little quirky, but strange? You’re not that bad.” She was pleased with herself and bristled with pride as she blew on her coffee through the little hole in the lid, then sipped it.

A moment later, she added, “Do you always take your dates to the drive-through?”

“This isn’t a date,” I shot back.

“Ah, yes. I remember from last night. You don’t do extras. Just the main event.”

“At least I’m honest,” I said plainly, giving her a side-eye to remind her she’d been anything but.

“And you think I wasn’t?” she shot back.

I shifted in my seat to face her.

“Well, I’m pretty sure you knew who I was last night when you decided to drop yourself into my lap. Was there even a redhead there?”

She beamed back at me.

“There were a lot of redheads. If you looked further than the pint glass you were holding, you’d have seen that. Redheads, blondes, brunettes, all bases were covered.”

I gave an ironic smile and shook my head. “But no redhead that was bugging you. You played me.”

“Rubbish,” she replied. “You can’t play a player, and you, Zak Atwood, are the biggest player of them all.” Then quietly, she added, “And anyway, I didn’t hear any complaints last night. I think you quite liked getting played.”

Five years ago, I was considered a player. I loved sex. Getting a woman off was what I lived for. That, and pleasing myself. It was strange, and I couldn’t explain why, but despite my aversion to other people now, I still craved sex as much as I did back then. Only, it was on my terms these days. I controlled everything, down to what they saw, where they

touched. Everything. If I couldn't fuck the way I wanted, I didn't. I had needs, but I had rules too. Rules that meant I could protect myself and them. No one wanted to see what lay under my clothes.

"I'm not a fool," I stated. "Don't treat me like one."

"No one said you were." In that moment, her eyes didn't shine in the same way they usually did, and I knew she was trying to be sincere. In a way, that was worse. Sincerity was one step away from pity.

"I think its best I take you home," I announced suddenly, wanting to escape the pressure building in my head and go back to my own home to remain in my perfectly orchestrated exile. "Let's forget this ever happened."

Instantly, I felt the tension radiate from across the car. I'd struck a nerve. Seems Little Miss Sunshine wasn't Teflon-coated after all.

"I'd prefer to be dropped back at Emily and Ryan's," she replied, taking the lid off her coffee and drinking to distract herself from what I thought might've been a touch of panic taking hold.

"Why?" I asked, curious to dig deeper.

"I like their house better. I like being with people." She painted on a fake smile, one that didn't reach her eyes and said, "I'm the yin to your yang Mr. I-Like-My-Own-Company."

"There's nothing balanced about this relationship," I huffed. "There's no yin and yang here."

She cocked her eyebrow. "Relationship? Getting a bit ahead of yourself there, aren't you, Zak?" That smile reached her eyes now, sparkling right back at me.

I couldn't win with this girl. She had me tying myself up in knots. I breathed heavily through my nose as I gritted my teeth and faced forward, deciding my usual silence or one-word replies were probably the best way to go from now on. Less trouble.

“Aww, now you’re in a mood with me,” she purred.
“That’s cute.”

“I’m always in a mood,” I barked, already breaking my one-word rule.

“I quite like the mean and moody, gruff exterior you have. I like a challenge.”

“A challenge would indicate that you might win. But I’m telling you now, you won’t. I’m not a challenge, I’m...”

“You’re what?” she asked, like she was holding onto my every word.

“I’m persona non grata.”

She frowned.

“What does that even mean?”

I took a moment to compose myself.

I knew the words I spoke next could be taken the wrong way.

I wanted to let her know she was wasting her time with me, but then again, she might like what she heard. I couldn’t second-guess her.

“I’m the one they all avoid,” I said with no emotion. They were just words. But if I thought about the meaning behind them, I might feel myself break a little. I had to keep my walls firmly in place. “I’m what you might call a shell of a man. Persona non grata means unwelcome person.” I turned to look at her. “Take that as you will.” And the way her face fell told me exactly how she’d taken it.

“That’s fucking tragic.”

I shrugged, focusing on the trees surrounding the car and not the wave of pity she was currently drowning in. “It is what it is.” I wouldn’t let those waves pull me down too.

“Unwelcome to who?” she suddenly asked, throwing me off. “I’m guessing you’re unwelcome to yourself, in here...” She tapped the side of her head. “Because as far as I’m

concerned, and from what I've heard about you, everyone else wants nothing more than to welcome you. They miss you."

She had no idea what she was talking about. But instead of arguing, I decided to take the spotlight off myself.

"You must've hated us after that night. The one where we exposed your dad... and you."

"I wasn't exposed," she said defensively, then she took a breath and righted herself. "I'm glad I found out. You did me a favour that night. All those years I missed out on having a relationship with my sister. I didn't even get to meet my brother, Danny. And it was all his fault. He deserved what happened." She meant it too.

"But you didn't, deserve it, that is."

She sighed, and I expected her to agree with me. We had been pretty brutal in our execution back then, even if the message needed to be heard.

"It is what it is. Would it have been better to find out another way? Yes. Has it ruined my life? Not really, no. Before then, it was just me and my mum. Dad hardly ever visited. We were on our own. Now, I have Emily, Ryan, and Kai. And through them, I've made loads of friends. Good friends. And I've met you." Her eyes glistened on that last part, and I knew I was in trouble.

"I'm glad it worked out for you."

"It's a work in progress." Her smile turned darker, more wicked. "But I think it's all going to plan."

She moved to sit with her back to the passenger window, facing sideways in the car. And then she hitched her skirt up her thighs and opened her legs, showing that she wasn't wearing any underwear.

Fuck me.

I wanted to look away, but I couldn't. And I realised, in that moment, how fucking weak I was around this woman because sitting facing me, looking at me the way she was, all I

wanted to do was drag her across the middle console and bury my face in that pretty little pussy.

“You’re playing a dangerous game,” I warned her, catching my breath.

“Aren’t those the best games to play?” she replied, lifting herself up and crawling across the car.

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SEVEN

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ZAK



She settled herself into my lap, and I let her, watching as she hitched her skirt, giving me a better view of her bare pussy. I moved the seat back slightly to give us more room, my focus shifting from her face to between her legs, trying to decide which one I wanted to devour first. She had a wicked glint in her eyes, and she leaned forward to whisper in my ear.

“You do things to me, Zak Atwood. Very bad things.” She sat back and grinned. “And I like it.”

She was such a little minx.

My heart was beating out of my chest, my cock straining in my jeans as she wriggled in my lap, and with a hooded gaze, I asked, “What bad things do you want me to do?” With my hand, I traced up the inside of her thigh and then brushed the tips of my fingers through her tempting, wet pussy. Gentle teases to drive her wild, just like she was doing to me.

She rocked her hips slowly back and forth over me and then bit her lip.

“Everything,” she replied breathlessly, and I moved my hands to grab her ass, sitting up to kiss her.

She wrapped her arms around my shoulders, her fingers threading through my hair as I tasted her, kissing her until I felt her grow more needy and slide her hand between us to rub over my cock, through my trousers.

“I want you.” She sighed. “So fucking bad.”

“Then have me,” I told her on a low moan, and glancing down to where her hand stroked me, I said, “Take it out.”

She grabbed the front of my shirt and pulled, but when she went to pop a button, my hand shot out to stop her, grabbing her as I shook my head to say no. My shirt was staying on. I didn't want her to see what was under there. If she wanted to fuck, we had to do it my way.

“Only the zip on my trousers,” I told her, and then watched as her little hands got to work on the zip, sliding it down and reaching inside to feel my hard cock, grip it, and pull it out.

“Aren't you worried about people seeing us?” I asked, glancing around the car park.

She stared at me for a moment with a questioning look on her face. “I really couldn't give a fuck,” she said. Then she quirked her brow. “Do you?”

I let my lopsided grin answer that one, and when she started to stroke my cock, without trying to lower my trousers, I pulled her towards me. My scars were hidden, and that's the way I wanted it. Always in control.

“I meant what I said last night,” I reminded her as I licked and nibbled her neck. “I can't give you more than this. If that's not enough for you, we need to stop now.”

But she wasn't going to stop. Her hand was wrapped firmly around my cock, stroking it with slow, firm strokes as she lifted her hips. Her mouth mirrored mine, licking and sucking my jaw up to my ear as she gasped, “This is more than enough. *You* are more than enough.” And then I groaned as I felt her rub my cock through her wet pussy.

I held her hips as she impaled herself on my cock. Her tight walls clenched around me, holding me, drawing me in. She felt fucking amazing, and for a moment, I closed my eyes, getting lost in the feel of her tight warm heat.

She bounced up and down on my cock, groaning on every movement, and I squeezed her ass, pulling her forward and rotating my hips. I loved that I had a handful of her ass as I watched her ride me, her eyelids growing heavy as she gasped

and moaned. Her mouth was open slightly as she chased her high, using me to get what she wanted. She looked fucking stunning, riding my cock, giving us both the kind of pleasure that was fucking mind-blowing. It was the most incredible sex I'd ever had. No woman had ever felt this right before. She fitted me perfectly, and I was seconds away from coming hard inside her. I couldn't stop it.

I reached down to rub her clit. I wanted her to come too. I didn't want to be that guy. The one that can't hold it and leaves the girl wanting more. I'd never been that guy. But today, I had to do everything in my power to rein it in because I couldn't seem to control the surge as my orgasm built.

"I'm gonna come," she gasped, and I kept my pace, fucking her, pulling her down on me as she rubbed over me, and then I felt it. The tightening and the pulsing as she came on my cock. That was the trigger that set my orgasm to explode inside her, and I gave a primal roar as I rode the high, filling her full of my cum as I gripped her hips.

"Oh fuck," she cried, her head thrown back as she pulsed around me.

"Fuck, yes," I growled, looking down at where we were joined, seeing my cock inside her.

Was there any greater sight in the world than that?

No.

And nothing felt better.

I let out a long moan of appreciation and threw my head back on the headrest. She kept me buried deep inside her as she lay over my body, panting to catch her breath. Then, she reached up to run her hands around my shoulders and shifted slightly. And then I felt it. The touch that changed everything. She placed slow, gentle kisses over the scarred skin where my neck met my shoulder, skin that had been hidden under my shirt before, and I froze.

"I know your story," she whispered. "I know all about what happened. You don't have to hide from me, ever. And I

hope that one day you can share it with me... your story, your scars. They don't scare me. I want to see everything.”

The heat that'd burned through me only moments ago suddenly turned to ice cold dread, and my whole body stiffened at her words and what they meant.

I sat up, slowly pushing her up and off me, and she gasped, a look of utter devastation painted clearly on her face as I lifted her off my cock and shifted her over to the passenger side of the car. Brutal, I admit, but necessary for my own sanity.

“I don't want you to see anything. My story is mine, and it's not something I want to share. Not with anyone.”

I knew I was being an asshole, but I couldn't help it. This was my trigger. She'd pushed my self-destruct button, and this was the fallout she'd have to deal with.

“It's just skin... scars,” she pleaded, tears welling in her eyes, and I felt like the biggest dickhead for using her and then throwing her off me like I had. She had my cum dripping out of her, and I was being the biggest dick. She didn't deserve it. But I was a runaway train hurtling off the tracks. “Things like that don't matter to me,” she begged.

“It matters to me,” I grunted, pulling the zip of my trousers back up. I set my seat back into the driving position and started the engine.

“You're not even going to talk about this?” she asked, glaring at me.

“No. Put your seatbelt on. I'll drop you at Ryan's.” I put the car into gear, ready to pull out, but she was having none of it.

“And I thought a shitty drive-through was the worst it was going to get.” She huffed and then opened the passenger door. “I think you've given me one ride too many today. I'll make my own way home.”

She slammed the door shut, and I watched her stomp away across the car park. I was an ass, but I still had a conscience.

So I drove towards her, manoeuvring the car so that I could wind down the window and talk to her as she walked.

“Get in. It’s too far for you to walk.”

She ignored me for a few seconds, then swung her head around to face me, piercing me with her stare. “I didn’t expect anything from you, Zak. But it would’ve been nice to be treated with a little respect after what we’ve just done.”

“I didn’t make any promises. I am what I am.” I slammed my mouth shut. That had sounded so much better in my head than it did coming out of my mouth. I was such an asshole.

“Yes, you are,” she hissed. “A complete and utter asshole, that is. I’m glad we agree on something.”

She folded her arms over her chest, still determined to outwalk my car.

“I never claimed to be anything else. If you’ve got some sort of saviour complex, save it for a guy who’s into that shit, because that’s not me.”

She blew out an exasperated breath and tightened her arms, her shoulders lifting as she stood taller despite my put-downs.

“The only person who can save you is yourself,” she stated plainly.

Then, she began to slow down, and I took a moment to contemplate my next words.

“I didn’t mean to upset you. You touched a nerve is all.”

Her body language eased as her shoulders dropped and she let her arms fall to the side.

“I touched your neck,” she replied, facing me, showing me how much empathy she had glowing in her eyes. “You know, the part you try to cover up. Just like the rest of you. And that’s fine.” She shrugged. “I get it. I won’t do it again.”

“I should’ve told you,” I muttered regretfully, and she stopped in her tracks, making me slam my brakes on.

“Told me what?”

I steeled myself for what I was about to disclose.

“That there are certain places I don’t like to be touched... or seen. But... now you know.”

Her expression changed instantly, and the sunshine she always seemed to radiate reappeared. Strangely, it made me feel relieved. I preferred the sunshine to the disappointment I’d had before. It made me feel lighter. I don’t know why.

“Now I know,” she repeated, nodding to herself, and as a sly little grin spread over her face, she added, “For next time.” She gave me a wink, and then her expression switched again, and with a deep sigh, she threw her head back with a look of regret. “I swear, if this were a romance novel, I’d be throwing my kindle at the wall right about now and calling me out for being too stupid to live.”

“You’re not stupid.”

“No?” She tried to be serious, but the way she looked at me showed she felt anything but. “We just went from zero to one hundred. I literally jumped on you in the middle of a drive-through car park. Even I’m slut shaming me, and I hate slut shaming.” She sighed and stepped forward, opening the passenger door.

“You’re... enthusiastic,” I added, trying to find the right words to describe her and coming up short. “Friendly.” That one earned me a sarcastic huff. “But you’re not stupid.”

She settled herself back into the passenger seat, and as she put the seatbelt on, she said, “Maybe we should agree on a safe word, or at least mark off some safe zones for your body. You know, no touch zones.”

“You say that like there’ll be a next time,” I replied grumpily, and she smirked to herself.

“We’ll see,” she muttered under her breath, staring out the passenger window, and from the reflection in the glass, I could see her beaming face reflected back at me.

“Yes, we will,” I stated as confidently as I could.

There’d be a next time.

She knew it.

And I was trying to deny it.

Trying... and failing.

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EIGHT

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ZAK



It'd been five days since I'd had a decent night's sleep. Five days since my world had shifted on its axis and made me antsy and all out of sorts. Five days since I'd last seen Morgan, and she was all I'd thought about.

The girl with the sickly-sweet sunshine smile full of wicked promises had gotten under my skin more than I'd realised. She bothered me; and no one had ever done that, even before the fire.

"I've got to admit," I said to Finn as he sat in the corner of my home office, painting the last of the vases for another huge order. "I didn't expect to see that fucking psycho, Adam Noble, at your wedding. What's the deal there?"

Finn didn't usually paint the orders from here. I shipped them to him, and he did his part remotely. But today, he'd decided to mix things up a little. I had no idea why. I loved Finn, but I was already exhausted from having to converse with him, and this was only the second conversation we'd had this afternoon.

"It wasn't easy," he replied, unable to look over at me. "But Liv is Effy's best friend. She was a bridesmaid. I couldn't really expect her to come and leave him at home."

He went quiet for a moment, and I thought the conversation was over, until he cleared his throat and added, "He's not that bad once you get to know him. None of them are. They call themselves soldiers because that's what they feel like—warriors, fighting for their town. And let's face it,

it's a shithole. None of them had the nicest up-bringing and they're trying to do the best they can. You can't fault them for that."

"I can and I will," I shot back. "You had a crap childhood too. Doesn't mean you're off blackmailing people and causing shit." I glared at him from across the workshop, showing him I didn't buy his feeble excuses for Noble's behaviour back then.

"My childhood wasn't the best," he said, which was the understatement of the century. "But I had you guys. And you all had good role models in your lives that affected me too. Your families were like my own. And when you sit back and look at the facts, what did Adam really do that was so awful, in the big scheme of things? He got me to paint a mural in the town. It's still there now, and it's one of the pieces I'm most proud of. He got us to put on a party to try and give something back to his town. Okay, he made Brandon throw the fight, and Brandon will never forgive him, but in the end, he got rid of my uncle. The man who made mine and my sister's lives hell growing up. I can't be mad about that. Not forever."

"And he threatened to tell everyone what your uncle did," I snapped back. But then guilt washed over me. Finn's uncle had abused him, and bringing it up now felt wrong, especially to score points in an argument.

Finn swallowed, took a deep breath and then, fighting down his demons, he said, "His methods were... unconventional." He lifted his gaze to mine and then focused back on his work. "But they worked."

"Unconventional? He fucking threatened you! He left you with no choice but to play his twisted games." I hated that Adam and his friends had manipulated Finn's plight, twisting it to serve their purpose. They'd taken advantage of him, and I despised them for it, I always would.

Finn shrugged. "I can't hold onto that forever. It's over. Done. And he's Liv's husband now. Poppy's dad. He's not going anywhere. I guess I'm just trying to make the best of an awkward situation."

Awkward? The guy made his life hell back then. Trust Finn to see things with rose-tinted fucking glasses. I wouldn't forgive Noble. I couldn't. Neither could Brandon, judging from the fight at the wedding. Those wounds still cut deep. A fact that must've finally dawned on Finn as he looked up at me with guilt on his face.

"I'm so sorry, Zak." He swallowed and added, "I should have told you he'd be there. I didn't mean to blindside you. But for what it's worth, I don't think he started the fire." He dropped his head. "Not that my opinion matters, but still, I shouldn't have done that to you."

I don't think I'd ever met someone as attentive and thoughtful of others as Finn was. The guy would literally cut himself open and bleed for you if you asked him to. I didn't want him to beat himself up about this.

"It didn't bother me. I don't like him, but I'm big enough and ugly enough to block that fucker out."

Adam Noble didn't factor in my brain. A certain brunette did, and this conversation was just my way of warming up to the big question. It was time to steer things in the direction I wanted them to go.

"What's the deal with Emily's sister?" I asked, hoping he couldn't hear the way my voice faltered as I tried to appear unaffected.

"Morgan?" Finn frowned, probably wondering why I was asking about her, and he kept his focus solely on his painting as he replied, "There's no deal there. Where Ryan and Emily are, Morgan is too these days. After everything that went down at the community centre, Emily and her grew closer. I heard her mum didn't take the news about Alec Winters being a lying cheat very well. Then she got sick, cancer I think, and she passed away a few years back. Morgan relied on Emily a lot after that, and now, they're inseparable. Ryan and Emily are really protective of her."

"How so?" I asked, wanting to know as much about her as possible without arousing suspicion.

“Well, let’s put it this way, Kian asked her out, and Ryan warned him off. Told him Morgan was off-limits. She’d been through enough and he didn’t want her being played. You know what Kian’s reputation is like.”

Yeah, not as bad as mine was when I lived in Sandland.

“But Kian got off lightly,” Finn went on. “Do you remember Marcus Bridge? He was in the year below us at high school.”

I shook my head. I’d never heard of the guy.

“Anyway,” Finn carried on. “He took Morgan on a few dates. Ryan and Emily had no idea. Then one night, he drove Morgan back to theirs, tried it on in the car outside their house, and Ryan saw him. Dragged him out of the car and punched him. She never saw him again.”

“Why did he do that?”

“Because she’s vulnerable,” Finn added. “They didn’t want her to get hurt. Morgan means a lot to Emily, and so she means a lot to Ryan.”

An image of what’d happened between Morgan and me the last time she’d been in my car flashed through my mind, and I felt my stomach clench. I was pretty sure Ryan would do more than punch me if he found out what I’d done. Especially after I’d told her not to expect anything from me.

“She doesn’t look vulnerable,” I stated, hoping he’d give me more insight into her life. “She seemed pretty confident at the wedding.”

“Confident or trying to hide something?”

I didn’t respond.

Was her over-confidence to compensate for something else?

The death of her mum, maybe?

Or how her father betrayed them all?

Could someone really project such a sunny, bright persona on the outside while dying on the inside?

Because I couldn't.

There was a dark, empty cavern of pain and nothingness inside of me, and there was no way I could hide it. I projected what I felt right back into the world, and what I felt was anger, bitterness, and a hatred that ate me up like a monster devouring everything in its path. No. No one could fake their whole personality like that.

Could they?

At that moment, I heard the door behind me open, and when I turned in my chair to glance over my shoulder, my heart stopped. Standing there, with the brightest smile on her face, was Morgan.

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NINE

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MORGAN



I'd stood outside his workshop for a few minutes before going in. I didn't want to alert them to the fact that I was here, but I'd heard them talking about how vulnerable they thought I was. That Finn thought I appeared confident to hide something else. Something darker, maybe? I don't know, but it struck me how ironic it was that I was doing exactly that now, grinning like a fucking Cheshire Cat so they wouldn't realise I'd been eavesdropping. Using smiles to hide the truth. I was a seasoned pro at it.

Finn spotted me first. His expression was one of shock and confusion as he stared at me. Probably wondering why I'd shown up here of all places. Zak was a little slower, turning and looking over his shoulder, the lines of irritation etched into his brow at having his private space invaded by someone coming in turned to bewilderment as he realised it was me.

"Hey!" I did a stupid, cringey wave as I stood in the doorway. I didn't know what else to say to break the ice, and boy, was it icy in here.

"What are *you* doing here?" Zak snapped.

But his accusatory tone was drowned out by Finn asking, "How are you doing? It's great to see you, Morgan."

I don't think Zak agreed that it was great, but he tempered his salty mood as best he could and spun around in his chair to face me.

"I'm good, thanks for asking," I replied, stepping further into Zak's territory. "I'm sorry to barge in here

unannounced...”

“Then why did you?” Zak spat, and I watched as Finn raised his brows behind him.

I was tempted to tell him I carried a watermelon, but Zak wasn't in the mood for that version of me, and so I went with the truth—well, the truth I was willing to divulge.

“Ryan had some paperwork he needed to give to you.” I held the envelope up, as if I was showcasing the evidence to the jury. “It's for the service on your car.”

“He could've mailed it to me,” Zak replied, looking less than impressed.

“He could've, but he asked me to do it, so here I am.” That was a lie. I saw it on his desk and swiped it, telling him I'd drop it off at the post office. I didn't give Ryan a chance to argue, and I wouldn't give Zak one either. “He likes to offer a more personal touch.” I winked, and Finn smirked. It had zero effect on Zak, though. He just stood up and walked over to me, took the envelope from my hands, and then walked away.

“Thanks,” he said, throwing the envelope onto his desk as he sat back down.

I loitered for a little longer, wringing my hands together and balancing from one foot to the other. I probably looked fucking awkward, but I didn't care. I hadn't come all this way for nothing.

Finn must've picked up on my nervous energy because he stood up abruptly, announcing, “I need to go.” Then he checked his watch and tutted quietly to himself. “I told Effy I'd take her out for dinner. Can you courier the rest of the order to me? I'll finish it off in my workshop.” He grabbed his jacket from the back of his chair and stalked towards the door where I stood. “Nice to see you again, Morgan. You'll have to come round to ours one night for dinner.”

“That'd be nice,” I replied.

And with that, he nodded and left, and I watched as he closed the door behind him.

“And then there were two,” I said, turning back to Zak.

“I’ve got work to do.” He turned his back on me and started tapping away on his laptop. But if he thought that would get rid of me, he had another thing coming. He might be a surly bastard, and if it were anyone else talking to me like that, I would’ve called them out on it and fucked off. But this was Zak. Everything was different with him. Was I a doormat for him? In other people’s eyes, probably. But in mine, no. He was surly for a reason. I knew what that reason was, and I wanted nothing more than to help him. Reach inside and find the boy that was still in there, hidden underneath all the bullshit trauma and regret.

I started to wander around the workshop, picking up vases, pots, and bowls he’d created, and studying them. The craftsmanship was second to none.

How could someone who pretended to be ugly for the world create such beautiful things?

“You’ve built something really special here,” I said, peering at the shelves of art before walking over to the potter’s wheel set up in the far corner.

“It’s just a workshop,” he replied, not getting where I was coming from.

“I meant the pottery, not the actual building.” I rolled my eyes. “It’s all so beautiful.”

“Finn makes it beautiful; I just provide the bare bones.”

His inability to acknowledge his part in it all made my heart hurt a little for him.

I sat down on the stool by the potter’s wheel, feeling the urge to give it a go.

“Can I try?” I asked, opening a bag of clay nearby and grabbing a lump.

“Be my guest.” He sounded uninterested, but the fact that he wasn’t looking at his laptop anymore and was watching me instead told me a different story.

I slapped the lump of clay into the middle of the wheel and started it up.

“Make sure you use water,” he advised, like he expected me to make something worthy of his shelves.

I dipped my hands in the water and attempted to mould the clay, but it seemed to have a mind of its own. The lump wouldn't behave in the way I'd expected it to, the way I'd pictured in my mind. But I didn't care. As it started to grow upwards, making it look like I was creating a dildo, I laughed. That made me lose focus, and I must've pressed too hard because it started to bend, then wilt like a limp dick.

“You need to lean into it,” Zak told me. “Use more water and keep it centred.”

“Lean into it. Got it.” I felt mischievous and bent forward, sticking my face in the clay and covering my nose in the wet, grey matter. Then I sat up proudly, smiling at him, looking like a fool.

“For fuck's sake,” he moaned. And there went another twinge in my heart. I had clay on my face, I'd acted and now looked ridiculous, and he couldn't even crack a smile.

“What?” I gave him a puzzled stare as I shrugged my shoulders. “Do I have something on my face?”

He didn't answer, just stood up, walked over to the wheel, picked up a cloth and wiped my nose.

“I wouldn't quit your day job,” he said, throwing the cloth on the side and dragging another stool over. “Whatever that may be.”

He sat down on the stool next to me, and without a word, he took a lump of clay, slapped it onto the wheel and got to work.

“It's not easy,” he said as his hands started moulding the clay. “It took me ages to centre the clay properly. Years to make something worth selling.”

He started rambling on about using palm pressure, coning up, and centring. I didn't listen. All I could focus on was his

exposed forearms and the veins popping as he worked. How his wet, clay-covered fingers looked, pushing, controlling the clay. My heart was beating out of my chest.

Who knew a potter's wheel could be so damn sexy?

Patrick Swayze and Demi Moore, that's who.

And all of a sudden, I wanted to do a *Ghost* and join in the erotic hand porn that was playing out right in front of my eyes. Without a word, I reached forward and placed my hands over his larger, warmer ones. But the minute I did, his hands shot back, pulling away from me.

"What are you doing?" He glared at me, narrowing his eyes accusingly, like I'd just committed a crime.

"We've shared bodily fluids, Zak. I didn't think you'd mind sharing a lump of clay."

"That's not what that was though, was it?"

I blinked, waiting for divine intervention or some witty reply to spring into my head. But it never came.

"Why is touching your hands such a big deal? They aren't burned," I asked.

He sighed, moved his stool away slightly and stared at the floor.

"It's not the hands. I don't have a problem with that. It's the fact you did it without asking first. I didn't see it coming. You threw me off."

His words hurt me, but I wouldn't let it show.

"I think you were the one that threw me off," I joked, trying to make light of the situation.

"You know what I mean."

He stood up, walked over to the sink and started to wash his hands.

"I'm confused," I said, and watched as his shoulders sagged.

"What's there to be confused about?"

I couldn't believe he was even asking that.

"We've had sex twice."

He spun around.

"And I told you not to expect anything more," he barked.

"I don't," I lied. "But I don't understand why you're freaking out over me touching your hands."

"Because I don't like being out of control. I don't want to be... surprised."

"It's just a hand."

"Not to me."

All the little cracks in my heart were aching, opening up like wounds that refused to heal.

"Are you determined to go through life never giving anyone a chance to get close to you? Never giving yourself a chance?"

"It's better that way."

"Better for who?"

He didn't answer. Instead, he ignored me and sat back down at his desk, tapping away at the keyboard again like nothing had happened.

I stood up, walked over to the sink to wash my hands, and then headed to the door, expecting to leave things as they were. But I couldn't. My head might've been telling me to let him have his space, but my heart was screaming at me to chip away. Get him to keep talking. Make him open up, if only for a little while.

"We all need human interaction," I told him. "Without it, we'll die a little every day until there's nothing left but heartache and regret."

"I'm already there, kid," he said, and the way he referred to me as 'kid' made me wince, but I held it back.

"No, you're not."

He cocked his eyebrow and spared me a fleeting glance.

“If you were,” I pressed on. “We wouldn’t have done what we did at the wedding... and the car park,” I added with a sly grin.

“What can I say?” he replied. “I’m a weak man.”

“You’re a man with needs.” I folded my arms over my chest. The case I was making now was one I was determined to get through to him. “I have needs too. I think we could be good for each other.”

I must’ve tapped into a secret portal in his brain that snapped his attention back to me because he stopped typing and swivelled his chair around.

“How so?” he asked, his eyes narrowed as he stared at me.

“I know who you are.”

“No, you don’t.” He shook his head and went to turn back around.

“I understand where you’re coming from.” I pressed further, trying to keep his attention on me.

“Really?”

“I know you have limits, and that’s okay. I can work with that.”

“Morgan,” he huffed. “Whatever it is you’re trying to say, just spit it out, because right now you’re just talking in riddles.”

“You don’t like people seeing you.” I gestured to where he sat. “Your body, I mean. You don’t want anyone to see it. Fine. I won’t look.”

His frown lines deepened.

“You don’t want anyone to touch you, unless you’re in control, and guess what? I’m fine with giving you that control. I trust you.”

He folded his arms over his chest, giving me his full attention now.

“What are you saying?” he asked.

“I’m saying we’re pretty fucking awesome together. You can’t deny that. And I’m okay with a little blindfold and handcuff play. You want to be in control? Then control me. Let me see what you want me to see and hide what you want to hide. Keep my hands where you want them. I’m good with that.” It made me smile, watching his mouth fall open as I gave my speech. “If you want to go the whole hog and draw diagrams of the no-go zones on your body, be my guest.” I took a step closer to him, and on a whisper, I added, “Just know that there are no zones on my body. It’s all yours for the taking.”

My mouth was dry, my heart beating out of my chest with nerves, but I stayed frozen to the spot, waiting to hear what he’d say.

“What exactly is it you’re laying out here? Fuck buddies with hard limits?”

“Why not?” I replied, trying to appear nonchalant. “We could even have a safe word.”

“You’d need it if I’ve got you restrained,” he muttered as his eyes darkened at the thought.

“Not for me.” I winked. “For you.”

He shook his head.

“I don’t know. Ryan and Emily would be pissed—”

“Then don’t tell them.” I cut in. “What’s it got to do with them anyway?”

“Ryan’s my best friend,” he argued a little too weakly. He was cracking.

“And I love him too. He’s been the best brother-in-law to me. More like a brother. But the last thing I want to think about right now is what they both think. I’m more concerned about you. Us.”

“There is no us,” he shot back.

“There could be.”

“It wouldn’t work. I’d break your heart.”

“Not if I broke yours first.”

A hint of a smile appeared at the corner of his mouth.

“Okay. I’ve gotta admit, I like your confidence, but I need to think about this.”

“Whatever you need.” I stepped back, heading towards the door. I’d given him enough food for thought today. “But don’t take too long. Offers like this don’t come around every day. This is a once in a lifetime chance,” I said, gesturing up and down my body.

And with that, I turned and left. Leaving him to mull over the best decision he’d ever make in his life.

It was a no-brainer. I was offering him everything on a plate, just the way he liked it.

And me?

What did I get out of it?

I got the opportunity to be close to the man that’d been my obsession since the day I walked into Sandland’s Community Centre with my mum all those years ago. The man who I wanted above all others.

It was always Zak.

It would only ever be Zak.

The morning after Finn and Effy’s wedding, he’d called me out, saying I knew who he was, that I’d targeted him. Little did he know, I’d been watching him a lot longer than that. I’d planned everything down to the last detail. Nothing was a coincidence, and I’d left nothing to chance.

I wanted Zak Atwood, and I’d got him.

Just call me a freaking mastermind.

He was mine.

TEN

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ZAK



I had to hand it to her; the girl was determined. Either that, or fate was playing a very strange trick trying to get us together. But it was a dangerous one too. I might not see my friends in Sandland that much anymore, but I didn't want to get on Ryan's bad side. If he hated her dating Marcus Bridge, he'd despise her being near me. Even Kian wasn't good enough, and Kian was a good guy. I'd definitely be seen as a bottom-of-the-barrel choice, or was it scraping the barrel? It didn't really matter, I'd be both. Worse, probably. There was dating the dregs of the dating pool, and then there was me. Not anyone's first choice, and I was okay with that. I got it. Why would anyone want an emotionally stunted loser with body issues?

And yet, there was something about Morgan that kept drawing me in. Yes, I loved sex. And yes, I did still fuck women, even though I didn't like to be seen, and touch was strictly on my terms. In other words, there was no touch, not by them. But what I hadn't told her was that I'd never fucked the same woman twice. Not for years. Not since the fire. But for her, I'd made an exception. I'd broken my sacred rule. I'd always said once was enough. But I didn't think once would ever be enough with her. That was something I couldn't admit out loud, though. It hurt to even admit it in my own head. But one thing was clear, Morgan Rotherham was a mindfuck, and I couldn't deny her light drew me in.

Was I the moth or the flame?

I wasn't sure because she had me second-guessing everything. Sometimes, I felt like the flame, in control, mesmerising her, drawing her near. Other times, I was the moth, helpless to fight this little vixen that seemed intent on infiltrating every facet of my life.

I stared at the closed door she'd just walked through, part of me wondering if I should go after her, and the other half telling me to get a grip. Let her go. She was full-on, and I needed space. But the fact she'd put herself on the line, saying everything she'd said, offering what she had, made my mind whirl in confusion. The girl was an enigma. Who offers themselves up like that? She was like a gift from heaven destined to join me in hell, and I think hell suited her better, despite the sunshine she always radiated. She had a hidden dark side, and I guess she wanted to explore that with me.

But was I ready for the fallout that a deal like that could bring?

I swivelled my chair back around to face my laptop and picked up the envelope she'd given me off the desk. When I turned it over to open it, I saw her name and phone number written on the back. Yes, the girl was determined, all right. Strong-willed and tenacious, she could sell a barbecue to Satan and make him think he's getting a bargain. And I had to admit; I liked that about her.

But I wasn't going to use that number today.

Instead, I saved her number in my phone as Little Miss Sunshine and carried on with my work. Distracting myself with orders, invoices, and accounts, desperately trying not to imagine Morgan tied up, naked on my bed, blindfolded and begging for me.

An hour later, I hadn't got anything done. Seems picturing her laid out perfectly for me was more distracting than I'd realised, so I headed back to my house. I needed to take care of myself, run this little fantasy over in my mind and jerk off so I could get over it and get on with my day. Because it was always that simple, right?

WRONG.

Three days later, I'd jerked off more than I ever had as a horny teenager. Thinking about her and the promises she'd made had driven me crazy. So, when my phone lit up with an incoming text on a rainy Monday evening, and the name Little Miss Sunshine appeared on the screen, I opened it right away.

LITTLE MISS SUNSHINE

You have superhuman restraint, do you know that? So here I am, caving in and messaging you. Have you thought any more about what I said?

I took a moment to think how to reply. Obviously, I took too long, as she sent another message before I could respond.

LITTLE MISS SUNSHINE

Don't be that asshole and leave me on read. If you're not interested, say it.

Thing was, I was interested. I'd be a fool and a liar if I said I wasn't. But I had to be careful and manage her expectations. Agreeing to a sex pact was one thing, but I knew what could happen. Feelings would blur the lines, emotions would come into play, and she'd get hurt when I couldn't give her more. And I couldn't. I didn't want a girlfriend. I didn't want to live every day with the pressure of knowing that at any given moment, I could let someone down, let her down. That's what relationships were for me now. Them expecting and me being a disappointment. At least, that was what I guessed would happen. I hadn't been in a relationship for six years, so it was all conjecture, but I knew myself. I knew I wasn't ready, and I wasn't sure I ever would be.

ME

I'm not ignoring you, but I need you to understand my limits.

LITTLE MISS SUNSHINE

You've made your limits pretty clear so far, but I'm happy to discuss it in more detail. Would that work? Are you free tomorrow night for dinner? No pressure, we can just talk.

ME

I could do that.

LITTLE MISS SUNSHINE

Good. I'll meet you at The Royal Lounge in town at seven.

I SHOULD'VE KNOWN she'd be at The Royal Lounge early. It was a pretentious, over-priced restaurant, where the prices were bigger than the portions. Walking in, I could see her already sitting at a table in the corner of the almost empty restaurant, adjusting the cutlery and smoothing the skirt of her red dress nervously. I didn't think Morgan got nervous; I was seeing a different side to her as I stood in the doorway, watching. But as I moved closer to the table, her head shot up, and the timid, jumpy girl vanished, replaced by the vixen I was used to.

"Right on time, Atwood," she said, standing up to greet me.

I have no idea why, but I felt awkward and stuck my hand out to shake hers. She snorted and took my outstretched hand. "Thanks for coming," she said, smirking as she shook it, and then sat back down.

I pulled the chair opposite hers out and sat down, grabbing the menu to give me something to do with my hands. I felt out of my depth here. The place was virtually empty, but I could still feel the walls closing in on me. It was stifling, I felt suffocated. This was the kind of date I hated. Being on show and not knowing what I should do. And technically, this wasn't even a date; it was a catch-up, or a meeting, or a discussion. Fuck it... I had no idea what it was, but I felt uneasy.

Which fork was I supposed to start with?

I know my mother would've gone crazy if I admitted to not knowing that. As kids, our parents took us out to dinner all the time, but I'd lost confidence since then. I felt like I was seconds away from making a fool of myself. It was like I'd forgotten how to do life... the life other people led, anyway.

"How's your week going?" Morgan asked, and I started mumbling, glancing around as I blurted out some rubbish about being busy with work.

"It's good that you're busy." She smiled and tilted her head. I think she was trying to put me at ease, but it wasn't working. "It must be great to work with Finn too. He's a great guy."

"Yeah, he is." I placed my elbows on the table and steepled my fingers together, resting them under my chin.

"You're nervous," she said, and I felt my back go up. Yes, I was nervous. Uncomfortable, even, but I thought I was hiding it. Seems I was wrong.

I peered around the restaurant at the other patrons and the waiters gathered at the end of the bar. None of them were looking at us, but I couldn't shake the feeling of being on show. That everyone was looking at me.

"Why are you nervous?" she asked, narrowing her eyes slightly but giving me a warm smile.

"I don't usually come to places like this," I stated, grabbing the napkin and laying it in my lap. Another avoidance tactic. I'd be the one rearranging the cutlery next.

She reached across the table, then remembering my limits, she pulled back slowly.

“You weren’t nervous at Finn’s wedding, and there were a lot more people there,” she reminded me.

“I’d had a lot more to drink then. It helped to keep me going. It kept me there longer than I’d expected.”

“It helped you do a lot of things I’d never have expected you to do.” She winked, biting her lip suggestively.

“I was led astray,” I replied weakly, trying to defend my actions.

“Were you led astray the morning after too?” she purred.

“I think the alcohol was still in my system, spurring me on.”

“I hope not. You were driving.”

I couldn’t help but smirk, then I noticed one of the waiters watching us, and my walls shot back up again.

“Fuck,” she said, noticing my reaction. “I don’t know why I brought you here. I should’ve known this was a bad idea.”

I went to speak and faltered.

Did she mean the restaurant was a bad idea or the offer she’d cooked up in my office a few days ago?

“You’re not a stuffy restaurant kind of guy,” she added, as if she’d read my mind. “We should’ve just gone for a burger.” She glanced around, then in a hushed voice, she asked, “Shall we just bail? There’s a burger place around the corner that does the best fries. They even do take-out.”

Take-out sounded good to me. Bailing sounded even better.

“Lead the way,” I told her, and she stood up, grabbing her coat from her chair and stifling a giggle as she headed for the door. I followed, avoiding the confused looks on the waiter’s faces.

As we got to the door and stepped onto the street, I felt the tension leave my shoulders and relief wash over me. This was definitely the right choice. A burger joint was more my style. It wasn't lost on me that she'd picked up on that fact straight away. Maybe I needed to take this arrangement more seriously.

We walked the short distance to the burger place, and when we got there, we ordered burgers and fries to go.

"There's benches outside the entrance to the park," she said, leading me to the door. "They're private too. So as long as it doesn't start raining, we should be okay there."

We made our way to the benches and sat down. There was no one else here, and the burgers were hot and delicious. It was perfect.

We ate in silence for a while, a comfortable silence. In that moment, I realised I felt more at ease with this girl I'd known for a few weeks than most people that I'd known all my life. Talking was usually exhausting, mentally draining, but it seemed easier with her. Less effort. Enjoyable, even.

"So, you know about me and what I do," I said, breaking the silence. "But what about you?"

"What about me?" she asked.

I shrugged.

"What do you do for a living? What do you like?"

She took a minute to think as she chewed her mouthful of burger.

"I was on a photography course, but I dropped out. I just wasn't feeling it."

"You've gotta follow your heart," I stated.

"My thoughts exactly." Her eyes crinkled at the edges as she grinned and popped one of her fries into her mouth. "That's why I've signed up to do nursing instead. I like helping people. I want to do something meaningful with my life."

"That's a very noble thing to do."

She laughed quietly, and her eyes dipped as she said, “Yeah, it is.” Then looking up at me, she added, “Speaking of noble, how did you feel about him being at the wedding?”

He was the last person I wanted to talk about tonight.

“It is what it is.” I stared straight ahead, trying not to let the thought of Adam Noble ruin my calm and stable mood.

“It doesn’t bother you?” she asked between bites of her burger.

“No. I can’t control what he does. I’d rather not see or think about him, but life goes on.”

“Brandon still thinks he started the fire.” She spoke quietly like she didn’t want to offend me.

“And I couldn’t care one way or the other.”

“Really?”

“It happened,” I explained. “Now, it’s over. Obsessing over the hows and whys would drive me crazy, and I have enough to think about.” She nodded. “And for what it’s worth,” I added. “I don’t think he did do it.”

“You don’t? Why?”

“Adam Noble gets off on terrorising people. He brags about it. If he’d done it, he’d have shouted it from the rooftops.”

“Maybe he’s protecting Liv?” she replied.

“No.” I shook my head. “He had months before they got together to own his shit, and if there’s one thing I know about Adam Noble, it’s that he does just that... he owns his shit.”

“It is shit... what happened to you, I mean.”

I didn’t like the way the conversation was going, so I tried to shut it down.

“I’m over it.”

“But are you though?” Her eyes shone with empathy and understanding that I found unsettling. “Have you forgotten why we’re here? You can’t stand it when I touch you, you

don't want to be seen, and I want to help you, Zak, I really do, but I'm not sure I'll be enough."

"You're more than enough for any guy, don't ever say that," I snapped. It was the first time I'd heard her berate herself, and I didn't like it.

"I don't mean like that. I mean you should be seeing a counsellor or someone that can help you in other ways. There are support groups out there. People who are going through what you went through..."

I cut her off. This wasn't up for discussion.

"I've done counselling."

"And did you see it through to the end?"

I didn't answer. It was obvious I hadn't. The counsellor was a twat, and it'd all been a waste of my time.

"If you don't gel with the first counsellor you meet, you need to try another one. Find someone that you can work with."

I sighed and threw my half-eaten burger and fries into the bin next to our bench.

"I did the art therapy," I said, trying to justify my choices back then. "That helped me."

"And that's great. It gave you a way to channel your aggression and you created a business from it. You should be so proud of yourself, but you've still got a lot of anger inside. I think you need more than a lump of clay to tackle that. Talking will help."

"Talking is pointless. It's the last thing I feel like doing."

"It's the one thing that could save you."

I felt irritation clawing its way over me, like spikes stabbing every inch of my skin. Fight or flight mode was firmly engaged.

"Is that what this is?" I snapped. "Some kind of bullshit intervention? I thought we came here to talk about your offer, not the state of my mental health."

“We did.”

She reached out and placed her hand gently on my arm, my left arm, the one side of me I didn't feel quite so abhorrent about. I didn't shake her off, but I still looked down at her hand and held my breath, waiting for that icy fear to creep in. Surprisingly, this time, it didn't.

“I'm sorry,” she whispered. “Can we start again?”

“I wish you would.” I still couldn't take my eyes off her hand on my arm, and when she took it away, placing her hands in her lap, I felt a flicker of disappointment. “So, talk to me,” I said, fighting down feelings I couldn't understand.

She blew out a breath, and then her face lit up as she shifted where she sat to face me.

“I like you, Zak. I like you a lot.” She held her hand up as I went to say that she didn't even know me. “Yes, I know I have a lot to learn, but what I do know, I like.”

She stared at me from under her lashes with innocence, then the devil I knew she held inside her started to dance provocatively in her eyes.

“I think we can help each other... I *know* we'll be good for each other,” she corrected. “You don't like to be touched, and, well...” She hesitated before sitting up straighter. “Being tied up, restrained, that's something I'm excited to explore. You don't want to be seen, and being blindfolded doesn't scare me.” She shrugged. “I think we're the perfect match. You have limits and those limits could work in my favour. What do you say?”

“I say you're playing with fire. And if Ryan or Emily found out, I'd be a dead man.”

“It's got nothing to do with them.” She sighed. “They don't need to know.” Then she wriggled a little closer to me. “I'm a big girl, you know? I can make my own decisions.”

I knew I had issues, but I was still a red-blooded male. I'd be a fool to turn her offer down. But I had to make sure she could be discreet. I didn't want this to blow up in my face further down the line.

“Can I trust you not to tell anyone?”

“Of course,” she replied, her face softening as she showed me how honest she was being in her response.

“And you understand,” I added. “If I agree to this, that’s all it’ll be, an agreement. I can’t give you anything else. I’m not ready for a relationship.”

“Never say never.” She winked.

“Morgan,” I chastised.

“Yes. I agree,” she groaned. “I’m not sure I’m ready for all that either.” She looked hesitant, and I thought maybe she was having second thoughts, despite what she’d said, but then she lifted her face to look me in the eyes. “You do know you’re not going to be able solve all your problems with sex, don’t you?”

“Yes. I’m well aware.”

Thing was, sex had always been the way I’d expressed myself. I loved it. I was also fully aware that it wouldn’t change my world for the better. It might rock it for a brief moment, but it’d be like papering over the cracks. Sticking a Band-Aid over a gaping wound that wouldn’t heal.

Maybe this was a stupid idea.

I’d been fine on my own.

Why change that?

I was happy, living my life the way I was before she crashed into it—solitary, simple, and safe.

But another part of me didn’t want to close the door to the life she was offering. One where, for a few moments, I could feel like me again.

The old Zak.

Alive.

“Maybe we could do a trial run? See how it goes?” I suggested.

“That sounds like a good plan.” She smoothed her long hair over her shoulder, and like a little minx, she added, “And there’s no time like the present.”

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ELEVEN

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ZAK



We used the car ride to my place to discuss some of the finer details of our arrangement.

How often were we going to see each other?

I wanted to put a number on it, she didn't, so that was left open.

What was our safe word going to be?

She didn't want one, but I insisted. I didn't want to be that asshole. So, I told her it was sunshine, and it was non-negotiable. That earned me a sassy little huff.

Next, I wanted to know how we'd assess how well things were going.

She thought this was ridiculous, but I wanted clear and open discussions. I tried to get her to agree to a monthly overview, but she told me to get a life. If things weren't working, she'd tell me there and then, not at a monthly check-in.

In conclusion, I was trying to be business-like about this, make sure I'd covered all bases so I wouldn't leave myself open to any unexpected pitfalls. But she wanted to go with the flow. Let things develop naturally. She found my approach stuffy and told me I needed to lighten up if I was going to go through with this.

Lighten up.

Her saying that was like a red rag to a bull.

I wasn't stuffy, not when it came to sex, and in about ten minutes, I'd prove it to her.

We pulled up at my house, and I cut the engine. We both got out and made our way to the door.

"You don't need to worry so much," she told me. "I've thought a lot about this. I've got it all covered. It's going to work out just fine."

"I'm sure it will," I replied plainly, unlocking the door.

"You might want to tell that to your stiff shoulders and stony face," she remarked, breezing past me and walking into my house.

I watched as she wandered slowly around the living room, running her hand along the back of the sofa, and then she turned to face me.

"Very nice. Very... clean and in order. Not like most bachelor pads I've seen."

"I like things neat and tidy. Why? How many bachelor pads have you been in?" It was none of my business, and the way my stomach churned thinking about it made me angry with myself. I didn't care, and I was starting to sound like an asshole. She didn't call me out on it, though.

"Not many. Why, are you jealous?" I could tell she liked that. She couldn't keep the smug smile off her face as she watched me, studying my reaction.

"Not at all." I stood still, not quite sure whether to offer her a drink or put the TV on. I wasn't sure what to do, but watching her in my space was certainly intriguing.

"There was one thing we didn't talk about in the car." She bit her lip nervously, then her eyes dipped to the floor. "I know I'm clean. I've only slept with two other guys, and both of those were years ago."

"Seriously?" I was taken aback by her revelation. She was so sexually confident I was sure her number would've been higher. It made me wary to reveal my own.

“You’re lucky number three,” she announced, and then she took a deep breath and added, “I don’t want to know your number, Zak. I know it’s higher than mine. Your body count is something I’d prefer you kept to yourself. All I need to know is that we don’t bring anyone else into the mix, if you know what I mean. I need to know you’ll stay clean too.”

“Isn’t that like closing the door after the horse has bolted?” I remarked, and she frowned at me. “I mean, you didn’t ask me this at the wedding, or the day after.”

“Because I trusted you. And...” She faltered, and if I didn’t know better, I’d say she looked embarrassed. “I wasn’t thinking straight during those times. I let alcohol and passion rule my head.”

“You can trust me,” I stated confidently.

“Good. But maybe we should get tested regularly, just to be safe.”

“Sure.”

We stood for a moment in silence, watching each other. Then she cocked her head and gave a sexy little sigh.

“Come on then, Romeo. Show me your bedroom.”

I walked ahead of her, leading her up the stairs into my room at the front of the house. Once inside, she reached into her handbag to pull something out and then dropped the bag to the floor.

“Well, I’m ready, are you?” She held up a pair of handcuffs, placing the keys on my bedside table. She also had a black blindfold in her hand, and she placed both of them on the bed and gave me a smoking-hot smirk.

“Good to see you came prepared.”

“I’m always prepared.”

She wasn’t here to mess about, and knowing that pleased me.

She lifted her red dress up from the hem and pulled it over her head, showing me that all she had on underneath was a

black G-string. Her perky, perfect tits swayed a little as she stepped closer to me.

“What do you want to do first?” she asked. “Put on the blindfold or the handcuffs?”

“Cuffs,” I replied in a gruff voice. My need to touch her as she stood so temptingly close made me want to bypass everything and throw her down on the bed and fuck her from behind. Her hard nipples grazed my T-shirt as her sweet breath fanned my face, making me desperate for a taste.

“Good choice,” she whispered, holding my gaze as she reached to the side to pick the handcuffs from the bed and hand them to me. Then she stepped back and put her hands together in front of her, like I was a bloody cop and she was being arrested.

“No.” I shook my head. “Crawl onto the bed and hold the bed frame.”

She grinned and turned slowly, swinging her sexy hips as she crawled onto the bed and held the frame where I’d asked her to.

“Good girl,” I praised her.

“I’m always a good girl,” she purred, staring at me over her shoulder, waiting, begging for me to join her.

I took a moment to look at her, take it all in, and appreciate how fucking spectacular she looked, almost naked and ready on my bed to do whatever the fuck I wanted. It was an image I’d never forget. One I wanted to see over and over again, and I made sure to take in every little detail, searing it into my brain. The smooth curve of her ass, the delicate bend of her back, her long, brown hair cascading over her shoulders, waiting for me to grab it, wrap it around my fist and tug hard.

“Are you finished looking? I’m feeling a little lonely up here.” She wriggled her ass but kept her hands firmly on the bed frame, like the good girl she was.

“I don’t think I’ll ever get tired of looking at you like this.” I let my eyes roam over her tight little body one more time, then I got onto the bed behind her, and reaching up, I clicked

one of her wrists into the handcuffs. “Is that okay? Not too tight?”

“It’s perfect,” she told me, glancing up at me with need as I caged her in, leaning over her like a lion ready to claim her.

I threaded the cuffs through the bed frame, then secured the second one to her other wrist.

Bending down, I growled low in her ear, “Now I’ve got you exactly where I want you.”

“Then use me,” she begged. “Show me I’m yours.”

I grabbed her chin roughly in my hand, twisting her face so I could kiss her forcefully. I could already feel myself letting go, ready to lose myself in her body. I pushed my lips so hard against hers, I was sure I’d leave bruising, then I nipped her bottom lip and pulled away.

“You are mine,” I ordered. “In this bed, under my control, you’ll do what I tell you.” I heard her give a contented sigh. “You’ll show me how fucking perfect you are, and you’ll please me. You’ll do everything you can to fucking please me. Then... if you’re a good girl, I’ll fuck you the way you need to be fucked and fill you full of my cum.” I reached down, cupping between her legs as I leaned close to her ear. “Remember, this pussy is mine, and when I’m finished, it’ll be dripping with my cum. My cock will be all you’ll ever need to get you off. You’ll be begging for it.”

She groaned, rocking her hips over my hand.

“For a man of few words, you certainly like to talk dirty... and I love it.”

“I like to fuck dirty too,” I growled.

I leaned back and grabbed the blindfold, placing it over her eyes and tying it tight.

“No touch, no sight.” She sighed. “I’m gonna need all those dirty words from you, Zak.”

“Then keep your ass in the air and get ready to take my cock and make me come,” I told her. “I’ll give you all the dirt you need.”

I moved to kneel behind her and slapped her ass hard, loving how the skin mottled and turned pink from my hand. Another slap, and she let out a low moan.

“Have I been bad already?” She wriggled her ass, and I smoothed my hand over it, feeling the heat from where I’d smacked her.

“You’re always bad, tempting me with your sweet ass and your tight pussy. I think I need to teach you a lesson. Dirty girls get fucked harder.”

“I’ll be as dirty as you want me to be, if you can prove that’s right.”

I grabbed her G-string, pulling and yanking it off her forcefully, then threw it onto the floor. Then, with my hands, I spread her cheeks to see her glistening pussy and ass. I ran my fingers through her wetness and spread it over her asshole, smiling as I felt her squirm.

“I’m gonna enjoy fucking this pussy.” I ran my finger over her puckered hole, then pushed in slightly. “And this tight asshole.” She gasped, but her ass rocking backwards onto my hand told me she was loving every minute. “I’m gonna own every inch of you. I’m going to fuck every inch of you. There isn’t going to be a part of you I won’t have come in or on once I’m done with you.”

“You’ll never be done with me,” she teased.

I gave her one last slap on the ass for being a brat.

“I want you begging to take my cock, and after, you’ll thank me for it, like a good fucking girl.”

“I will.”

“Go on then,” I demanded. “Let me hear you beg.”

I undid the button of my jeans and slid them, along with my boxers, down my thighs, but I didn’t take them off completely. She groaned and writhed in front of me, making my cock ache with how fucking hard I was for her.

“I want it, give it to me,” she begged.

“Not good enough, princess.”

I waited, stroking my cock as I watched her ass rock slowly back and forth. She wanted to feel me rubbing her, stroking her; she was desperate and needy, but teasing her was so much fun.

“Please,” she begged harder. “Let me feel your big, hard cock.”

“Still not good enough,” I growled, chastising her. “You might want it, but I need that pussy dripping for me before you get it.”

She whimpered, but when she felt my hot breath near her pussy, she moaned, and when I speared my tongue and licked her, she groaned louder.

“Do you like that? Do you like me tasting how fucking sweet you are?”

“Yes,” she whimpered, barely able to speak. “More.”

I wanted to say no and deny her a little bit longer, but I couldn't. I wanted to bury my face in her pussy and eat her until she screamed my name. I wanted to drown in her juices, have it smeared all over my face. I'd never tasted a pussy as sweet as hers, and I didn't want to deny myself a moment longer.

I pushed her knees open wider as she knelt on the bed, ready for me, and I pushed my tongue inside her, fucking her, licking and tasting. My whole face was buried in her pussy, and I loved it.

“Ride my face,” I demanded as I gripped her thighs tightly. “Fuck my face and come on my tongue.”

“Yes,” she moaned back, rubbing herself on me.

I ate her pussy until her legs started to shake, using the tip of my tongue to circle her clit and then tongue fuck her tight little hole. My dick was throbbing, desperate to be inside her, and I stroked my cock as I sucked her, closing my eyes and savouring the taste as she started to throb on my tongue, her walls growing tighter as she chased her orgasm. And then she

came, flooding my mouth with her sweetness as she cried out. Her body shivered, her legs shook, and her pussy pulsated as she squeezed her thighs around my head to wring every second of ecstasy from me.

“Oh, God. That was so fucking good,” she cried, but I wasn’t done with her yet. I was just beginning.

I didn’t give her time to catch her breath. I reared up behind her and took my cock in my hand, running it along her pussy. Then I pushed in hard and fast, filling her soaked cunt.

“That’s it.” I held myself inside her, holding back for just a second. “Take my cock like a good girl.”

I grabbed her hips and pulled out, then pushed back in harder. Then I kept a steady pace, fucking her from behind hard and fast, thrusting into her and watching her ass cheeks as I pounded into her relentlessly. She held onto the bed frame, and with each thrust, she cried out, moaned, and called my name.

The metal of the bed frame started to bang off the wall as I increased my pace, fucking her into my mattress, losing any inhibitions I had. She was right; having her like this was just what I needed. This was the fuck to end all fucks.

I threw my head back, my fingers digging into her soft skin as I felt the pressure building in my balls, the shocks and sparks firing in the base of my spine. I was close to coming, and I squeezed my eyes shut tight to savour the feeling. It hadn’t felt this good in so long. Maybe it’d never felt this good. I was about to explode inside her, and it felt fucking amazing.

I opened my eyes and looked down at where my cock was penetrating her, sliding inside, slick with her wetness, and it was too much, too fucking sexy, and I roared as I came hard, emptying inside her.

“Oh, Sunshine.” I let my head fall back as I rode the wave, experiencing the strongest orgasm I’d ever had. My head was pounding, my body was alive with sparks of ecstasy, and when

I couldn't take it anymore, I fell forward, pinning her to the bed as I panted out my breaths.

We lay like that for a while, and then quietly, tentatively, she asked, "What went wrong?"

I lifted my head, puzzled at why she'd said that.

"There was nothing wrong. That was fucking perfect," I told her.

She was still cuffed to the bed and her blindfold was still on, so I couldn't see the emotions that'd no doubt be brimming in her all-telling eyes, but when she whispered to me, I knew what she was worrying about.

"You said our safe word."

I pressed my forehead to the back of her head and whispered, "It wasn't a safe word."

"It was. That's what we agreed on. Sunshine."

"No. I mean that was a shit safe word. I shouldn't have agreed to it. I used it as your nickname. Something I couldn't stop myself from saying in the moment."

"Oh," she replied, and then a moment later, she added, "I guess we need to think of a new safe word then."

I nodded and gave a low chuckle.

"I guess we do."

"Zak?" She twisted her head, as if she was looking at me even though she couldn't see a thing.

"Yes, Sunshine?"

That earned me a smile.

"This was supposed to help you loosen up."

"I've never been looser, baby."

"So, why have you still got all your clothes on?"

I knew she'd be frowning at me underneath that blindfold, and I couldn't blame her. I guess my ability to open up to her fully would take a little longer than I'd anticipated.

“Small steps, baby,” I replied, kissing her bare shoulder.
“Small steps.”

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TWELVE

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MORGAN



It didn't matter what I did or where I was; I couldn't get that night with Zak out of my mind. The way he'd held me afterwards, taking my blindfold and the cuffs off with so much care and then peppering my wrists with delicate kisses like he was saying sorry. The way he stroked my hair almost sent me to sleep. And the way he whispered that I didn't need to leave, I could stay the night, that one was the hardest of all, because I wanted nothing more than to lie in that bed with him, sleep until the morning and wake up to more kisses and fun. But I knew if I did, that wouldn't be the case. It was too soon for him. He wasn't ready to do the morning after, not the way I wanted. He'd have been awkward, probably regretting his decisions, and everything would've felt forced. That's what I thought, anyway.

So, I left. Leaving him wanting more. That's the way to reel them in, right? Well, it was how I planned to pull Zak closer to me. I'd waited too long for this. I didn't want to fuck it up at the first hurdle.

But as I sat in a crowded bar with Emily, Liv, and Effy, I was distracted. I didn't want to be here. My body might be sitting at this table, nodding absent-mindedly, as Emily scanned the crowds, looking for guys she thought were my type. But my mind was back in Willowbrook, with a dark-haired, and darkly moody man who'd always dominated my thoughts. He might be emotionally unavailable, but for me, every emotion I had was tied to him. I couldn't do anything to change it, and I didn't want to. Zak Atwood was my type. That's it. I wasn't interested in anyone else.

“What about the tall guy by the bar, the one in the leather jacket?” Emily asked, trying to point me in the direction of what felt like the millionth guy of the night.

“I don’t think so.” Liv sniffed, looking like she’d smelt something bad under her nose. “The eighties called; they want their jacket back.” She laughed at her own joke, then added, “Why are you so desperate to get Morgan married off anyway? She’ll meet a guy when the time is right.”

Emily looked a little guilty that Liv had chastised her and shifted in her seat, giving me an apologetic smile. “I don’t want to marry her off, I just want her to be happy.”

“I am happy,” I told her, straightening my back to prove it. “And you don’t have to play cupid for me, I’m quite capable of going out and meeting people.”

“I know.” Emily reached over and patted my hand. “I’m a busybody. Ignore me.”

“You’re not a busybody, you just care,” Effy replied.

“And I wouldn’t have you any other way,” I told a forlorn-looking Emily.

“Morgan, you need to come round to mine more often,” Liv butted in, changing the subject. “I could do with a live-in nanny. Emily is lucky to have you.” I appreciated her trying to big me up. She didn’t need to, but it was nice.

“I don’t live there.” I laughed. “I just like going round to help with Kai. And to see Em and Ryan, of course.”

It was true. They’d helped me through some dark times, and I liked being with them. They made me feel good about myself. Emily had that rare and special quality that made you feel lighter from being in her presence.

“Liv, she’s not a nanny,” Emily corrected her. “She’s Kai’s aunty.” Then growing concerned, she added, “Is Adam not pulling his weight?”

“You’re joking, aren’t you?” Liv pretended to look bothered, rolling her eyes, but she couldn’t hide her grin, even when she picked her glass up to sip her drink. “Adam does

more than I do. He insists on putting Poppy to bed, and when she wakes up in the night, nine times out of ten, he's the one who goes to her. He said he prefers it that way. He wants her to know that whenever she needs him, Daddy will always be there."

"Oh my God, Liv. That might be the sweetest thing I've ever heard you say about him." Emily put her hands over her heart, and her eyes softened.

"I told you, he's a big softie underneath it all," Liv relayed proudly.

"Yeah, he hides that really well," Effy muttered under her breath; then, as her cheeks blushed, showing her embarrassment, she said, "Do you think they'll get together when they're older? Poppy and Kai, I mean."

"I'd love to have Poppy as my daughter-in-law," Emily cooed, her eyes watering as she got lost in thoughts of their future.

Liv just scoffed. "Not if Adam has anything to say about it. He's already brainwashing her. He tells her every day that she's going to be a nun, like she understands what the hell he's on about. She's not even one yet. And I think he forgets whose genes she has sometimes." And then, smiling fondly, she added, "I'd love to have Kai as a son-in-law."

"A one-year-old and another on the way," Effy said to Liv, as Emily tittered to herself. "You're a glutton for punishment."

"I've tried batting him away," Liv replied, winking at us. "But it only encourages him more. He likes the challenge." Effy screwed her nose up and Liv threw her head back and laughed out loud. "My husband is an animal. And I love it!" She cackled.

"He's an animal all right," Effy whispered, earning a warning glare from Emily.

I guess the saying 'forgiven but never forgotten' applied to the girls' where Adam was concerned. Perhaps forgiven was too strong a word? Tolerated, maybe, for Liv and Poppy's sake.

“I’ll go and get us some more drinks,” Emily announced, avoiding the elephant in the room and standing up at the same time as Effy.

“I’ll help you,” Effy chimed, and the two of them left the table and headed to the bar.

Liv shifted her chair a little closer to mine, and leaning across, she called over the music. “They still don’t like Adam, but it’s fine. It is what it is. He’s good to me, and Poppy and I love him. That’s all that matters.” She studied me for a moment. “It’s no one else’s business, you know... who we love... and speaking of love, why don’t you tell her you’ve met someone already?”

I frowned back at her.

“What?” I asked, maintaining my poker face.

Liv smirked.

“Emily and Effy might not have seen you at the wedding, sitting on a certain man’s lap, but I did.”

I should’ve known someone would see. I hadn’t exactly been subtle. The alcohol and desperation to finally make my move had become too overwhelming.

“Have you told anyone?” I asked, not because I was bothered about anyone knowing, but because I knew how it’d affect Zak. It could fuck up our agreement, and I really didn’t want that to happen.

“No.” She shook her head. “I’m pleased for you, for both of you. Be careful, though. He’s got a lot of issues. Make sure you’re looking after yourself first.”

“I am,” I replied defensively, instantly feeling guilty for snapping at her. I could tell she’d picked up on my hostility. Her face fell and she put her hand over mine, squeezing it affectionately.

“I’m not trying to be negative or make you feel like it’s going to fail, whatever *it is* that’s going on between you two. I want it to work for you. I really do.” She took a deep breath, no doubt considering what she said next. “Zak is...

complicated. And it'll take a lot of patience and time to pull him out of the darkness. You've been through a lot yourself, losing your mum, and everything that happened with your dad. I just don't want you to get hurt."

"I appreciate you thinking of me. But I'll be okay. I'm big enough to look after myself."

I've always looked after myself. It was a case of having to. There wasn't anyone else to rely on growing up.

"I know you are." She huffed to herself and groaned. "Just ignore me. I think I'm the one who's turned into the busybody tonight."

"It's fine," I said, wringing my hands in my lap and wondering if it was too early to bail. I really wasn't feeling it tonight.

"If you want to leave, I can help," Liv said, picking up on my discomfort, and she lifted her mobile and gave it a little shake. "You might be doing me a favour too. Adam's just texted. He's sat outside waiting for me."

"Stalker much?" I joked, and she gave me an eye roll.

"You have no idea." She bit her lip then stood up. "Want us to give you a lift home?"

"No, it's okay. I haven't drunk any alcohol, and my car is parked down the road. But I could use an excuse."

"I've got you." She winked, and we headed to the bar where Emily and Effy were waiting to catch the barman's attention.

"We're going to take a rain check," Liv told Emily, speaking a little louder to be heard over the bass of the music pumping out of the speaker next to the bar. "I'm knackered, babe. This pregnancy is wiping me out and I can't go on a second longer. I need my bed." Then she gestured to me. "Morgan has reached the end of the road tonight too. Would you mind if we called it a night?"

"Of course not." Emily gave Liv's baby bump a gentle stroke. "You've gotta get all the rest you can before baby

number two comes.” She turned to me, looking concerned. “Are you okay? Has my pushy manhunt driven you away?”

“Not at all. I’m just tired and I’ve got an early start tomorrow.”

“I thought you were on study leave?” she asked, cocking her head as she narrowed her gaze at me. She was suspicious.

“I am. But I’ve got an early study group meeting at the library,” I lied.

She nodded slowly, taking it in.

“You should’ve told me. Next time, I’ll organise the night out to suit you better.”

She was being kind, thoughtful; that was what Emily was. Selfless and always putting others first.

“I know. Thank you.” I leaned across to hug her and kiss her on the cheek. Then I did the same to Effy and said my goodbyes along with Liv. “I hope you know how much I appreciate you all,” I told them, and then, with a lighter heart, I left the bar.

Outside, we spotted Adam leaning against his car, arms crossed over his chest and eyes trained on the door we’d just walked through. As soon as he saw Liv, he unfolded his arms and walked right over to us.

“Are you okay?” he asked, putting a protective arm around her.

“Yeah, just tired, and this one here”—she thumbed at me—“needed an excuse to leave early.”

“Do you want a lift?” Adam asked me.

“No, it’s fine. I’ve got my car.”

He nodded, then gestured down the street. “Okay, we’ll walk you to your car.” I put my hand up to argue, but he was having none of it. “It’s not a question. We’re walking you. End of.”

So, we walked the short distance to my car, and once there, Liv grabbed me in a bone-crunching hug. “Have fun,” she

whispered in my ear. “Give him my love, won’t you?”

I pulled away and nodded, getting into my car and driving away. I felt guilty for bailing, but I felt relieved that I was out of there and on my way to see the one person I really wanted to spend my time with, even if I was showing up randomly on his doorstep with no idea what reception I’d get.

“AREN’T you supposed to be out with Emily tonight?”

Zak stood at the doorway to his workshop, looking like he needed a good night’s sleep. I had gone to the house first, but after getting no answer, I’d noticed the lights on down here, and so, here I was. His usually darkened, suspicious eyes were weary and ringed with shadows as he peered at me, like he couldn’t quite focus as he stared at me in disbelief, standing on his doorstep. He ran his hand through his mop of dark hair and huffed, but more from tiredness than irritation. Then he stepped back to let me in, his eyes trained on me as I sauntered past him. He might be tired, but the little black dress I had on under my coat would wake him up.

“Burning the midnight oil?” I asked, making my way further into the workshop and turning on my heel once I was in the middle of the room to face him.

“Always.” He closed the door and locked it. “I take it you’re not here to improve your pottery skills,” he said without cracking a smile, and then he sat down at his desk, tapping away at his laptop as if I wasn’t there.

“I always work best in the evening,” I replied, trying to sound seductive, but it hurt that he wasn’t even looking at me. Maybe I’d made a mistake coming here unannounced? Zak didn’t do well with surprises. Unless they were accompanied by alcohol and nameless women landing in his lap.

“Do you need any help?” I asked, hoping to draw him away from his computer.

“Nope.”

I pulled a stool out and sat down, trying not to let his sour demeanour deter me, but part of me felt like I should stand up again and walk out. Yes, we had a deal, but that didn't include treating me like a fucking doormat. Maybe I needed to add a few stipulations of my own.

"Busy?" I cocked my head, waiting for him to lift his eyes from that damn screen and look at me. He was about ten seconds away from witnessing me flounce out, and that was something I never thought I'd do. Not to Zak.

"Always." He sighed as if he'd got the world on his shoulders and ran his hand over his face, then he carried on bloody typing. "Florapetal keeps us going with their orders, but it gets a bit much at times."

"Then tell them you can't meet their order. I'm sure they'll extend any deadlines if you ask."

You're all right telling me not to expect anything. Maybe you need to practice that in your business world too.

I grimaced at my whiney inner thoughts. I was getting jealous, and I felt twisted up inside because this wasn't going the way I'd planned out in my head on the drive over. I needed to get a grip of myself.

"I don't let people down," Zak told me, and I knew it was true. He had a responsibility, and he wanted to meet it. It was the one area in his life where he held himself accountable and had expectations. I felt guilty for expecting anything less.

"So, why the early night?" he asked in a disinterested manner.

"I dunno. I wasn't really feeling it."

I wasn't feeling this either.

"Mmm hmm," he replied.

This was like getting blood from a stone, and it was on the tip of my tongue to say I should go, but I didn't. I'd come here for a reason, and I wasn't going to give up that easily. I never did. But it also made me realise we hadn't made as much progress as I thought.

“Jeez,” I blew out a long breath. “And there was me thinking we’d gotten somewhere after the other night. I thought we’d put stilted conversations and awkwardness behind us.”

He looked up at me then, his forehead creased with confusion, and the tiredness from before now changed to uncertainty.

“We did.” He closed his laptop and swivelled his chair to face me. “I’m sorry if I’ve given you the wrong impression, I’m just...” He sighed, and his eyes dipped to the side. “Tired.”

“I should go.” I stood to leave, but he stood up too and raised his hand to stop me.

“Don’t. I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to make you feel... unwelcome.”

“It was a mistake coming here. You’re busy,” I added, but he shook his head.

“I know I’m not the warmest guy to be around, but I’m trying. I’m sorry.” The air was heavy around us, and for the first time since the wedding, I didn’t know what to say or how to act around him. I didn’t like feeling out of my depth. “Tell me about tonight.” He came to sit next to me. “What happened to make you leave?”

I shrugged like a stroppy teenager, turning away like I was giving him the cold shoulder, and he smirked.

“I didn’t want to be in a bar with strangers, but I’m second-guessing that now.” I dropped my head as I wrung my hands in my lap.

What the fuck was wrong with me?

I’d come in here with every intention of sweeping him off his feet, and now I was behaving like a spoilt brat. I knew I liked him more than I let on, but I had to stop reacting like this, or I’d push him away. I’d spent too long getting us to this point; I couldn’t fuck it up now.

“You don’t need to second-guess anything,” he said in a gentle voice that made the twists in my heart begin to unravel. Maybe he felt more than he was letting on? And then, he reached out his hand and laid it over mine, the warmth sending shockwaves right through me. I looked up into his eyes, and then, finding the intensity of his gaze too much, I found myself staring at the scarred skin on his neck and shoulder that peeked out from his T-shirt. I knew that damage ran down the side of his chest. I’d heard about his ordeal. I also knew his legs had been badly damaged. And I wondered if we’d ever get to a place where he’d feel comfortable letting me see, allowing me to touch him there. A girl could always live in hope.

“Does it still hurt?” I found myself blurting out before I could fully engage my brain.

His fingers were brushing softly over mine, but when he heard my question, he pulled his hand away and sat back.

He was pulling away from me.

“I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have asked that,” I said, apologising, but he shook his head.

“It’s fine.” Then he sat forward, his head dipped low as he rested his forearms on his thighs and let his hands fall between his open legs. “Years ago, it was pain like you couldn’t imagine. In fact, calling it pain feels wrong, that word isn’t strong enough to describe what it felt like. It was hell.” He took a few breaths to compose himself. “But there were phases to the healing process, and I survived every one. They weren’t easy, but I got through it. The doctors have offered me plastic surgery, and I might need more skin grafts in the future, but for now, no, it doesn’t hurt in the way you might think. I apply creams daily, massage the skin. It doesn’t look great, but... it’s me. I don’t like the way I look, but I have to live in this body, so I’m trying to make the best of it, you know?”

My heart hurt for him, hearing him say he didn’t like himself or the way he looked. To me, he was beautiful. Perfect.

“Perhaps, one day, you might let me do that for you... massage the creams, I mean.”

He visibly balked at that, but I wanted him to know nothing about him was ugly. Not to me, or anyone else. I might not have seen the full extent of his injuries and how they looked today, but I knew nothing would ever drive me away.

“You think you’re this hideous abomination that needs to be hidden, but you’re so wrong, Zak. There’s nothing you could show me that would make me walk away.”

“You say that now.” He laughed, trying to make light of it.

“And I mean it. You’re a kaleidoscope.” He frowned, so I explained myself further. “You have parts of you that are, in your words, broken, but when I look, all I see is something beautiful made from those parts. Parts that come together to create something better, something wonderful, unique. You.”

“You’ve got a weirdly kind and totally obscured way of seeing the world,” he replied, trying to downplay my compliment.

“I say it as it is,” I told him, and then, to hit my point home, I added, “Didn’t you notice how many women were checking you out at the wedding? Even the married ones.”

“Fuck off.” He sat taller now and leaned back, shaking his head but smiling at the same time.

“Yes. I noticed. I made my move as fast as I could when I saw you sitting on your own. I knew it was only a matter of time before some other girl swooped in and beat me to it.”

“They don’t know me. They don’t know what I’m like. I hide it well.”

“Maybe.” I shrugged like it was nothing. “But I knew.”

He peered up at me, staring at me from under his lashes. “You only know what Ryan and Emily have told you about me.”

“And I hope, one day, you’ll tell me more, but believe me, I know enough.”

I saw him swallow as he took in what I was saying, and just as I’d guessed he would, he tried to change the subject and take the spotlight off himself.

“And what about you?”

“What about me?” I asked.

“You’ve had trauma to deal with too. Does yours still hurt you?”

“Nice avoidance tactic there, Atwood,” I chastised.

“I say it as it is,” he joked, throwing my words from earlier back in my face.

“I don’t hurt,” I told him. “I get sad sometimes, like we all do, but I try not to let it take a hold of me. When I found out about my father, and the fact that we were his dirty secret second family, I went down a dark hole, I won’t lie. But getting to know Emily and Ryan, it changed all that. Emily was amazing. She helped me a lot back then, she even came to therapy sessions with me. And when I lost mom, Ryan took on all the paperwork, sorting out stuff that I just didn’t have the headspace for. He practically arranged the whole burial for me. I don’t know what I’d have done without them. They’re my rock. Do I wish things could’ve been different? Yes. Would I change where I am now? No. I’m not one hundred percent where I want to be, but I’m a work in progress. And at the end of the day, isn’t that what we all are?”

“We are indeed.” He gave me a smile that made my spine tingle. The kind of smile that said he saw me in a new light, or at least he was starting to. I hoped he was.

“Speaking of a work in progress...” I gestured to the corner of the room, where a red cloth had been thrown over something to hide it. “Am I right in guessing that might be something new you’re working on? It looks too big to be a vase or a bowl.”

Zak turned to look at it and stood up, walking over and then turning to face me as he spoke, as if he was standing guard over his hidden masterpiece.

“I’m trying something new. I’m not ready to show anyone yet, though. I love creating on the wheel, but I was curious to see if I could create something another way; with my hands and tools.” His cheeks blushed with embarrassment, and I

didn't want to push him further. Well, I did, but I figured he'd detonated enough truth bombs so far tonight. Another might be a step too far.

“Well, when you're ready to unveil it, I'll be the first in line to see.”

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THIRTEEN

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ZAK



When I'm ready to unveil it.

I felt the same way about this piece of art as I did about showing my damaged skin. I doubted anyone other than me would see it, and I was fine with that. I'd shown enough of myself tonight, more than I'd done in a long time.

Then it struck me.

Usually, talking about the fire or anything about the trauma I suffered afterwards sent me into a spiral of anger and depression. It was why I didn't like talking about it at all. And okay, perhaps I hadn't divulged a lot, but it was something, more than I usually gave away. But with her, talking didn't seem so heavy. In fact, I felt a little lighter. When I came in here earlier in the evening to work, I'd been the heaviest I'd felt in days. I felt bogged down by life. I'd let work get on top of me. I was worrying about my choices and overthinking everything.

My friends.

My solitary life in a town where no one knew me, stuck in the back of beyond.

Her.

Everything.

But having her here made me forget all about that. It made me feel like life didn't always have to be so difficult. There were flickers of light that came along occasionally, and she was one of them.

Damn.

Was Little Miss Sunshine's spell on me starting to work, robbing me of my dark, gloomy safety blanket?

I kind of liked that blanket.

I wasn't sure I was ready to let it go.

"Well," she announced, standing up and letting her coat fall from her shoulders onto the floor. She sauntered over to me in the sexiest black dress I'd ever seen, swaying her hips and giving me fuck-me eyes. "If you don't want to unveil that masterpiece, maybe you can unveil something else for me?" She nodded to my crotch, and I threw my head back and laughed.

"What the actual fuck? That's the worst chat-up line I've ever heard. Next, you'll be telling me you're not into sunsets, but you'd love to see me go down."

"Oh my God, I love that one." She giggled in response. "Something's definitely about to go down. Tell me, do I have to sign for your package?"

"Fuck me." I shook my head, giving her a reproachful look. But she was on a roll.

"Roses are red. Violets are fine. You be the six. And I'll be the nine." She winked.

"You're a fucking idiot, do you know that?" I chuckled.

"Yep, but you love it. And it's good to see you laughing. I've never heard you laugh like that before."

That's because I hadn't. Not for a long time.

"And yes," she went on, her eyes sparkling mischievously. "If I haven't made it one hundred percent clear, I do want you to fuck me."

In an instant, the atmosphere went from silliness to a sexual intensity even I couldn't deny. I loved that she could tease me then drive me crazy straight after. And I loved her sexual confidence. It was one of my favourite things about her. That, and her goofy smile.

I took deep breaths as I watched her saunter closer towards me, and when she was eventually standing in front of me, I let the world outside fall away. All that mattered was what was about to happen.

And I really fucking wanted it to happen.

“Get on your knees,” I demanded in a gruff voice, and right away, she complied, dropping to her knees on the cold, hard floor. I reached over to take a cushion from a chair close by and threw it down. “There, use that,” I told her. I had no intention of making this quick, so I wanted her to be as comfortable as possible.

She pulled the cushion under her knees and gazed up at me with her huge chocolate brown, fuck-me eyes.

“Thank you,” she purred, and the urge to bend her over and smack her ass washed over me. I liked to see her begging. I loved to hear her thank me. And I knew it’d be fucking amazing to experience both of those while I slapped her ass raw and told her what a good girl she was. A dirty girl, but only for me.

She looked stunning on her knees, ready for me, peering up at me, about to take what I had to give. I turned to grab two pieces of cloth from the side, and when I turned back around, she had her wrists together, held out in front of her, waiting for me to restrain her.

“Behind your back,” I commanded, and instantly, she moved her arms behind her. “Good girl.” I bent down and placed one of the cloths over her eyes, securing it tightly as I whispered in her ear, “I know what you came here for. You want to get fucked. Don’t worry, I’ve got you, little kitten.” I don’t know where that nickname came from, maybe it was all the purring, but it suited her as well as Sunshine did.

“You always know how to look after me,” she uttered breathlessly, and I didn’t even try to hide the smile on my face as I placed a kiss on her shoulder and moved to tie her hands behind her back.

Once she was secured and blindfolded, I stood in front of her and slowly undid the buttons on my jeans.

“What do you want, kitten?” I asked, letting my jeans and boxers fall to the floor. She might be blindfolded, so maybe it was cheating, but this was the first time I’d exposed my legs to another woman like this.

“I want you,” she replied.

“Not good enough,” I chastised her, moving a step closer. “I need details.”

“I want... your cock.” She faltered slightly, then licked her lips, and I could see her straighten her back as she composed herself and found that inner slut I loved so much. “I want your cock in my mouth. I want to taste you, suck you. And then, I want you to fuck my pussy the way you did before. Only this time, I want it harder. Faster. Fuck me like you hate me and make me scream.”

Fuck me, that was the best fucking answer, and it made my cock throb just thinking about all the things I wanted to do to her.

I took my cock in my hand and gave it slow strokes, edging closer to her.

“Do you want me in your mouth first?”

“Yes.”

“Just your mouth? Or can I slide down your throat nice and deep, fuck your pretty little mouth, and come down your throat?”

“Fuck, yes,” she gasped, tilting her head up to show she was ready.

“I didn’t hear you ask nicely,” I teased.

“Yes, please.”

“Again,” I growled.

“Please. Please fuck my mouth and my pussy. I want it. I want you. Please.”

What kind of man was I to deny her a moment longer?

“Whatever you say, kitten.”

I pushed the head of my cock against her lips, and she opened up, her tongue flickering around it as she hummed her approval.

“That’s it, Sunshine, get me nice and wet, taste what you do to me.”

She lapped at the beads of precum, then twisted her head as she sucked the end of my cock, and as I closed my eyes and let my head fall back, a part of me wished she wasn’t restrained because it’d feel fucking phenomenal to have her little hand working the bottom of my shaft as her tongue worked the top.

“Do you like that?” I asked, letting my head fall forward so I could watch her taking my cock in her mouth. “Do you like making me so fucking hard?” I reached for her ponytail and wrapped it around my fist, then I pushed a little more forcefully into her mouth. “Open up for me, kitten. Let me into that tight little throat of yours.”

She pushed her head forward, opening herself up to me, and I felt my cock hit the back of her mouth before it slid down her tight throat.

“Oh fuck, that’s it. You suck my cock so well, baby.”

I held her head as I fucked her, rocking into her mouth and sliding down her throat. I wanted to see her eyes as she sucked me. I wanted to watch them water as she struggled with my size but kept going, knowing she was pleasing me.

“I bet that blindfold is fucking soaked with your tears,” I groaned. “As soaked as your pussy is right now.”

She hummed her agreement, and the vibrations against my cock sent me spiralling into ecstasy. I was seconds away from blowing my load all down her pretty throat.

I thrust in and out slowly, savouring the feel of her warm mouth, holding her hair and pulling to move her the way I wanted her.

“Are you ready to taste what you do to me? Swallow me down?”

She nodded, and I held her hair tight, giving the last few hard thrusts down her throat before I came hard. Her throat bobbed as she swallowed around me, taking everything I had to give. Not wasting a fucking drop. She was fucking perfect. She knew what I wanted and was proving she'd do anything to make me happy.

“Such a good fucking girl,” I said, stroking her hair in praise as I let her suck and lick the last drops from my cock. Then I pulled out, leaving her gasping and panting.

“I knelt beside her and whispered, “Good girls get praise, but dirty little sluts get rewarded, and you, little kitten, are both.”

“Only for you,” she moaned.

I ran my thumb across her wet mouth, and she dipped her tongue out, licking and sucking it, just like she'd sucked my cock. With unashamed eagerness. I loved it.

“Now stand up,” I whispered in her ear, then gave her my arm to help her off the floor.

She stood up, staggering a little as she did. Guess I wasn't the only one that had gone weak-limbed after what she'd done to me. I led her to my desk and pushed her forward, so she was facing down. Then I knelt behind her and lifted the skirt of her black dress.

When I saw how drenched her bare pussy was, that even the outside of her thighs were soaking wet, I tutted as if I were disappointed. I wasn't.

“You made a mess, kitten. You soaked yourself. And now, I have to clean it up.” I ran my tongue along the inside of her left thigh, slowly, painfully so, tasting her, savouring her. Then, when I was done, I moved to her right thigh, and she squirmed, crying out as her hips wriggled, begging me to go higher. “Such a fucking delicious mess.” I groaned, my hot breath teasing her, so close to where I knew she wanted me.

“Where else do I need to clean you?” I asked, desperate to hear the words from her.

“My pussy,” she cried.

“How?” I asked, needing more.

“With your tongue. I need you to clean my wet pussy with your tongue. Please.”

I couldn't wait any longer. I covered her pussy with my mouth, and I licked and sucked, tasting her like I was a starving man, and she was my last meal. The way she lurched forward, screaming with desire made my cock grow harder, throbbing despite only coming moments ago. She made me feel like I had the stamina of an eighteen-year-old, the kind of feeling I wanted to bottle and keep forever. I couldn't get enough.

“Oh yes. That's so good,” she moaned, and I pulled away, wanting to make this last as long as I could.

“Such a greedy girl,” I reprimanded. “With such a greedy pussy.”

“Why did you stop?” she cried, turning her head, even though she couldn't see me.

“What else do you want me to do?”

“I want your tongue on me.”

“Where?” I knew I was being a fucking cruel bastard, but I couldn't help it.

“My pussy and my clit. Please. Make me come,” she begged.

I flickered my tongue over her clit, and then I swirled it down her pussy, fucking her with my tongue. Over and over, I alternated between tasting her sweet hole and sucking her clit until she was writhing beneath me. And when I felt her walls contract and her legs start to quiver, I stopped.

“No!” she screamed, her forehead banging on my desk. “Don't fucking stop. I'm so close.”

I ran my fingers through her drenched pussy, pushing into her, feeling her walls grip me.

“Do you want to come on my fingers or my tongue?”

“Ahh,” she cried, as if she were in pain. “Both.”

I chuckled.

“So greedy.”

And I pushed my fingers deeper inside her, tilting my head to run my tongue over her swollen clit. She gave a muffled cry, rocking her hips against the desk to try and reach the high she was chasing. Her moans were so sexy, such a turn-on that I felt like I could come myself just from hearing them.

Then, her walls clamped down on my fingers and her pussy flooded as she came hard, trembling on the desk as she rode my hand. Whimpering as I licked her release and made her orgasm last that little bit longer. The first of many tonight.

I pulled my fingers from her and put them in my mouth, sucking the taste of her from them.

“You’re fucking delicious, Sunshine,” I told her, and then I took my rock-hard cock in my hand and ran it through her pussy lips. “Now get ready to be properly fucked.”

I didn’t give her chance to catch her breath, I thrust into her hard and she cried out, and as I started to rut into her, she came again, squeezing my cock as she convulsed and pulsed around me.

“Oh God, it’s too much,” she screamed, but I wasn’t going to let up.

“You can take it,” I stated, slamming my cock into her tight, wet pussy. “I want more from you. More orgasms. Give me more.”

“No,” she whimpered, but the way she pushed her ass back into me told me a different story.

“Yes,” I demanded, slamming harder and harder, making the legs of the desk squeak as they shifted across the floor. I put my arm under her hips and lifted her up slightly, conscious

that she might bruise herself. Then, I grabbed her ponytail with my other hand, and I yanked her head up as I thrust my cock into her. “Take it. That’s a good girl. Take my cock. Come on my cock. Show me what a dirty slut you are.”

“Fuck,” she cried, coming again, and the way her pussy strangled me made me come too, thick ropes of cum exploding inside her as my head fell forward and I lost my fucking mind.

The room was filled with our ragged, panted breaths. The smell of wickedly dirty sex hung in the air. And even though I felt like I’d fucked her thoroughly, I still hadn’t finished. I needed more.

I was addicted.

To sex?

Maybe.

To her?

Possibly.

To sex with her?

Most definitely.

She was the only woman who’d ever made me feel this feral, this desperate for more.

“I think I got what I came for.” She sighed and laughed quietly. Then, she let her cheek rest on the desk as she caught her breath.

“Not yet you haven’t,” I replied. “But that was a nice start.”

FOURTEEN

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MORGAN



He fucked me five more times that night. On the floor, in a chair, against the wall, and then twice more on his desk. He was insatiable, but so was I. Being with Zak Atwood was all I'd ever dreamed about, and now I was with him, it was better than a dream. My reality was a filthy fuck-fest, and I was here for every sordid, seedy, delicious moment. Dreams did come true if you worked hard enough. I was a testament to that.

It'd played on my mind how tired and overworked he looked the last time I'd seen him. So today, I'd decided to bring a little joy into his day. Spread a little sunshine. I knocked on the door of his workshop and waited. When he opened the door, I breezed past him, holding my little white box tightly in my arms like it held the key to his happiness.

"Visiting again so soon?" He raised his brows questioningly.

"I thought you might need cheering up." I bounced on the balls of my feet as I stood in the middle of the room, waiting for him to join me. Excited to share my gift.

"I'm busy, Morgan. You can't keep showing up here. I have work to do."

"Calm your tits, Mr Sunshine." I rolled my eyes, mocking him. "Or should that be Mr. Raincloud?" Then I stood taller and held my box up to entice him. "I won't stay long. I know what a busy man you are. But you can afford to take a break,

can't you? Everyone needs to take a break." And winking, I added, "You're not that important, are you?"

He huffed and closed the door. "I'm very important," he stated plainly. "World peace hinges on what I manage to achieve on my potter's wheel today." Then he made his way across the room to me, moving like he was wading through treacle; heavy limbs and jaded eyes, traipsing slowly to come and stand in front of me. "Be quick. I have a FaceTime with the Prime Minister at two."

"Didn't know he was a fan of your work?" I cocked my brow and bit my lip, hiding my smile.

"He's my biggest fan. I've pencilled in his order for a particularly large and very thick vase that he's commissioned to shove up his deputy's ass."

"Nice!"

"Yeah. Like I said. Very important work."

"Here." I thrust the box forward into his chest. "I bought you these."

He frowned, taking the box off me and opening the lid. When he saw what was inside, his usually surly expression lightened a little. It wasn't full-on happiness but surly had become mildly sullen. Pouty even. It was a start.

"Cupcakes," he announced, sounding unimpressed.

"Not just any cupcakes," I corrected him. "Vanilla cupcakes." I peered into the box and pointed out the designs I'd had specially made for him. "Sunshine and kitten vanilla cupcakes." Each cupcake was topped with a yellow sunshine or grey kitten sugar topper. They looked delicious, and I knew they were a winner.

What human being in their right mind could resist a good cupcake?

The right cake could be life-changing.

Okay, that was going a bit far. But they had the power to brighten your day.

“I don’t eat cake,” he said, shutting the lid and passing them back to me.

Great.

He wasn’t going to make this easy for me.

“But you haven’t tried *my* cake.” I pushed the box back into his arms and he took them, putting them on his desk, ignoring them.

“I’ll try one later. Thanks.”

I knew he wouldn’t, and he wasn’t getting off that easily.

“I think you should try one now,” I insisted, flipping the lid open, choosing a sunshine cupcake and picking it up. Then I stepped forward, and without a second thought, I crushed the cupcake into his mouth. Icing oozed all over the place, coating his lips and smearing his cheeks.

I didn’t care.

I pushed further, and he stepped back, spluttering but laughing, thank God.

I really hadn’t thought this one through.

“Fuck me,” he muttered as he licked his lips and used his fingers to gather the stray icing from his face and eat it. “Always shoving your sunshine in my face, aren’t you? Nothing changes.”

“You dissed my cakes. I had to take drastic action.”

“By choking me?”

“Stop moaning. You know you love it.”

He took the now mashed-up cupcake from my hand and took a massive bite.

“Hmmm,” he said through his mouthful. “It’s actually pretty good.”

“They’re better than good,” I argued, giving him my stern, admonishing glare to reprimand him.

“Yeah, I guess they are. Your cupcake is very tasty.”

His eyes sparkled, and a rare smile flickered on his face, distracting me from his hand that was making a grab for another cake from the box, and before I knew what was happening, he was smashing a kitten one into my face.

“Tastes good, doesn’t it?” He grinned as I wiped the icing off and ate it through my laughter.

“Totally. And that’s the best way to eat cupcakes, smashing them into your face.”

“Really?” He cocked his head.

“Yes, really. Want me to prove it again?” I reached for another cupcake, and he took a step back, holding his hands up in defeat and laughing. God, I loved to hear him laugh.

“No! I believe you. No need for a cupcake massacre.”

“I don’t know...” I licked my lips and let my eyes run the length of his body. “A little cupcake fun might be just what the doctor ordered today.”

“This is my office, Morgan,” he reprimanded, but his tone had zero conviction. He was ready to play. I could tell.

“You didn’t seem to mind the other night.”

“That’s because there wasn’t sticky icing threatening to paint my walls.”

“It wouldn’t be your walls I’d be smearing them on.”

He smirked and picked the box up.

“I like where your mind is going, but let’s go one step further... cupcake picnic? The field at the back is very... secure.”

“Why not.” I shrugged. “I love eating outdoors.”

Zak picked up a blanket by the door as we headed out. He locked up and then we sauntered over the grass behind his house. I thought he was going to set up right in the middle of the field, but he led me to the edge where the trees lined it. He wasn’t as much of an exhibitionist as I was, obviously. He wanted the privacy from the tree’s shade.

He lay the blanket down, then sweeping his hand forward, he said, "After you."

I sat down on the edge of the blanket, and he sat next to me. The butterflies in my stomach multiplied as I placed the box of cupcakes in-between us. I couldn't wait to see what he'd do next.

He opened the box and took a sunshine cupcake out. "I like calling you sunshine, but when we're alone..." He lowered his voice. "Doing what we do, and you're being my dirty girl, I can't stop calling you my kitten. You've brought me a box of sunshine and dirty darkness."

"That just about sums us up, doesn't it?" I added. "I'm the sunshine, and you..." I studied him for a moment, choosing my words carefully. "You're the dark night sky. Black and vast, unforgiving and mysterious, but there's twinkles of light if you look hard enough."

"Like the stars, you mean?"

"Satellites, comets, shooting stars, even." I pinched my fingers together. "Little flickers of magic that break through. You can see them if you really try. Magic that shines brighter when you look at it from an open space, like this, where we are now." I was trying to pay him a compliment. Tell him he might have darkness in him, but it wasn't all dark. The light he fought so hard to hide was his best feature, even if he denied its existence.

"If you're asking me to stay out here till it's dark and stargaze with you, you've got the wrong guy."

Why did he do that?

I hated that he could turn a special moment like this into a reminder of how fleeting and temporary our arrangement was.

"God forbid I should ever ask Zak Atwood to do something remotely romantic. No. I don't want you to stargaze with me." I took a breath. "I want you to tie me up," I said, twisting the conversation in a direction I knew he could handle. I took the cuffs and blindfold from my handbag next to me and threw them onto the blanket next to the cupcake box.

“Bind me, take away my sight and touch, but give me sounds, the feel of you, the taste of those cupcakes on your body. Use my other senses to drive me wild.”

His eyes burned into me. “They say your other senses are heightened when one is taken away.”

“And you’re about to take away two of them.” I sighed, kneeling in front of him. “I guess I’m in for a wild ride. Maybe you’ll send me into orbit.” I pointed up. “In that sky you didn’t want to look at.”

“Why look at the sky when there’s something way better to see down here, kneeling right in front of me.” And there it was, the other side of Zak. The one that kept pulling me back in. He was a master manipulator, and I loved being played by him.

He knelt before me, reaching for the hem of my dress, pulling it up and over my head to reveal my lacy red underwear.

“I’ll never grow tired of this view,” he said gruffly, staring at my body, and then he looked right into my eyes. “You’re fucking beautiful, Morgan. I’ve got no idea why you’re with a guy like me.”

I didn’t think, I reached forward, cupping his face, and thankfully, he didn’t pull away from my touch.

“Because you’re beautiful too. Beautiful and complicated. Why wouldn’t I want to be with you?”

I hated that he doubted himself, doubted his worth. But I also knew words were cheap. Actions and time were what he needed to reset the balance and get him to the point where he could see himself the way I and everyone else saw him; as a stunning, brave, and gorgeous human being. A man any woman would be proud to call hers. But they’d have to get through me first because Zak Atwood was and always would be mine.

He threaded his fingers into my hair, fisting his hand at the base of my neck, and then he yanked my head back.

“You’ve got an answer for everything, haven’t you?” he hissed. “Maybe I should gag you too, but then, how would I enjoy this fuckable mouth?”

Suddenly, he smashed his lips against mine, pulling my hair as he kissed me hard. Our tongues tangled as he took what he wanted, and I moved my hands, running them through his hair, pulling and scratching at his scalp as he devoured me.

“Such a fucking tease,” he groaned against my mouth. “And I fucking love it. But you’re getting a little too confident. These hands need to behave.”

He pulled away, picked up the handcuffs and clicked them onto my left wrist and then my right, restraining my hands in front of me.

“I say where you touch. Where and how. I’m in control. Always. Don’t ever forget that.”

He stood up, taking the blindfold and securing it over my eyes. And then I heard the familiar sound of his jeans opening, the whoosh as they fell to the floor, and sensing movement, I braced myself for what would come next, squeezing my thighs together as wetness flooded between my legs.

“Taste me,” he growled, cupping the back of my head to pull me forward, and I opened my mouth, my tongue darting out to taste the vanilla cream he’d smeared on the end of his cock. “That’s it, kitten. Lick it. Suck my cock like the dirty slut you are.”

I did as he asked, licking the cream, taking him into my mouth to suck him clean, and then, as he rocked into me, telling me what a good girl I was, I swirled my tongue along the length of his shaft, taking him deep in my throat as I gave him full control. He held my head, thrusting slowly, and when I groaned around him, I heard him moan, “Love it when you do that. This mouth was made to take my cock. This mouth and that tight little pussy of yours.”

I couldn’t reply, all I could do was hum in agreement, and he moaned again.

“So fucking good. You suck my cock so well.”

Over and over, he rocked into me until I could feel his cock pulsing on my tongue, and then, he pulled out.

“Not yet,” he gasped.

He lay me gently on my back, lifting my arms so my handcuffed hands were above my head.

“Don’t move,” he commanded.

Then, I heard movement and felt him lowering himself over me, his warm, naked body pressed against mine. He didn’t speak, but when he kissed me, I tasted the frosting on his tongue. It made me hungry for more. Starving, even.

He broke the kiss, and my skin prickled as his hands roamed over my hips, up towards my tits, as he tilted his body to the side, probably watching the trail his hand was taking.

“You don’t need icing,” he whispered. “You’re already fucking delicious.” And I gasped, arching my back as he clamped his mouth over my lace-covered nipple and bit down gently.

His hot mouth licked and sucked aggressively, like he wanted to tear a hole in my bra to get to what he wanted. Then he moved to the other nipple, giving it the same attention, biting until he was happy with how hard he’d made it.

“Stunning,” he groaned. “Look at how your body reacts to me. It’s fucking perfect.”

“It likes what you’re doing.” I sighed.

“I can see that.” He lowered his head to nestle in my neck. “I love the way you purr for me, little kitten.”

“I always will.”

He reached behind my back and snapped the clasp of my bra open, lifting it up the length of my arms to settle over where the cuffs were. Then he straddled my hips and took my tits in both hands, massaging and playing with them, running his thumbs over my hardened nipples as he squeezed and rubbed, teasing me. I arched my back, pushing my tits forward, loving the feel of his warm hands on my sensitive skin.

“As sexy as your mouth is, I really want to fuck these tits.”

I could feel his hard cock resting on my stomach. Beads of precum kissing my skin as he rocked and massaged me.

“Do it,” I told him, wanting to feel him come apart on top of me. Needing to hear what I could do to him.

“Beg me,” he demanded.

Hearing him sound so dominant yet desperate for me made me squirm. My G-string was soaked, and I was already pulsing between my legs. I didn’t know how much longer I could last without feeling him inside me. But he wanted this. I did too. I wanted to please him.

“Please,” I begged. “Please fuck my tits and come all over me.”

“Fuck, yes,” he groaned, and he lifted himself, moving further up my body, placing his warm, hard cock in-between my tits. Then he squeezed them, using them to sheath his cock as he started to thrust over me.

I could hear him grunt on every thrust, feel the heat from his cock as he pistoned between my tits, and in my mind, I pictured the look of pure ecstasy on his face as he rode me, bringing himself closer and closer to orgasm. I imagined the way his cock looked moving against my skin, the veins pulsing as he chased his high, and then, as he cried out, I felt the hot spurt of cum coat my chest, trickling slowly to my neck as he came all over me.

His thrusts slowed as he finished. And then I felt him running what I guessed was a cupcake over his cum, gathering it from my body.

“Open up and taste me,” he commanded, and I opened my mouth, my taste buds exploding as he slid the cupcake over my tongue. “Icing and my cum. I want to watch you lick it all off.”

I swirled my tongue over the frosting and licked, swallowing it all down.

“My good, dirty girl,” he praised me. “Always doing as she’s told.” He moved down my body and ripped my G-string down my legs, pulling them off. “Now open your legs wide and let me lick you clean. Remember, good girls get rewarded, and dirty girls get orgasms.”

I opened my legs, the cool air making me shiver as he growled his appreciation.

“Always fucking soaked.” He ran his finger along my pussy and then pushed it inside, making me mewl like the kitten he always said I was when we were fucking like this.

I tilted my hips, rotating and rocking them against his finger, doing anything to give me the friction I needed.

“Greedy and desperate to be fucked, aren’t you?”

“Yes,” I moaned.

“Yes, what?”

“Yes, please.”

He pulled his finger out, and then I felt softness being rubbed over my pussy. Moments later, his mouth was on me, and he was groaning, telling me how delicious the cupcake tasted when it was being eaten from my pussy. My legs were quivering, my knees weak as he licked, eating me, using his tongue to swirl and taste the cupcake and me. And then, like a fucking firework, I exploded on his tongue, my body jerking as I kept my hands above my head and clenched my thighs around his head, riding out every delectable second of my orgasm. He sucked and licked as I convulsed and moaned, until I turned into a pool of satisfied limbs underneath him.

Eventually, once I’d got my breath back and could form words, I said, “Thank you.”

“Don’t thank me yet.” I could hear the amusement in his voice. “I’m about to fuck you like an animal. Maybe save the thanks till later.”

Jesus. Fucking. Christ.

As if I wasn’t gone already, hearing that sent me over the edge.

He rolled me onto my side, and I let him, unable to control my limp body. But as he settled his naked warm chest against my back and lifted my leg, I smiled. Everything he did to me was amazing, mind-blowing, but feeling his naked skin against mine? Nothing could beat that.

He slid his cock into my already soaked pussy and pulled my leg up to rest over his hip. Then with a firm grip on my waist, he started to thrust into me from behind. “Do you like that?” he asked, his voice ragged as he spoke near my ear. “Do you like the way my cock stretches your tight little pussy?”

“So much,” I replied breathlessly, pushing my ass back into him as he rutted into me.

He pounded into me, forcing another orgasm from me, making my pussy contract hard. He was relentless. And before I could catch my breath, he pulled out of me, making me groan at the loss of him. But I needn't have worried. He forced me onto all fours, my ass in the air, my handcuffed hands braced in front of me as he pushed inside me again, taking me hard from behind. Animal fucking indeed. He was slamming into me like his life depended on it. Thrusting and grunting, holding my hips in a vice-like grip. Then I felt a crack on the side of my ass as he slapped me.

“That's it, take it,” he growled. Then I felt another crack, making my ass tingle and burn. “Make me come,” he demanded.

I kept pace with him, my body moving and pushing back into him as he thrust forward. I wanted to do whatever I could to please him, and I fisted my hands, fighting the urge to reach down and cup his balls, touch him, and show him how much better I could make it for him if he let me have that.

Thrust after thrust, he was relentless. And then I heard him cry out as he came hard inside me, and I came too. My walls squeezing him as he thrust and moaned. His hands loosened their grip on my hips as he fell forward, his chest warming my back as he clung to me.

Both of us were panting, lying limply on the blanket to recover.

He pulled me to him, and I sighed as the warmth from his chest radiated into my back. His strong arms held me close, making me feel safe and secure. Loved.

“What the fuck are you doing to me?” he whispered low in my ear, his voice gravelly and breathless.

“Showing you heaven?” I said, not caring how corny that sounded.

“You are fucking heaven,” he gasped. “With a little bit of devil thrown in for good measure.” He nibbled my shoulder, then kissed the skin he’d marked.

“I guess the cupcakes were a hit then... eventually,” I joked, and he laughed, his chest vibrating against my back as he let himself go. It was the most precious thing I’d ever heard, and I felt a piece of my own fractured heart fuse back into place.

He had no idea he was healing me too.

“You can stop by with cupcakes any time.” He chuckled, nuzzling into my neck. “But I doubt anything will ever taste as sweet as you do.”

And nothing would feel as sweet as he did, lying in my arms, skin against skin. Heart bonded to mine. Soul etched through me like fucking Blackpool rock. All our broken parts twisted together to create something better, stronger, perfect.

Zak Atwood might think he was ugly and scarred on the outside, but it would never match the ugliness I felt every damn day, strangling me from the inside like a slow, torturous death. Like cruel vines of hell, roping around my heart, squeezing me until every breath felt painful. Zak had suffered immeasurably, but so had I. The only difference was no one could see my scars.

No one cared.

And that was okay.

I never wanted anyone to know anyway.

FIFTEEN

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ZAK



I had to be the luckiest motherfucker on the planet right now. I had a girl who was willing to come to me, any time, any place, and feed my darkest fantasies. She gave herself freely without question and let me do things to her that I never thought I'd experience again. She took my feelings into account, even over her own, and she always put me first. That was a total mindfuck.

Why was she doing this?

What did she get out of it, other than orgasms?

I had no answers, but I couldn't deny I'd never met anyone like her. I found myself daydreaming about her, even though I'd said it was just an arrangement. It was a temporary agreement that was mutually beneficial for us both. But the amount of headspace she took up these days had me questioning how temporary this would be. Maybe I was lying to myself, because I didn't want it to end any time soon.

Today, I was facing another hurdle in this secret pact of ours. Finn and Effy were throwing a barbecue for close friends to say thank you for all the support they'd received during their wedding. I don't know why they'd invited me. I didn't do anything. And I don't know why I'd eventually accepted after receiving the fifth text invite from Finn. An afternoon with other people in someone else's home always felt like torture. But an afternoon with Morgan there too? Torture didn't even come close. How the hell was I supposed to be around her and not be affected?

It was bad enough dealing with all the other questions whirling in my head, without factoring her into the mix too.

When was a suitable time to leave?

Was half an hour too soon?

Had I spoken to enough people? And why did I have to talk at all?

Was I making people feel uncomfortable just by being there?

I knew I'd be uncomfortable. I counted too, right?

And that was just the start. The number of questions I asked myself made it hard to reason with my brain.

I'd show my face, speak to the relevant people, then leave. Maybe Morgan wouldn't even be there.

Who was I kidding?

With Ryan and Emily there, Morgan would be too, and I was a crap actor.

If Ryan got so much as an inkling about the kinky fuckery I'd been getting up to with his sister-in-law, he'd probably cut my dick off and post it back to me with the message, 'Out of Order'. Perhaps I was out of order. If I found out one of them had been near my little sister, I'd slice theirs off too, and I barely saw my family these days. Not that that meant anything.

Fuck.

This could potentially be a nuclear bomb about to detonate my whole world.

Was I ready to handle the fallout?

I parked up outside Finn and Effy's house, and after spotting Ryan's and Brandon's cars on the road ahead of me, my heart leapt into my throat. My heartbeat was galloping like a fucking racehorse.

This was going to be a challenge.

I shut the engine off and took a deep breath, gripping the steering wheel tightly and bowing my head before I decided to man-up and get out of the car. The sooner I went in, the sooner I could leave. *Deep breaths, clear mind, and keep a cool, calm focus*, I repeated over in my head. It's just an afternoon with friends. What could go wrong?

I slammed the car door shut and walked forward with slow, measured steps as I headed toward their house. They lived in a pretty little street in a quiet, newly built estate in Sandland. All perfectly manicured lawns, trimmed hedgerows, and flower beds blooming proudly. It was the last place I'd have expected a free-spirited, artistic renegade like Finn to live. A rustic barn with original features and wildlife growing rampant outside sounded more like him. But then, I suppose you compromised in a relationship. This street screamed neat, tidy... Effy.

Their house was at the bottom of the cul-de-sac. A picture-perfect starter home with pristine white windows and two topiary bushes placed either side of the highly polished black front door. I walked up their driveway and went to knock, but Effy opened the door before I had chance.

"Zak!" She stepped out, throwing her arms around me, then moved aside to let me in. "It's so lovely to see you. Finn's in the back garden arguing with Brandon over who's controlling the barbecue. Men and fire, hey?" Instantly, her face turned bright red, and she slapped her hand over her mouth in shock. "Oh my God. I'm so sorry. I didn't think. I'm so—"

"It's fine," I butted in, saving her from the mortal shame she was clearly experiencing. "I'll be arguing with them later too. What man doesn't love a barbecue?"

This one. But I wasn't about to tell her that and make it worse.

"Brandon does like to take control. You know what he's like," she said, trying to paper over the cracks. "Come on in. Grab yourself a drink. There are beers in the fridge and fruit punch on the table outside."

I followed her, deciding beer was the better option. I wasn't really a fruit punch kind of guy. I was driving though, so it'd have to be light beer. As she led me down the hallway, Harper appeared at the other end, a wriggling Tommy firmly attached to her hip.

"Effy, do you have any wet wipes?" she called out, blowing a stray hair from her face as she gave an exasperated huff. "Tommy just smeared the jam from his sandwich all over Esme's dress, and she's screaming in the middle of the garden, refusing to move 'cos it's all sticky." Harper rolled her eyes, sighing like she had the troubles of the world to contend with.

"There's a pack on the table outside," Effy replied. "Hold on, I'll show you."

I watched Effy change course, her attention now fixed on Harper and Tommy. I stayed where I was, and Harper gave me a fraught smile and a wave as she noticed me standing in the background.

"Hi, Zak," she said, huffing as she hoisted Tommy at her side. "Sorry to be a pain. I'll catch up with you in a bit, yeah? Once I've settled these little monsters down." And then she turned and left, following Effy outside before I could reply.

Maybe this was a golden opportunity to leave? I felt so out of my depth. I'd already made Effy squirm in her own home, and Harper couldn't get away from me fast enough. Why did I come here?

The sound of laughter coming from the kitchen a little further down distracted me from my gloomy thoughts. It was laughter I recognised, and like a siren, it called out to me, making my legs move despite the protestations from my brain. That laughter felt like home, and that's what I needed right now. My home.

The laughter grew louder, and as I reached the doorway, I froze when I saw what was in front of me. Morgan had her back to me, but she was doubled over laughing as Connor, Ryan's brother, brushed flour off his face with a dishcloth. There was pastry, half rolled, on the counter, but it looked like

half of it had landed on him, and when she turned around to face me, the rest was on her too.

Her face dropped when she saw me, and every muscle in my body tensed, turning to stone. I didn't know how to react. I didn't like this. I didn't like the sick feeling it gave me, seeing her laughing, so at ease with another guy. A guy who was looking at her like the sun shone out of her. Like she was his whole world or the world he wanted for himself.

My face started to sweat, and my fisted hands shook at my sides, seconds away from flying up into his face. I hated that I felt that way. That my brain sparked and short-circuited as if all reason was being wiped from my hard drive. And the way my stomach dropped? It was like I'd just plummeted down the dip of a rollercoaster, only this wasn't a thrill. It was fucking awful. Welcome to the nightmare I never expected in a million years. I was jealous. Fuck was I jealous.

"I'm sorry." Morgan could barely speak, and her eyes dipped to the ground, guilt painted all over her face. "We were just being stupid."

"Don't apologise. It's fine." Connor laughed. "I'm sure Zak has seen two dumbasses having a food fight before." He went to put his arm around Morgan, but she ducked down to avoid his touch, moving to the fridge and opening it to take out a bottle of beer.

Connor frowned, then turned to me and held his arm out.

"Nice to see you again," he said, but all I could do was stare at his outstretched arm. I didn't want to shake it. I didn't even want to speak to him. What I did want to do was kick his ass for looking at her the way he was now.

"Is it?" I snapped. "Nice to see me?"

I glared from him to Morgan, who still couldn't meet my eyes, and then back at him. He just rocked on his feet, his hands now stuffed into the pockets of his jeans and a shit-eating grin on his face. But when my stern glare didn't falter, his grin slipped, and he became embarrassed, clearing his

throat and turning away from me to face the neglected pastry on the counter.

“I need to finish these tarts,” he muttered. “It is a party, after all.”

Morgan stepped closer to me and held the beer bottle out.

“Beer?” She cocked her head, her eyes telling me what she couldn’t say. She was sorry that I’d seen what I did. Whatever *that* was.

I stared at the bottle she held out in her hand, and then, because I couldn’t trust myself to do or say the right thing, I didn’t take it. I spun around and walked away. And as I did, I heard Connor utter, “Sorry to hear you’re still an asshole with fuck all social skills.”

I stopped. Ready to go back and show him exactly how unsociable I was, but a soft hand on my forearm pulled me out of my angry haze.

“Please, let me explain.” Morgan peered up at me, and I nodded, following her up the stairs, leaving Connor the cunt to his fucking pastry.

Connor making tarts was ironic. He was the biggest fucking tart at this party. He hadn’t thought twice about taking his older brother’s fiancée, and I didn’t trust him around any woman, least of all mine.

“I’M sorry I disturbed your fun,” I snapped, walking past her as she held the door open to the bathroom and then locked it behind us.

“It was a bit of silliness. It didn’t mean anything.” She came to stand right in front of me, looking up at me with pleading eyes.

“It didn’t look like that from where I was standing.”

“Well, it was. Jeez, Zak. It’s only Connor. Ryan’s brother. He’s like a brother to me too.”

I leaned down to brush my lips against her ear.

“I don’t think he sees you as a sister, not from the way he was looking at you just now.”

Her chest heaved as she took deep breaths, and I peered down at her delicious tits spilling from her low-cut red crop top. The same tits I fucked in a field not so long ago. Tits I licked, sucked and fucking owned. It made me want to bite them, mark them as mine, especially knowing he’d looked at them too.

I used my finger to trace a delicate line from her neck, down to tease between her tits, and she squeezed her eyes shut. Her pink pouty mouth opening slightly as she sighed.

“I don’t care how he was looking at me,” she gasped. “Or what you thought you saw. I’m not interested in Connor or anyone else. I only want you.”

“Is that so?” I asked, moving to run the pad of my thumb over her bottom lip. I knew I was being a dickhead. I had no right to stake my claim over her. Especially after I’d made it clear that this would only ever be a friends-with-benefits kind of deal. But somewhere along the way, it felt like it was becoming so much more. What it was becoming, I had no idea, but things were changing.

She nodded, and some of the tension holding my body hostage ebbed away.

“Do you know what the thought of this pretty little mouth wrapped around another man’s cock does to me?” I leaned into her, my lips ghosting over hers as I tasted the cherry on her breath. “It makes me want to stick my cock right down your throat and prove that it’s mine. No one else’s.”

She pushed her lips against mine to kiss me, but I pulled back. I hadn’t finished teasing her yet.

I put my hand on her waist and slid it slowly down to cup her ass, squeezing hard.

“And this ass? It’s mine. Mine to look at. Mine to touch. Mine to do whatever the fuck I want.”

“I know,” she gasped, pushing her chest forward to graze against my shirt.

She wanted me.

I wanted her too.

But all good things come to those who wait.

I stepped slowly around her as she stayed frozen to the spot, and I stopped behind her, gliding my hand from her hip to rest on the button of her jeans. Then, I popped it open and pushed the zip down, sliding my hand inside and cupping her delicious wet pussy.

“And this?” I growled. “This pussy will only ever be touched by me. Tasted. Fucked. It’s mine.”

She gave a little moan, and I looked up at us in the bathroom mirror. Me, with my hands in her jeans, and her, with her mouth open, eyes closed, and her head rested on my shoulder. She looked stunning and so ready to be fucked. A reminder fuck. Because if I ever saw her give that sunshine to another man, I’d lose my shit completely.

Reluctantly, I pulled my hand out and roughly yanked her jeans down her thighs. Then, I kicked her legs to let her know she needed to spread them.

“Bend over,” I commanded in her ear. “I need to fuck you.”

“Here?” she asked innocently, but I could tell by the twinkle in her eyes reflecting back at me in the bathroom mirror that she wanted it.

My girl was a voyeur, a risk-taker, a fucking cock tease who loved nothing more than taking what I had to give. She loved being risky, taking chances. I loved it too. That’s what made this so fucking perfect.

“Yes, here.” I pushed down on her shoulders, and she complied, leaning over the sink and holding on to the counter. “Do you think I have the patience to wait until we leave this house to show you who you belong to?”

“But what if someone hears?” She peered over her shoulder seductively, biting her lip.

“They won’t.” I took my tie off and balled it up, shoving it into her mouth. “My girl knows how to keep her fucking mouth shut.”

I unzipped my trousers and took my cock out, running the tip through her wet pussy, and then, without warning, I slammed into her, making her scream through the gag and plant her hands on the bathroom mirror in front of her for support.

“See?” I said, thrusting hard into her repeatedly. “The perfect... fucking... fit.”

She braced herself on the mirror as I pounded into her. Every stroke acting as a reminder that she was mine. I didn’t share.

“When I’m finished,” I gasped. “Mine will be the only cock you’ll ever want. I’m all you’ll ever need.” I didn’t know where these words were coming from, but I couldn’t stop them. They needed to be said.

I could feel myself getting close, and as I held her hips, I watched her ass jiggle with every thrust. Seeing how well her tight pussy took my cock, how perfect we looked together with my dick sliding in and out of her, made the possessive feelings I’d had earlier multiply. No one else was getting this. She was mine.

I hung my head as my orgasm took hold, and when I felt her pulsating around me, coming on my cock, I exploded.

“Fuck, Morgan. You know how to make me come so hard,” I panted. “You’re such a good girl.”

I slowed my pace and pulled her against my chest to hold her as we both panted out our breaths.

“Such a good girl,” I reiterated, reaching around to pull my balled-up tie from her mouth.

“And you’re such a bad boy,” she whispered with a devilish grin, making me smile.

“Then I guess that makes us the perfect pair,” I said, biting down gently on her shoulder.

“Two reckless, broken souls together.”

I heard the words she used, but they didn’t register. Because if they did, I’d be asking myself why she thought she was broken.

Reckless, yes.

She was a little minx.

But broken?

That was a word I’d never have used to describe her.

I was about to find out how wrong I was.

AFTER OUR BATHROOM SESSION, we cleaned up and made ourselves presentable. I stuffed my tie into my jacket and left my shirt open at the collar. Morgan said she preferred it that way, and part of me liked that. I liked knowing I pleased her too.

I decided it’d be better if we didn’t go downstairs at the same time. I didn’t want it to look suspicious. So, Morgan went ahead, and five minutes later, I followed. Once I reached the garden and positioned myself next to Ryan and Emily by the buffet table, I glanced around at everyone here. Brandon was wearing a ‘Sexy Chef’ apron, taking full control of the barbecue, as Finn stood right next to him, frowning at the grill and trying to make a grab for the tongs in Brandon’s hand. Harper was sitting in a chair next to Effy and Liv, with Tommy on her lap, the three of them deep in conversation and sipping what looked like white wine.

And then, there was Morgan.

She was sitting on a picnic rug in the middle of the garden, with Kai crawling around her and baby Poppy in her arms. Phoebe and Esme were sitting with her too, hanging on her every word, staring at her like they couldn’t quite believe she

was there, giving them her undivided attention. I couldn't explain why but watching her made something in my chest hurt. Instinctively, I rubbed my hand over my chest to free the tightening I felt there.

"She's a natural," Emily whispered.

I turned to see her watching Morgan too, with Ryan by her side.

"I don't think I've met anyone with as much empathy as she has." Emily gave a thin-lipped smile that didn't reach her eyes. "It beggars belief, really. After everything she went through growing up."

Ryan nodded his agreement grimly, his brows knitted together and his gaze fixed to the floor.

What did they know that I didn't? That I felt like I really should know.

"What did she go through growing up?" I asked, desperate to know more. "You had the same father. It can't have been any worse than yours and Danny's childhood."

Emily gave a pitiful laugh, one that told me what I was about to hear was anything but a laughing matter, and with a slight shake of her head, she stared straight ahead at Morgan, doting on all the children in the garden.

"But she didn't though, did she? Have the same father, that is. The father I had was the one he wanted the world to see. The statesman. The leader. A man with strong values and beliefs. It was all about family, honour, and reputation when he was with us. And yeah, I know how fucked up that sounds. He didn't stand for or respect any of those things. It was all a lie. But Morgan... she got another version of him."

"And what version was that?" I had to know.

"He lied and cheated us both, but the way he treated Morgan like she was his dirty little secret, was unforgivable." Emily sighed, and then starting from the beginning, she explained how her father hadn't been at Morgan's birth. He didn't even want her and often told her mum she should've

had an abortion when they rowed. Something Morgan had heard him say more than once.

Hearing that made me angry, fury surging inside me at what she'd had to deal with. I wished I could summon her father in front of me right now and make him pay for what he'd done.

How does someone come to terms with that?

Knowing their own father never wanted them.

“Her mum wasn't much better,” Emily went on. “As a child, she wouldn't let Morgan out to play. Morgan had no friends, and her mum insisted she was home schooled. She didn't know how to interact with others. She'd never been given the opportunity to meet children her own age or make friends. They kept her like a prisoner in that apartment. The only people she saw, other than the ones she watched on the TV, were her mum and dad.”

I swallowed, feeling nauseous.

“I'm surprised her mum even took her to the community centre that night when you all exposed our dad,” Emily went on. “She rarely went out. But I guess her mum thought the promises my dad had made about them starting a new life together were going to come true that night. But all she got was misery spawned from a truth she didn't want to hear. A spotlight shone on a life that'd been concealed for so many years. A girl that'd been hidden like she was a dirty, horrible mistake.”

Emily reached up to wipe the tears from her eyes. “It took a long time for her to agree to meet me, you know. It took even longer for her to open up and talk. Her mum wasn't keen on us getting to know each other, but you know me, I wasn't giving up that easily. And in those early days, Morgan could barely hold a conversation, let alone do what she does now.”

She gestured to where she sat, laughing and playing with the children. “She's worked so hard to turn her life around. I'm so proud of her. The nursing course, the way she's built herself up after her mum passed away. All of it.”

Emily looked up at me with sadness in her eyes. “I went with her, for the counselling sessions she had years ago. I didn’t sit in on them all, but I was there. I heard about the damage that’d been done to her through the years. The mental cruelty. Abuse comes in many forms, and hers was some of the worst I’ve ever heard. Neglected, unloved, ignored, made to feel like she wasn’t wanted. It was truly heart-breaking to hear. I’m so glad she came through it all to become the strong, loving girl that she is now.”

I felt disgusted.

Disgusted with her dad for making her feel like her life wasn’t worth shit.

Disgusted at her mum for facilitating it. Putting her daughter second to a man who did nothing but cheat, lie and steal.

But most of all, I was disgusted with myself.

She’d been his dirty little secret her whole life, and now I’d made her mine. And it was so wrong. She didn’t deserve that. She deserved to be loved openly and freely by a man who was proud to have her on his arm. A man who had the backbone to stand up and show the world that she was his. Someone who’d give her everything she wanted, the life she deserved full of laughter and happiness. Not a weak, spineless waste of breath like me.

She deserved the world, and all she’d got was a paper-thin illusion of what her life could be. I couldn’t do this to her anymore. It had to stop.

“She’s come so far, hasn’t she?” Emily turned to Ryan, and secrets only they knew passed between them as they smiled solemnly at each other.

I couldn’t cope with the growing tightness in my chest. I felt ashamed. My skin crawled as I remembered the way I’d spoken to her only moments ago.

What kind of man had I become?

Since when had I lost my humanity?

She'd given me everything, and I'd done nothing.

"I need to go," I blurted, turning to leave and stumbling over a garden chair in my desperation to escape.

"Are you okay?" I heard Ryan call out behind me, but I didn't stop to answer. I just pushed my way through the door back into the house, elbowing Connor, who was carrying a tray of cookies that he almost dropped as he swerved to avoid me.

"Asshole," he whispered under his breath but loud enough for me to hear, and I flinched.

I was an asshole. And I had no right to call him out on that.

I charged down the hallway and flew out of the house as fast as I could. I didn't want anyone to catch up with me. I didn't even know what I'd say. My mouth was dry, and my mind was scrambled. I needed to be alone. I was toxic, and being near me right now wasn't a good idea for anyone.

I reached my car and got in, locking the doors, then throwing my head back against the headrest, as I blew out a frustrated, nervous breath. And when I let my head fall forward and opened my eyes, I saw Morgan standing on the front lawn, a look of sheer bewilderment on her face.

It broke me.

She had broken me.

I thought I was doing okay, living the life I was, but I wasn't. I was destroying a girl who was pure, kind, and good. Way too good for me. I needed to get away and make this right. Make myself right. Be a better man. For her sake and mine.

I shook my head with regret and started the engine, speeding away from the scene of my crime. And she stayed rooted to the spot, wrapping her arms around herself to feel some comfort because that's what she was used to, being let down and comforting herself.

Shame on me for perpetuating that awful cycle her life had cruelly given her.

Shame on me.

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MORGAN



I don't know why he left like that, but it hurt to watch him drive away, shaking his head like he regretted ever being there.

What had made him do a one-eighty and leave so suddenly?

Was he still pissed off about what'd happened with Connor earlier?

I should've shrugged it off. If he still had a problem with that, it was his problem to solve. I'd explained myself. What more could I do?

But despite myself, I still felt a yearning inside. I didn't like to think of him being upset.

I watched his car disappear around the corner as he sped off like a getaway driver, and I fumbled in my pockets, looking for my car keys. But then I shoved them back down again and took a step back.

Should I follow him?

Or was it better to go back inside and pretend nothing had happened?

I didn't know how to play this, and that was a first for me. I was confused, hurt, and I wanted to make the stabbing pains in my chest go away. I knew he was the only one that could make it stop. But if I followed him, I might make it worse. I needed to weigh up my options and think this over carefully.

“Morgan?” Emily’s voice echoed quietly and hesitantly behind me. “Are you okay?”

I didn’t know what to say. I was scared that if I spoke, I’d cry. I couldn’t trust myself to stay calm. My emotions were all tangled, and I needed space to clear my head.

“How long has it been going on?” she asked, and I turned to face her. “With Zak, I mean? I know I’m reading between the lines here, but I’m guessing he’s the one who’s put a spring in your step these last few months. But now, you’re not smiling. What’s happened?”

“It’s complicated,” I managed to say without giving anything away.

“It always is with him.” She paused for a moment, and seeing the empathy on her face made me feel worse. “Be careful. I don’t think he’s ready to be with someone, and you —”

“What about me?” I butted in, trying not to sound defensive and failing miserably.

“You’re special, Morgan. You deserve the fairy-tale.”

“Don’t you think I’m getting that already?”

Yep, totally on the defensive.

“No. I don’t,” Emily replied sympathetically. “Because he’s not ready to accept a happy ending, and I’m not sure he ever will be.”

A knife to the heart was too feeble a way to describe how her words made me feel. That knife was more like an axe, swinging into my already splintered, fractured heart.

I’d once described Zak as a kaleidoscope of colour and wonder, broken parts that were beautiful, captivating.

But I was the opposite.

A monochromatic scattering of bland, dull nothingness. Mine were broken parts that no one wanted to see.

“Do you want to go after him?” Emily asked, breaking through my reverie.

“I don’t know if I should,” I replied, confusion clouding my judgement. “What would you do?”

She shrugged. “You know him better than I do these days. And judging from that look on your face, nothing else is going to give you the peace of mind you need. I think you owe it to yourself to go and talk to him.”

“Maybe.” I paused for a moment. “Please don’t say anything,” I pleaded. “Can you keep this between us? I don’t want Ryan to know, or any of the others.”

“It’s none of Ryan’s or anyone else’s business,” she stated plainly. “But he only wants what I want, and that’s for you to be happy.”

“I know, but Zak doesn’t want him to know.”

She nodded with understanding and then came towards me, grabbing me in a hug.

“I won’t tell him,” she said as she held me. “And that’s a sister’s promise. That means it’s unbreakable.”

I PULLED up outside Zak’s house and switched the engine off. Then I sat and tried to think about what I’d say to him. Before leaving, Emily had told me about the conversation they’d had about me. I wasn’t thrilled, to put it mildly, but what could I do? The truth was out there, and all that was left for me now was to deal with the fallout. I guess finding out I hadn’t always been the ray of sunshine he thought I was had sent him running for the hills, but I owed it to myself to confront him. I’d waited long enough for my chance to be with him, and I wanted to know if there was anything we could salvage from the wreckage. So, I pushed the negativity to the side, focused on positive thoughts, and after a few calming breaths, I painted a smile on my face. A smile could heal a thousand wounds, after all. At least, that’s what I’d taught myself.

Then a little devil whispered in my ear, ‘A smile can also hide a thousand heartbreaks’, but I ignored it. Troubles were

what you made of them, and I was determined to make mine disappear. To forge a better life from the rubble that was scattered behind me. I would say like a phoenix from the flames, but any reference to fire just felt wrong after everything that'd happened.

I sent a quick text to Emily to let her know I was okay. I knew she'd worry and start blowing up my phone if I didn't. Then, I got out of the car and walked the short distance to his front door. I knocked and stood back, waiting nervously. When he opened it, he let out a regretful sigh, looked down at the floor, and then shook his head.

"What are you doing here?" It wasn't the best greeting he'd ever given me, but the door was still open, which was a bonus.

"I came to see if you're okay."

He closed his eyes and his head fell back, another exasperated breath escaping as he composed himself.

"*You* are coming to check on *me*? What the fuck, Morgan?"

I was confused. I couldn't read him.

Was he angry? Upset?

Had I come here too soon?

Did he need more time to himself?

Because from the way he spoke, I was the last person he'd expected to see.

"I don't like to think of you on your own." I clamped my mouth shut. I was starting to sound desperate, which was the last thing I wanted.

"I'm always on my own," he spat back, and then, looking like it was the last thing he wanted to do, he opened the door wider. "I suppose you'd better come in, seeing as you're already here."

I opened my mouth to speak, then closed it again. He'd offered me an in and I didn't want to argue about it on the

doorstep. So, I walked into his house and headed for the living room, sitting down on the sofa as he stood awkwardly in the doorway.

“Do you want a drink?” he asked, clearly not happy about entertaining me, judging from his grave tone.

“No. I’m fine.” I wrung my hands in my lap and then inwardly cursed.

Get it together, Morgan. Talk to him and settle this or walk away. Either way, you need to get your head together.

“I’m sorry I upset you at the party. And I’m sorry you found out all that... stuff about me.”

He sighed, running his hands over his face, and then sat on the sofa next to me.

“Why are you apologising?” he asked.

“Because you’re clearly pissed off.”

He stared at me for a moment, his eyes dark and unreadable. “I am pissed off,” he uttered. “But not with you.”

“Then why did you leave? I thought, after everything that’d happened in the bathroom, we were okay.”

“We were.” He paused. “We are.”

“Then what’s the matter?” I asked, as my frown wrinkles started to make my head ache. “Look, I know you took a huge step today, going to that party. I understand that wasn’t easy for you, but everyone was so pleased to see you there.”

“I can’t do this, Morgan,” he blurted out suddenly.

Instantly, my stomach rolled from hearing him say that, and I sat forward, clenching my fists to try and numb the pain that was crawling inside me.

“Can’t do what? What is it? Have I done something wrong?”

“*You* have done nothing wrong. But you don’t deserve any of this. You don’t deserve to be treated this way. You deserve better than me.”

“That’s a lot of things you think I deserve,” I snapped back, peering at him from the corner of my eye. “Have you stopped to think about what I feel? What I want? What I think *I* deserve?”

He sat back, running his fingers through his hair and tugging on the ends in frustration. “I got carried away,” he uttered with regret. “I used you. Took what you were offering, and I... *I fucking used you*, Morgan.”

“You just said that twice and it’s still bullshit. You didn’t use me. I asked you to do all those things. I wanted it too. You can’t use someone if they agree to it.”

“You’re wrong,” he argued, shaking his head. “It is using someone if that person doesn’t understand the rules to begin with.”

My frown deepened. I didn’t understand where he was coming from.

“And the *arrangement* we agreed to?” he carried on, my stomach growing heavier as his words hit like painful drops of acid. “It has to stop. You deserve better than that.”

I felt my throat tighten as I struggled to say the words I wanted to say.

“There you go again,” I whispered, my throat scratchy and my nerves on edge. “You think you know what’s best for me. But why can’t you let me decide?”

“Because there’s only one way this is headed... and that’s heartache, when you find out I can’t change. I can’t be who you need me to be.”

“Can’t you? How do you know if you don’t give it a chance? If you don’t at least try?”

“Is that what you want? To see how fucking ugly I am under all this?” He clawed at his T-shirt, his jaw clenching as he fisted the fabric in disgust. “Do you want to feel as grotesque as I do?”

“Will you stop?” I shuffled in my seat to face him. “I’ve told you, time and again, there’s nothing you can show me

that'd change the way I feel. Nothing's going to scare me away."

"Because you've been conditioned by your parents to seek out love at any cost. You're clinging to something that can never work. Is that why you chose me? Because you knew eventually it'd crash and burn, just like every other relationship you've known."

His words had turned to bullets now, penetrating my heart and making me feel like complete and utter shit. Was he determined to have me on the floor, bleeding out at his feet?

"I'm sorry, that was—" He started to backtrack, but I wouldn't let him.

"That's not fair, Zak," I butted in, interrupting his pointless apology.

"I know. But it's the truth. Isn't it?"

I huffed in disagreement.

"It's *a* truth, but not mine. Yes, my parents were assholes. My father doesn't deserve to be a father, and my mum was a mindfuck on a daily basis. But I'm not on some perversely familiar path to destruction because that's all I've ever known. I'm here, with you, because I like being with you. I want to be with you." He went to speak, but I wouldn't let him interrupt me. "Don't tell me again that I deserve better. I don't want to hear your bullshit excuses. Maybe, instead of psychoanalysing me and my shitty childhood, you should look at yourself and ask yourself why you aren't good enough? Why do you think you aren't good enough for me, Zak?"

He didn't answer. Instead, we sat in silence for a moment. Both of us processing what'd just passed between us. I was seconds away from grabbing my bag and leaving. But then, he shifted to face me, and quietly, he asked, "Can I try something?"

"Sure. Why not?" I replied flippantly, feeling like the fight I'd always had inside me was slowly ebbing away.

He reached across the sofa and took my hand in his, and feeling his soft, warm touch settled my racing heart a little.

Then gently, he ran his thumb over my knuckles as he tried to regulate his own ragged breaths.

“If you want me to stop at any time, just say,” he told me, and I nodded.

He shuffled a little closer to me, keeping hold of my hand. Then he closed his eyes and flattened my palm, guided my hand underneath his shirt and placed it over his chest. I could feel the rampant beat of his heart fluttering against my fingers, and I peered up at him, but he wouldn't open his eyes. Instead, he hung his head and took slow, measured breaths.

“Does it still hurt?” I asked quietly, not wanting to disturb the sensitive silence.

“Sometimes. Not as much as it used to. It can be sensitive.”

He held his hand over mine under his shirt, but he let me move my fingers, slowly grazing over the skin as I explored where his burns were.

“Is this okay?” I asked, and he nodded, keeping his eyes shut tightly.

I let my fingertips explore every dip, every bump of his skin. It was smoother than I'd expected. Silky and fragile, bumpy, different.

From the pained look on his face, I guessed he thought this was repulsive to me, but it wasn't. He was opening up, and nothing had ever felt so special or intimate before in my whole life. He was letting me touch him. It felt ground-breaking, and I don't think he realised how monumental this actually was.

“Talk to me,” he pleaded as my fingers stroked and caressed. “Is this too much? I need to know what you're thinking.”

“Zak,” I swallowed down the lump in my throat. “This is everything. You feel... perfect.”

He opened his eyes then, and the warmth I saw there that I'd never seen before, made the tear I'd been holding back trickle freely down my cheek.

“Don’t cry.” He brushed his other thumb across my cheek to wipe away my tear. “You’re the first person to touch me like this. Well...” He smiled and dipped his head, redness blushing his cheeks. “Apart from the doctors and nurses that is.”

My heart swelled in my chest.

“Thank you.”

I kept my hand pressed gently against his chest. I didn’t want to break the spell.

He smiled and pulled me to him, then he moved backwards, laying us both down on his sofa. He placed a kiss on my forehead and whispered, “Small steps, Sunshine. Small steps.”

We stayed like that until we eventually fell asleep, holding each other as we lay on his sofa. We were fully clothed, but I’d never felt so raw and exposed. And through it all, I’d kept my hand on his chest. His heart beating beneath my fingers. His skin warming my touch and my heart.

Some of the walls he’d built around himself had fallen away tonight. Parts of mine had too. I always knew touch was powerful, but I never realised it would feel like this. The power of touch had the potential to change your life. And it had done just that, tonight, to mine.

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SEVENTEEN

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ZAK



When she'd turned up at my door, standing on the doorstep with that warm smile on her face, asking me if I was okay, I'd felt my fortified walls start to crumble away. On the drive home after the barbecue, I'd sworn I would end this. Put her first and walk away. Sometimes you had to be cruel to be kind, and the way I'd treated Morgan from the moment I'd met her hadn't been kind. It'd been selfish and self-centred. I'd decided to keep my walls in place, strengthen them, even. I'd been clear to her about what would happen next; and that was nothing. The pact we'd cooked up between us had to end. I was using her, and it had to stop.

However, seeing her glowing with empathy, taking a conciliatory approach to our situation and yet shining with warmth and humility, understanding how all this affected me, made me second-guess everything. I had to be honest with myself. I liked being with her. Being around her had a calming effect on me. Talking to her was easier than talking to anyone. It was effortless. And the intimacy? I'd never connected with someone on a level like that, not before the fire or after. I might have hidden what I didn't want her to see, but she'd seen more than anyone.

And so, I decided to take a step forward, a step towards her. I had to make an effort to meet her halfway because I owed her that much. If I was honest, I owed it to myself too. I'd cowered in the shadows for long enough, and after experiencing her light, I didn't want to let it go. I liked it too much. So, I let her touch my chest, fighting the feelings of

repulsion. I didn't want to scare her off or make her feel uncomfortable. But when her fingers touched me, grazing my skin softly with her feather-like delicate touches, it felt like healing. Her hands made me feel better about myself. The gentle strokes sent goosebumps up and down my spine and prickles through my scalp, forcing me to close my eyes so I could savour the sensation. Her touch was something magical, bringing me to life, making my heart pound and my head soar. It felt good to be touched by someone who knew all about me, knew the real me and wasn't afraid to meet me in the hell I'd locked myself into. Someone who'd take my hand and lead me towards the light I never thought I'd see again.

My saviour.

My angel.

My sunshine in the darkness.

We lay together on the sofa, her hand on my chest as I held her. And for the first time in my life, I fell asleep with a woman in my arms.

When I woke up the next morning and felt her warm body pressed close to mine on the sofa, a wash of contentment drenched my soul. The way her soft lines moulded to my hard edges made me pull her a little closer, arousal coursing through me at how tempting she was. But at the same time, I was apprehensive. She still had her hand on my chest, and I still had a lot of hang-ups, despite what'd happened last night. They wouldn't go away that easily. I'd had issues with my body for years. They were like demons that clung to me with their sharp talons, refusing to let go, piercing any logical thoughts with the realisation that I wasn't like other guys. I was harder to love. I didn't look the same. Why would a girl like her want someone like me? She'd had enough sorrow in her life. Why take on mine too?

But I pushed those damning thoughts away. Locked them up in the little box in my head to deal with another day, but not today. Today, I wanted to see what we could be if I gave her a chance, if I gave myself a chance too. I was willing to move to

the next level. Find out if there could be a future for us. She deserved it. Maybe I did too.

Slowly, she started to rouse from her sleep, and when she finally woke up, I asked her if she was all right, studying her eyes for any hint of regret. But there was none, only acceptance. Reluctantly, she'd slid her hand down my chest and out from under my shirt, then she'd kissed over my heart and said, "Thank you."

I went to speak, but I couldn't. I had to swallow the lump in my throat. But I hugged her a little tighter to let her know it was all okay.

"I didn't expect what happened last night," she went on. "But I'm glad it did. I think it was what we both needed."

I hummed in agreement as I buried my face into her hair and kissed her, breathing in the goodness she radiated.

We lay together without talking for a while, just happy to be as we were. But eventually, our bodies forced us to move. We couldn't stay like that forever. She went to the bathroom, and I headed to the kitchen to sort out some breakfast for us both.

But where did we go from here?

That was the question that really needed answering.

"One day at a time," she whispered into the space between us, like she'd heard my thoughts as she walked into the kitchen. I turned to see her standing by the fridge, watching me with concern etched into her brow. "Let's just take this one day at a time," she reiterated, taking cautious steps towards me. "Don't overthink it. Just let it happen."

"Small steps?" I replied, giving her a hint of a smile.

"Small steps." She nodded in agreement.

I DIDN'T ASK her to leave. Instead, I told her I had work to do and asked if she wanted to stay. She agreed, on the

understanding that she wasn't getting in the way. And so, we headed to my workshop, where I had paperwork to complete and orders to box up.

I sat at my desk as she pottered around my office, looking at the merchandise Finn had sent over in the week, ready for distribution. I tried to focus on the accounts I was working on but I couldn't help but get distracted by her. Watching her delicate touch as she picked up vases and turned them over in her hand to look at the workmanship. I loved the way she sighed as she brushed her fingers over the intricate details Finn had painted on them; pink dahlias on some, others with lotus flowers, lilies, peonies, or cherry blossoms.

"They're so beautiful." She sighed, placing the vase she'd been holding back on the shelf.

"You can take one if you like," I told her.

"Really?"

"Of course. Pick your favourite."

She tapped her lip as she scanned the row of vases and then picked up one with a lotus flower on it.

"I think this one's my favourite." She smiled, holding it like it was the most precious gift she'd ever been given. "I love the lotus flower. It's a symbol of purity, you know. Unblemished perfection, even though it grows in muddy, murky ponds. It's a bit like us," she mused. "Breaking free from the dirty darkness of its world and blooming to become something better than where it came from."

She had such a poetic way of talking sometimes, and the comparison she'd made triggered something in me. I couldn't stop myself from blurting out, "Was it bad for you, growing up?"

It was a stupid question. I knew that. Emily had already told me how fucked up her childhood had been. The girl wasn't even allowed to have friends. And yet, I couldn't help it. I wanted to know more.

She let out a slow, solemn breath, taking a moment to compose herself. Then she sat down at the other desk in my

office. The one Finn would sometimes use on the rare occasion he came here to work.

“Do you know what my earliest memory was?” she said.

I shook my head.

“I must’ve been about two or three, and I was sitting on the living room floor, playing with my toys. I’d set up a tea party for my teddies. They were all sitting in a circle, and I’d filled my little plastic teapot with water, ready to fill their cups. And then, my mum walked through with a basket of washing in her arms, and I looked up at her. And she...” She faltered, taking a breath. “She looked down at me with pure hatred in her eyes. Just wicked, like she wished I wasn’t there. Like she... hated me. And I remember thinking, even at that age, what have I done to upset her? Why is she looking at me like that? I didn’t understand. But it made me feel panicked, and I wanted to do something, anything to make her like me. I didn’t know what I’d done, but I knew I had to do something to make it better.”

“You did nothing wrong,” I said, and she shrugged.

“Looking back, it was nothing. She didn’t hit me. She barely spoke to me half the time. But it was just a feeling, you know? It stuck with me. That feeling that I was a burden.”

“You were never a burden.”

“I was. When I was about five or six, we were out for a drive. We weren’t going anywhere, she just wanted to get out of the apartment, so she drove us through the city, past this huge office building, and Mum pointed at it and told me she used to work there. That she’d been offered a promotion at her job in that building. She thought she was going places, that she was going to be someone. But then, she found out she was having me and all of that stopped. She didn’t get the promotion and she left. She told me I was the reason she was forced to give up work and leave that life behind. From a somebody to a nobody, that’s what she said.”

“Morgan, that’s total bullshit. If she wanted to take that promotion, she could have. She can’t blame you for that.

Women have children all the time and carry on working. She lied to you.”

“She’s always lied to me,” she stated sadly. “That’s just who she was. According to my mother, I was the reason she never had the life she always wanted. It was my fault that my dad didn’t leave his other family to live with her. He didn’t want me either, apparently. Neither of them did. Why would he leave his other family to put up with a brat like me, that’s what she used to say.”

My jaw clenched so tightly I thought my teeth might crack from the pressure.

“She sounds evil.”

“It is what it is,” Morgan replied in such a matter-of-fact way that it made me even angrier.

She didn’t deserve to have lived a life like that.

“He wasn’t any better,” she went on. “At least my mum fed me and took care of me in the day. He didn’t bother to do anything. I’d hear him at night, when I was in bed. He’d knock on the door, come in, talk to my mother, but he never asked about me. He never even came into my room to see me. He just did what he’d come to do with her and then left. He didn’t stay until the morning. He didn’t stay ever. He was a ghost in her life, using her for what he could get, and she couldn’t see it, or she just didn’t want to. And to me, he was my father, but he wasn’t a dad.”

Guilt swarmed through me like a million wasps stinging my blackened soul. I wasn’t any better than her father. I’d done the exact same thing to her, using her and leaving like it was nothing. I felt so ashamed.

“That night,” she said. “When we went to the community centre, and you all exposed him for the fraud he was, she didn’t listen. She thought we were there to take our place beside him. That he’d finally seen the light and was welcoming us into his world. He wasn’t. You showed us exactly what he was, but she never accepted it. She pretended, to anyone who mattered that she did, but deep down, she

didn't. I think if he'd come out of prison and she was still alive, she'd have taken him back in a heartbeat. She was obsessed with him. He was all that mattered. And I know she had cancer, but I truly believe she died of a broken heart. She didn't have any fight in her, not without him."

Fuck. Her shitty life really was coming back to haunt her, and all because of me.

"I'm so sorry, Morgan. I'm sorry we made it so much worse for you. We shouldn't have done what we did that night. We wanted to hurt him, but all we did was hurt you and Emily. We were wrong and I'm so fucking sorry."

"Don't be sorry." She smiled back at me. "You did us a favour. You did what had to be done. And besides, if it wasn't for you, I'd have never met Emily and everyone else. It was a blessing. Really, it was." I raised my brow in question, and she smirked. "Okay, so it took me a while to see it as a blessing back then, but it was. I promise. My life turned around after that day. Things eventually got so much better for me."

"I'm sorry things were so shitty for you before that though," I said, wishing I could change her past, erase all the negative and replace them with something magical, like she was.

"I think they loved me in their own way," she explained. "But it wasn't the right way. They did their best. My father tried to make my mum happy, but he was spread so thin it was never enough, and Mum... she had her demons. She needed help. I can't stay mad at her forever. In the end, she did the right thing. She saved the money my father had given her, hid it from the tax man, and paid off the mortgage on our apartment. When Mum died, she left everything to me. So, financially, I'm okay. And I decided to use it to make a better life for myself..."

"To put yourself through nursing college."

"Yes, and other things. Stuff to make me feel better about the past. Put right some wrongs."

“You’re the lotus flower.” I pointed to the vase. “And your parents are the shitty pond scum.” That made her laugh, and it made my shoulders relax a little too.

“I guess,” she replied. “Did you know, he used my name to open accounts?”

I did.

I’d hacked every account Winters had ever opened, and I knew all about his seedy, shady business deals, but I would never admit that. So, I stayed quiet.

“He stole my identity,” she said. “Opened bank accounts, credit cards, all in my name. He even had me listed as a director on the business he got sent down for.” She hung her head. “I wasn’t good enough to visit, or take out on family trips, I wasn’t even good enough to hug, but I was good enough to steal from.”

“I take it you don’t speak to him?” It was a stupid question, but words were failing me right now.

“I didn’t speak to him then, and I don’t now. I have no intention of ever acknowledging that man as my father. But I’ll be forever thankful for finding Emily. Even if it was a little too late. I’m sad that I never got to meet my older brother, Danny.”

“I knew Danny.”

She lifted her head to look at me, her eyes brimming with tears.

“Did you? What was he like? I mean, I know what Emily and Ryan have told me, but I love hearing about him.”

I closed my laptop and sat back, taking the time to focus on her and tell her all about Danny and the stories I remembered from when we were kids. I made sure she knew what a good guy he was. How he protected Emily and was always there for everyone.

“He’d have loved you,” I told her. “Another sister to dote on. He’d have made up for all the other shit you went through. You’d have had the childhood you deserved with Danny in it.”

She smiled to herself then asked, “What about you? Do you still speak to your family.”

When I had to, I wanted to say, but that wouldn't have been fair. My family had always been there for me. It wasn't their fault that the fire had turned me into a shitty son.

“I had a good childhood,” I told her. “My family were solid. We played games together, went on the best holidays. I couldn't have asked for a better upbringing.”

“And now?”

“Now... they give me the space I need. They call me all the time, but they know I have things I'm working on. My little sister is at uni. My mother calls me every Friday night. I get invites to Sunday dinner, but I don't go.”

“You should,” she said, with hope shining in her eyes.

“Maybe one day.”

I didn't want to talk about my shitty role as a son anymore, and I really didn't want to put her through any more trips down the dark paths of her memory lane, so I stood up, walking over to the potter's wheel, and I grabbed a chair.

“Come here,” I commanded, sitting in the chair, gesturing for her to sit in front of me.

She stood up and came over to me, perching herself gently on my knee.

“I won't break,” I joked quietly, pulling her to sit in-between my legs. She fitted perfectly. She felt so right.

“Are we going to re-enact that scene in *Ghost*?” She giggled.

“We're going to make magic together,” I replied, wetting my hands, then taking a lump of clay, I slapped it onto the middle of the wheel.

I took her hands in mine, wetting them both so we could manipulate the clay easier, and then I rested my head on her shoulder as I talked her through the process of centring and moulding. Describing the way her hands should move and

why. She was hesitant at first, but as I twisted my fingers through hers, encouraging her to let go, whispering for her to feel the clay, let it work for her and command it to become what she'd pictured in her mind, she relaxed.

We worked together, our fingers slipping and sliding against each other as we moulded the clay into a tower. Then, I guided her hands to the top and showed her how I used my thumbs and the heel of my palm to push the tower down. With our fingers entwined, we moulded the edges. I kept my hands on either side of the walls of the vase to show her how to sculpt and shape it. And all the time, she linked her fingers with mine, her breath ragged as we controlled the clay and created our own magic, not only with the vase, but with each other.

"It's so soothing." She sighed as I doused more water onto my hands and hers and placed them back on the clay.

"Soothing for the mind," I whispered, and then, because it felt so natural, I kissed her cheek. The way it made her smile made me feel like all my Christmases had come at once. I felt like a giddy child again.

"I could do this all day," she said, her eyes fixed on our joined hands but her head tilting to rest against mine.

"Now you know why I made a business out of doing this," I whispered in her ear, and placed another kiss on her cheek.

We sat together for a while, lost in our sublime little bubble, both of us revelling in the sensation that having our hands woven together like this created. Like we'd found a serenity, a home in each other. Sitting close together like no one else existed in this world. Nothing else mattered.

Eventually, I slowed the wheel to a stop and told her, "I might try and paint this one myself."

She turned to look at me. "I could paint it, if you like? It wouldn't be as good as Finn does it, but I'd like to give it a go."

"Whatever you want, Sunshine."

I gave her one last peck on her cheek, then with heavy legs, I stood up, taking the vase off the wheel and holding my hand out to her.

“We need to clean up,” I stated.

“Do we?” She reached forward and ran her wet, clay-covered hand down my cheek and laughed. “But this shade of grey looks good on you.”

“Oh, it’s like that, is it?” I narrowed my eyes at her and lowered my head to give her a wicked glare. Then I wiped my own clay-soaked hand down the front of her neck and over the swell of her breast.

She squealed, stepping away from me and plunging her hands into the murky water at the potter’s wheel, and then flicked it at me, splattering my white T-shirt.

I lunged for her, using my dirty hands to hold her and hug her as she squirmed and laughed in my grip.

“Stop!” She could barely speak; she was laughing so hard, but I didn’t give up. I kept squeezing and tickling her, loving the way her laughter made my whole body melt.

I lifted her up and carried her kicking and squealing over to the sink, and then I put her down, both of us panting as we stared at each other.

“Now we definitely need to clean up,” I said, gesturing to her filthy crop top and my dirty shirt.

“After you,” she purred, looking me up and down like she couldn’t wait to see what kind of show I was going to put on. “I’ve always wanted to see a wet T-shirt contest for men.”

“Oh, kitten.” I leaned forward, my lips grazing her ear. “You should be careful what you wish for.”

I had intended to wash my hands, my forearms, and then head to the shower back at the house, but something stopped me.

Trying not to overthink what I was about to do, I grabbed the hem of my T-shirt and pulled it over my head. I heard her

delicate gasp, and when I looked at her, she was staring at my bare chest, and then her eyes met mine.

I struggled to keep my breaths slow and stable, but the nerves were truly hitting hard now.

What the fuck was I doing?

This could all blow up in my face.

I tried to stay calm and stop my heart from bursting through my chest, because right now, it felt like a thoroughbred horse was inside there, ready to gallop like hell to the finish line and finish me off in the process.

This was torture, and I couldn't second-guess what she'd say or do. But then, slowly, as if to make sure she had permission, she lifted her hand up and touched the scarred skin on my chest and brushed her hand delicately down my right side. It was skin she'd felt before, but to see it was a different thing entirely.

"So, this is me," I said breathlessly, surprised I could talk through the sharp pain lodged in my throat. "Every tattoo and scar."

"This is you," she repeated. "And you're beautiful. Who did the tattoos?"

"A guy I spent a hell of a long time learning to trust. He did them in my house so I wouldn't have to go into his studio. He respected that I needed my privacy, but he also knew how important getting them done was to me. They were my way of claiming a part of my body back." And then, I don't know why, but I added, "He let me cover my scars with bandages while he worked on my good side."

"They're both good sides," she replied.

I scoffed, but she narrowed her eyes at me.

"They are, Zak. You're beautiful. I know the difference here"—she stroked over my scarring—"means something to you, but it doesn't to me. All I see is... you. And I wouldn't have you any other way." A few more gentle touches and she said, "No one is flawless or perfect... but you? I think you are."

This shows me you know how to fight, that you survived. And what could be more beautiful than survival? You've lived a life. And this body?" She swallowed as she placed both of her hands on my chest. "It's amazing. You. Are. Amazing."

My nostrils flared as I breathed heavily, watching her hands caress me with so much tenderness.

"This isn't the worst of it," I warned her. "My legs took the brunt of it."

"I don't care," she replied, her eyes fixed on mine. "It means the world to me that you've shown me this much. That you've let me touch you. This is special, Zak."

I cupped her face in my hands and leaned down to brush my lips over hers. "It is, but it's all because of you. I want to work through this with you, if you'll let me?"

A tear trickled down her face and I wiped it away with my thumb.

"Of course, I..." Her voice broke, and she pulled me down to kiss her, unable to finish her sentence.

"Sometimes you don't have to find the right words," I told her as I ghosted my lips over hers. "You tell me all I need to know with your smiles, your eyes, and now... with your touch."

Her eyes flickered closed, and she stroked her thumb softly against my chest as she held her hands there. I closed my eyes too and listened to what her touch was telling me.

You're safe with me.

I've got you.

I'll never let you down.

"Hey." I put my thumb and forefinger under her chin and lifted her face up to look at me. "Why do you look so sad? Come on, talk to me. This should be a happy thing."

"I am happy." She sniffed. "I just want you to know that nothing you say or do could ever change the way I feel about you. I'll always be here."

“The same goes for you,” I told her, and those tears that I thought I’d wiped away fell freely from her eyes again.

“Do you mean that?” she asked, biting her lip, looking unsure.

“Of course.”

“Nothing?”

“Not a thing. Just remember, you’ve done nothing wrong. The past is in the past. All that matters is where we go from here.”

“And where do we go from here?”

I smirked and cocked my brow.

“To the shower.” And then instantly, I regretted it. “But not like that. I need more time before...”

“I know,” she replied, with empathy glowing on her face. “I think there’s been enough firsts for you today.”

I held her hand as we made our way back to the house, a peacefulness I hadn’t experienced in a long time rippling through me.

So, this was what it felt like to be in a relationship?

I was embarrassed to admit that at twenty-six, I’d never been in a relationship, ever. Before the fire, I was too busy jumping from one girl to the next. Then after, I didn’t jump anywhere. I’d resigned myself to the fact that it was me, myself, and I, for the long haul. But meeting Morgan made me realise I didn’t want that, and being with her wasn’t as scary as I thought it’d be. It was kind of nice to know I could lean on her, and her me. Our special something.

EIGHTEEN

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MORGAN



We showered separately and then spent the rest of the day watching movies on the sofa like any other normal couple. When I suggested going back home to get some new clothes and give him space, he refused, telling me he had enough hoodies to keep me warm.

Later that night, when we lay in bed holding each other, he switched off the lights and pulled me close.

“Is this okay?” he asked, and I laughed.

“I feel like we’ve done a complete one-eighty.”

“What do you mean?” I could feel him smiling as he brushed his lips against my neck.

“I mean we’ve done some pretty naughty stuff; you’ve handcuffed and blindfolded me, but you’re asking if it’s okay to hold me in bed.”

“I don’t know.” He ghosted his lips across my shoulders as he spoke. “This feels more intimate in a way. I know that sounds ridiculous. I’ve explored your body like it was my own, but this isn’t about sex. It’s about something deeper. The connection we’re building here, it’s feelings and emotions, and that means so much more.”

I rolled onto my back, and seeing his silhouette resting on his side, watching me, made me reach up to stroke the side of his face.

“I like hearing you talk about feelings.”

“I think it’s time to stop pretending... on my part, anyway. I need to be honest about where this is heading. I like being with you, and I don’t want that to end. I want to spend every moment that I can enjoying it.”

I loved the words he was gifting me. They felt like balm to my tattered soul. I never in a million years thought I’d get him to talk about feelings, let alone admit he had them for me, even though it was in a roundabout way.

“I want that too,” I whispered into the darkness.

I felt him shift in the bed and then heard rustling, and a moment later, I froze and then melted. In the darkness of the bedroom, under the covers, he’d stripped his clothes off and pulled me close. The feel of his naked skin against mine meant everything. I couldn’t see him, but I could feel the warmth and softness from being held like this.

“I hope you know what you’ve done for me.” He sighed. “You’ve changed my life.”

I fought the tears that threatened to burst free.

He thought I’d changed his life, but he had no idea what he was saying or how it affected me. How he’d changed my life too.

I’d never known what it was like to live the kind of life that everyone else lived. Have the balance that they took for granted. And now, because of that, I seemed to feel things so much more than everyone else. My sadness was overwhelming, suffocating to the point where I struggled to breathe. It’s why I fought so hard to keep the bitter thoughts at bay because when they took over, all I saw was a dark hole trapping me. No light or safety was in sight. But in contrast, my happiness was like explosions of intensity. The fourth of July on acid and then some. Being happy and seeing the joy I could bring to others was a drug I’d never be ashamed to be hooked on. And love? I couldn’t tell him yet, but I’d loved Zak for a long time, much longer than I’d probably ever admit. I wanted that love to lift him up, give him wings and make him fly. Let him see the world the way I saw it. Make him see himself the way I saw him.

But with a love like mine, a power that had the potential to become potent, I always held the nagging doubt that when that day came, and he left me, it wouldn't be sorrow that followed; it'd be outright and utter devastation.

"I want to do things a little differently tonight," Zak said as he moved to lay his body over mine. "I want to feel you differently."

I threaded my fingers through his hair, and he nuzzled into my neck, kissing me as he whispered, "I want to fuck you slowly, take my time and feel every delicious inch of your pussy around my cock. I want to drown in you, your moans, your sighs, the way you feel... and your touch. I want you to touch me."

I tugged at his silky strands, coaxing him into a deep, slow, languid kiss. Tongues tangled, our lips sliding and breaths mingling as I tasted him.

"I want you," I begged, and he chuckled.

"You're always so needy. I love hearing you beg."

"I'll always beg for it. You make it worth begging for."

He liked that answer and nipped at my bottom lip, biting and pulling it.

"That's what happens when you're a good girl." He smiled against my lips. "Good girls get fucked in the best way." He grabbed the back of my knee and forced my leg up, so it was bent at his waist. I lifted the other leg, opening myself to him as he lay over me. "Are you ready, kitten?"

I gasped, "Yes," but it was too late, he was already spearing hard into me. He stilled inside me as I let out the most toe-curling groan I'd ever made.

"You always take my cock so well, baby," he moaned. "I fucking love the way you feel wrapped around me."

I ran my fingers down his back, grazing my fingertips over his skin, and then grabbed his ass.

"You've wanted to do that for a long time, haven't you?" He pulled out of me slowly, then thrust back in hard. "To grab

my ass while I ride your tight pussy. I guess we're getting a lot of firsts today."

I had wanted it.

I'd wanted it so badly I'd fantasised about it for ages, and I squeezed his ass to let him know that he was right and that he felt perfect.

"Fuck me, baby. Fuck me harder, please," I pleaded.

"If I do, are you going to use your pretty pussy to make me come harder too?" he growled.

"Always."

He started to thrust relentlessly into me, rocking the bed as he held onto the metal frame. I clung to him, letting him fuck me, but this time, it felt different. Being close to him, having his body over mine, it felt like we were making love. A love fuck. I liked love fucking.

The headboard banged, our breaths turned to pants, then groans and moans we couldn't hold back. And then we both came hard, waves of pleasure hitting us like a tsunami. My legs quivered, my pussy clamped down on his cock, and my walls radiated wave after wave of pure bliss. He cried out too, giving me everything he had to give, coming inside me with jerked, erratic thrusts.

This felt different. Everything felt different. The kisses were deeper, the touches magical, and the way he held me like he never wanted to let me go made the endorphins in my body do somersaults.

"You've changed my life too, you know," I gasped quietly, mirroring his comment from earlier as we came down from our high.

"How so?" He tightened his grip on me and let me trail my fingers up and down his back.

"You make things make sense. It's easy to fall, but it's hard to find someone who'll catch you... and you have... caught me, that is."

“I’ll always catch you,” he said, hugging me close. “You can trust me.”

And in that moment, I knew I could.

I’d always dreamed about finding something like this, and I was so glad I’d waited, taken the time to make it happen. It had been worth it. He was worth it.

But then, a nagging doubt hit me.

When he eventually saw the real me, would he think I was worth it too?

WE SPENT most of the night exploring each other in the dark. Love fucking and sharing whispers in the shadows. Promises of a life we were moulding for ourselves, just like the clay from our vase. Nothing was perfect, but together, through our imperfections, we might be able to find a way to build something for the future, for us. That’s what I hoped, anyway.

The next morning, I felt the heat from the sun peeking through the curtains, forcing my eyes open. And when I blinked and turned to look at Zak lying next to me, I had to hold in my gasp. The covers had fallen away from him, and he was lying beside me, still deep asleep, totally naked. It wasn’t the sight of his injuries that’d made me stifle my gasp. No. It was the fact that he looked so peaceful, lying there, oblivious to the way he was exposed.

His chest rose and fell as he breathed steadily, and I stared at the scarring over his chest that ran down his right side. He’d said his legs were the worst, and I could see the mottled complexion along his thighs and lower down his legs. It looked tight and shone a little; it was uneven, bumpy in places, but it didn’t look repulsive. If anything, it made me want to touch him more, feel him the way he was now. Zak would say he was scarred, disfigured. But all I saw was resilience and bravery. His skin showed a map to the man he was now, a man that had been through indescribable pain but never gave up. A tapestry that told a tale of a man with immeasurable strength

and courage. They weren't scars. They were just him, the man I loved.

I stayed still, watching him as he slept. My beautiful man. But as he started to stir, I closed my eyes, pretending to be asleep. I didn't want him to show me his body this way. I wanted it to be on his terms. I'd never take that away from him.

So, when the mattress dipped, and I could sense him getting out of bed and walking out of the room, I let him. Moments later, the bed dipped again, and I felt him climb back in next to me. Only this time, as he edged closer to where I slept, I felt the fabric of his pyjamas brush against me.

I wriggled a little, yawned, and then opened my eyes. And there he was, smiling down at me, dressed in his armour, ready to fight another day.

"Morning," he said, giving me a rare glimpse of a smile. He didn't know I'd seen him, and I was relieved.

"Morning. What are you making me for breakfast?" I asked, stretching and then pulling him to me for a kiss.

"I know what I want to eat for breakfast," he growled, pushing his hand between my legs, his fingers grazing my pussy.

"I think I need a shower before there's any of that." I patted his cheek and sat up, letting the covers fall off my naked body. I wanted him to see how comfortable I was in my skin, not that he needed reminding.

I heard him give a sexy groan behind me, so I stood up, swaying my hips as I headed for the bathroom. I wanted to put on a show, and glancing over my shoulder, I saw his eyes trained on my naked ass.

"You're so predictable." I rolled my eyes, and he laughed.

"I've always been an ass man, kitten." He stayed focused on my butt as he spoke. "And if you keep swinging it in front of me like that, I might just join you in that shower and show you exactly how much I love it."

“Promises, promises,” I teased, and left him lying on the bed with his memories. I knew he wouldn’t join me. He’d told me yesterday he wasn’t ready. But a girl could always hope.

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NINETEEN

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MORGAN



N ight after night, he gave himself to me in the shadows of his room. But day after day, we slipped back to where we were, sliding back to square one, where he hid behind cotton armour and promises that time was the greatest healer. And all I could think was, what if time was just an excuse now? He knew me. He knew I wouldn't run away. He could trust me.

If I was truthful, I didn't think time was what he needed; I think he needed a push. He needed to know that I'd be there to catch him when he fell. But he also needed to talk, deal with his emotions and find other ways to cope. If that was with someone else, then so be it. I wasn't qualified anyway, and I wanted more than anything for him to talk to someone who was.

I knew he had his issues, and I respected that. But to move forward, we had to take some uncomfortable steps. I was so proud of how he'd opened up to me, so honoured that he'd chosen to give us a go. Now, it was time to try something new. Push the boundaries. I wanted this for him. I wanted him to shrug off the last of his shackles with me. Free himself of the burden of his fears.

We'd laid together on the sofa, watching Netflix and being at peace with each other. Then, when it came time to head to the bedroom, I followed him, but I knew tonight would be different. It was make or break.

I switched the light on as we walked in, and sure enough, he went to switch it off again, but I covered the switch with

my hand.

“Don’t,” I pleaded. “Not tonight.”

“You know the rules,” he reminded me, trying to push my hand out of the way.

“Rules change,” I stated firmly, keeping my hand exactly where it was.

He sighed and stepped back, folding his arms over his chest.

“Okay, tell me... what are these new rules?”

So far, he was taking it better than I’d expected. At least he was asking what the new rules were, but whether he would follow them was another thing entirely.

“I want to try something.” I let my hand fall away from the light switch, and I stood in front of him. “I want to play a little game.”

“You know I like games.” His face darkened, imagining the bedroom games he had in mind. I think they were a far cry from what I had planned.

“This one is called mirror,” I explained, giving him a sultry stare to keep his interest piqued. “I do... and you... copy.”

“Bring it on,” he uttered in a low, gravelly voice.

I didn’t want to scare him off from the outset, so I decided to build him up to the main event.

First, I reached forward and touched his mouth, sighing as he kissed my fingertips while I softly grazed his smooth skin. I ran my thumb across his bottom lip then pushed it into his mouth, and he closed his eyes, leaning forward to suck it. When I pulled it out, he slowly opened his eyes to look at me from under his lashes, a hooded, seductive stare, and I winked at him.

“Your turn,” I whispered, and watched in awe as he stepped forward, reaching across to do the same thing to me.

I sucked his thumb slowly, tasting him, twirling my tongue around him like I did when I sucked his cock. Then, I let it fall

from my mouth with a pop.

“I fucking love your mouth,” he groaned.

“I love having you in my mouth,” I purred back.

Next, I reached up on my tiptoes, and licked the side of his neck, peppering the delicate space below his ear with sweet kisses. He hummed, tilting his head to give me better access, and I grinned against his skin.

“My favourite place,” I whispered, and he chuckled.

When I pulled back, he said, “Mine too.” And then he bent down, licking my neck, and then kissing me in the same way that I’d kissed him. His hot mouth and tickly breaths made my skin goosebump, and I shivered as ripples of pleasure ran up and down my spine.

“I think I like this game,” he whispered against my ear.

I turned my head to face him, covering my mouth with his, taking his bottom lip between my teeth to bite gently and pull.

“We’re getting a little aggressive now, are we?” He wiggled his brow. “I’m down with that.” And then he kissed me back, biting my bottom lip and pulling it gently between his teeth.

I could feel the pulse between my legs hammering hard as we played this seductive game. I wanted him so badly I had to fight the urge to push him down on the bed and take what I wanted.

Instead, I put both my hands on his chest and pushed him back slightly, then placed my mouth over his T-shirt, sucking through the fabric where I knew his nipple was, grazing my teeth over the sensitive spot. When I pulled back, his eyes shone as he stared down at me.

“I think I’d prefer to mirror that one with you naked. But I guess I’ll have to play by the rules.” He let his fingers graze over the buttons of my shirt. “Or maybe not.” And with a dirty smirk on his face, he flicked my top button open, then the next one and the next one, until he could easily push the cotton aside and get to the purple, lacy bra I had on underneath. I

watched, my breath ragged as he squeezed my breast in his hand, rubbing his thumb over my nipple as he panted slowly. Then he bent down, putting his mouth over the lace to suck me through the fabric. He flickered his tongue over my erect nipple, making me arch my back to beg for more. I ran my fingers through his hair, tugging at the ends to show him how crazy he was driving me. I was breaking the rules too, but I didn't care.

“Always so responsive. I love it,” he mouthed against my chest, and then he lifted his head, wicked intent sparkling in his eyes.

He was so in the moment, and so was I.

It was now or never.

I took a step back, biting my lip as I undid the rest of the buttons of my shirt, and let it fall from my shoulders onto the floor. Then, I reached behind me to unhook my bra and I let that fall too, leaving me standing in front of him, naked from the waist up.

He stared at my tits, then glanced up at me as if he was waiting for me to do something else.

“Your turn,” I told him, nodding to his T-shirt.

I could see him visibly swallow, and apprehension flickered in his eyes. I had to keep him in the moment with me.

“Don't overthink it,” I said, running my hands over my tits and squeezing them, for him. “It's just you and me. Remember. I've seen you before. It's okay.”

He nodded, faltering for a moment, then he put his arm up, grabbing the back of his T-shirt and pulled it over his head. He threw the shirt onto the floor but kept his head bowed in front of me. I could see he was starting to get nervous. His chest was moving faster as he breathed heavier, and his arms rubbed over his stomach like he didn't know what to do with himself. But he was beautiful, every inch of him, from his vendetta and England tattoos on his left side to the scarring on his right. He was perfect.

“You’re stunning. Please believe me,” I whispered. “But, Zak? You haven’t played by the rules. You need to look at me.”

He let his arms fall to his sides and lifted his head to look right at me. Worry and uncertainty turned to acceptance in his eyes when he saw me smiling back at him.

“There isn’t a thing about you that isn’t beautiful to me,” I repeated. “Remember that.”

He nodded, and I took a deep breath. This was my grand finale, and it could go either way. It could be the best thing we’d ever done or leave our budding relationship in tatters.

I popped the button on my jeans and pulled down the zip. Then I pushed them down my thighs, along with my underwear, all the way to my feet. I kicked them off and stood in front of him completely naked.

“You’re fucking gorgeous,” he growled, licking his lips. “But, kitten, I’m afraid if you see me like that, it might change the whole dynamics of this game.”

“Try me,” I urged. “What have you got to lose?”

“My pride. My dignity. My self-esteem... You.”

I shook my head at all of it, especially the last one.

“You’ll never lose me.”

We stood in his bedroom in a standoff. Me, waiting for him to find the courage to meet me halfway. And him, fighting his inner turmoil, the inner demons that’d kept him chained up and caged in his prison for so long. The prison that was his body. He needed to do this to be free. I wanted him to break free.

“Don’t say I didn’t warn you,” he uttered, and then I watched him, holding my breath as he slowly popped the buttons of his jeans and then pushed them, along with his boxers, over his thighs and down to his feet, kicking them away like I had.

He stood there, panting heavily, waiting for my reaction, not realising I’d seen this before. I knew what he looked like,

but he didn't know that. What I said next would mean everything.

“I know I can stand here and tell you how beautiful you are to me, and you wouldn't hear it. I could say all the wonderful words whirling in my mind about how you make me feel and how much seeing you like this means to me, but they'd fall on deaf ears. So, I'm going to show you instead, because I think a touch can say what a million words can't.”

I took a step towards him and placed my hands on his chest. Then I kissed over the scars on the bottom of his neck, moving to his shoulder and then over his chest.

“All of this is perfect. You are perfect,” I whispered against his skin as I kissed down his torso, along the scars. “So perfect. Perfect for me.”

I felt him stroke the back of my head, and then his fingers were in my hair as I trailed further down his body.

I knelt in front of him and peered up, knowing this was the part of him he hated the most. His legs. With both of my hands, I traced delicate, gentle touches up the sides of each leg, and then I stroked my fingers over the scarring, feeling the smoothness and the ridges. The bumps and the lumps. Exploring him, searing every inch of him into my memory. “For as long as I live,” I sighed. “I'll never forget how special this moment has been... seeing you. Loving you.” I kissed his scarred leg, using my lips to show him what he meant to me, peppering his skin with the love I couldn't say. Then I moved to his other leg, kissing over every damaged inch until there wasn't a part of him I hadn't showered with my love.

A game that had started as something sexual had turned into so much more. It was an affirmation. Bonding my soul to his. I knew sex was Zak's love language, but I wanted to make him feel good as he stood exposed to me like this.

I rested back on my heels and gazed up at him as he looked down on me. Then, I took his hard cock in my hand and stroked him, leaning forward to taste him on my tongue.

I heard him hiss and I looked up to see his eyes grow darker as he watched me lick over the head of his cock and then suck it, tasting the sweetness of his precum. I hummed in appreciation and pushed him further into my mouth, using my hand at the base of his shaft to stroke him. My tongue teased as I bobbed my head on his dick, pushing him further and further down my throat.

“Fuck yes,” he growled, finally letting go and grabbing my hair as he thrust his hips slowly into me, pushing himself right down my throat. I moved my hand away from his shaft and wrapped my arms around him, grabbing his ass as he rocked his hips. His cock filled my throat, thrusting slow but hard, and I took it, using my hand to stroke his balls. I loved that I could do this for him, make him feel good while he was being so open to me.

I could feel his cock thicken on my tongue as he started to pant heavier and thrust harder. And through my watery eyes, I watched as he looked down on me, awe and wonder glowing from him. Then suddenly, it all became too much, and he threw his head back, letting out an almighty groan as he came down my throat. I swallowed and kept sucking, wanting to prolong the feeling for him for as long as I could. His hips jerked as he rode the wave of pleasure. And then, he pulled out of me and gestured for me to stand up.

“That was amazing,” he said as he caught his breath. “And now, little kitten, it’s your turn.”

I’d let Zak do anything to me right now. I always would. So, I took his hand as he led me to the bed. And that’s how we finished our night, holding each other, loving each other, being as close as two people could be. Naked. Exposed. But so, so right. I’d asked him to jump with me tonight, and he did. He took that leap, and I would never forget it. A leap of faith that meant the world. This was the beginning of something special.

My forever something.

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TWENTY

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ZAK



She stayed with me for over a week. It surprised me that I loved having her around so much. I'd always preferred my own company. But being with Morgan was effortless, enjoyable, and I wanted to make the most of every minute I had with her. The sunshine to my darkness. She made everything seem less hopeless. She made a future seem possible, exciting, even. And after showing her the real me, I felt more at peace with myself. I would be forever thankful to her for that.

But eventually, life came knocking on our door, interrupting our sacred bubble. She had college to attend, things to do, and I had work. So, reluctantly, I let her go. Days spent growing closer to each other had meant I'd gotten behind with my orders. I was determined to make the most of my day without her and get on top of things.

I was just about to head out to my workshop when I noticed from the corner of my eye that her mobile phone was sitting on the arm of the sofa. I knew she'd need that today, and I could hardly ring her and get her to come back for it. Instead, I rang Emily.

"Hey, Zak," she answered after the first ring. "Are you okay?"

"Yeah, I just wondered if Morgan was there with you." I knew it'd sound suspicious that I was ringing to ask about her sister. "I need to ask her about an order," I lied. It was a feeble excuse, but it was all I could think of to say in the moment.

“Sorry, she’s not here,” Emily replied. “But I can give you her number.” I cursed inwardly. That was no fucking use to me.

“I would take it,” I told her. “But that’s why I’m ringing. She left her phone here earlier.”

“Ah!” Emily had taken the hint. “So, an address might work out better.”

“That’s right.”

I could hear Emily fussing with something on the other end of the phone, and then she said, “I think she might be in lectures today, but I haven’t got anything written on my calendar. I guess you could drop it around here or pop it through her letterbox.”

The letterbox sounded like the better option, so I asked Emily for the address, berating myself that I didn’t know this already. It was just another reminder of how shitty I’d been about this whole arrangement.

“It’s flat twenty-four, Bromford Apartments, Elsmore Crescent,” Emily stated. “And when you’re done there, remember, our door is always open.”

“Thanks,” I said, and hung up.

AN HOUR LATER, I pulled into the car park of her apartment block, scanning the area to see if her car was here, but I couldn’t see it. I took her phone off the dashboard, popped it into my pocket, and then got out of the car, heading towards the double glass doors that led into the building. Once inside, I took the elevator up to the second floor, and then, when the doors opened, I counted the apartments until I found number twenty-four.

I smiled to myself when I saw the little alcove set into the wall next to her apartment door, with a vase I recognised placed in it. I’d notice my work anywhere, and I picked it up

and turned it over in my hands, hearing something tinkle inside as I did.

“I’ve told her it’s a silly place to hide her spare key,” a voice echoed from down the hall.

I looked up to see an old woman watering a plant outside her door.

“She’s not in you know,” the woman said, sounding uninterested, but the way she was watching me as she tilted her watering can said different.

“That’s why I’m using the spare key,” I shot back, and then under my breath, I muttered, “Nosy cow.”

I don’t think I muttered it quietly enough though, because she sniffed and then went back into her apartment, slamming the door as she did.

I tipped the vase up, and the key fell into my hand. There was a nagging little voice in my head, telling me this was wrong, it was an invasion of her privacy, but then, I figured we didn’t have secrets anymore. All I was doing was letting myself in, leaving her phone somewhere she could find it, maybe I could even leave it on charge for her, and then I’d lock up. No big deal. Right?

I unlocked the door and stepped into the small hallway, and the scent of fresh flowers hit me, making me smile. Even when she wasn’t here, she still left a sunny scent behind.

Despite being told by the old lady outside that she wasn’t home, I still called out, “Hello,” just in case.

I was met with silence, so I walked the short distance into her living room.

Everything here looked clean and crisp. There were cream furnishings and walls, so pristine that the room didn’t even look lived in, and then I noticed what sat in the window in pride of place. A familiar amphora vase with an Alice in Wonderland design on it that we’d made and sold quite some time ago.

I frowned, trying to remember when I'd gotten that email to say it'd been bought, and then it hit me.

Finn's wedding.

A nagging doubt scratched away in my brain, but I didn't dwell too much on it. It could just be a coincidence. She'd seen the vase and bought it, not knowing it was ours. Then, after that, she'd visited my workshop and got another one, the one she kept her spare key in. Can't say I remember her taking it, but that was okay. It was no big deal.

I glanced around, looking for her phone charger, but it wasn't plugged into any of the electrical sockets in here. I knew I should leave the phone on the coffee table in the middle of her living room. I knew going into any other room was out of order, but I couldn't help myself. I wanted to know more about the woman who'd steam-rolled into my life and turned everything on its head.

I had to know more.

Ignoring my conscience, I walked forward, opening another door. It led me into a small hallway where the doors to her bathroom and bedroom were. For some reason, I felt nervous poking around in her world without her permission, but I couldn't turn back now. I was committed to seeing this through.

My shoes sank into the plush carpet as I crept towards the first door. I twisted the handle and pushed the door open, and when I saw what was in there, I frowned. Piles and piles of unopened boxes were stacked high, right up to the ceiling. They were about four or five boxes deep, covering the windows, filling the room. I could barely fit in here myself.

I'd expected to find a bedroom behind the door, but not this, whatever this was. Her apartment so far had been immaculately tidy—seems I'd stumbled across her dumping room on the first try.

"So, you're a little hoarder," I whispered to myself, moving closer to the towers of boxes to see what she'd been ordering. "You're keeping Amazon busy, that's for sure."

I smirked, but then, I froze.

A wave of ice-cold shock washed over me, freezing me to the spot. I blinked, rereading the address on the boxes, not quite believing what I was seeing.

This had to be a mistake.

What the hell was this?

Every single parcel stacked up in here was addressed to florapetal.net, that address being a post office box in the city. None of the boxes had been opened, but as I made my way through the room, looking at box after box, I could see that some of these orders were from months ago.

There were thousands of pounds worth of orders in here. I couldn't make sense of it, and as I whispered, "What the fuck?" to myself, a gentle voice from behind me gasped, "What are you doing in here?"

I spun around to find Morgan standing in front of me, a look of utter horror on her face.

"What the fuck is this?" I asked, gesturing to the boxes towering around me. I could feel my anger simmering, bubbling beneath the surface, building with every second that she stood still, silently staring at me. "Answer me!" I shouted, and she jumped, her eyes wide as she held her hands to her chest in fright.

"I don't... I didn't... It's not..."

"It's not what?" I interrupted her.

"It's not what you think." She hung her head and took deep breaths.

"Morgan, you have no idea what twisted shit is going through my head right now." I took a beat to calm myself. "I suggest you tell me why you have all these boxes. Why every order we've busted our asses off to make for this company is sitting unopened in your fucking spare room."

I was panting, my teeth gritted so tightly my jaw ached. I needed some answers right fucking now.

“I never wanted anyone to bust their asses,” she replied pleadingly, her eyes shining with regret.

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“I mean...” Her voice cracked, and she swallowed before speaking again. “I mean, I only wanted to help.”

“What?” I barked. “How?” I lifted my arms up and glanced around the room. “How is this helping?”

“It’s complicated,” she muttered, and my hackles rose even more.

“It’s not fucking complicated. Tell me what’s going on.”

“Okay.” She held her hands up. “But I need you to calm down first. Please calm down and listen.”

I folded my arms over my chest. I wasn’t calm, but I wanted to hear this.

“Go on.”

Her eyes darted about, and she wrung her hands together as if she were trying to decide what to say, where to start, how to spin this so it wouldn’t sound so fucking weird.

“Okay. Here goes.” She took another deep breath then looked up at me. “I own florapetal.net.”

“You own a flower business?”

“Yes. I mean, no.” She rubbed her brow free of the sweat that’d started to gather there. “The business name is mine, but there is no florapetal.net. It’s a fake business.”

I couldn’t believe what I was hearing. I’d done my homework. I’d researched that company name and checked the IP address. But obviously, I hadn’t done enough. I was starting to feel like a fucking fool.

“Why do you have a fake business, Morgan? And why are you using it to con me?”

“I’m not conning you,” she pleaded. “I’m helping you.” I thought she was going to start crying, but she held it together,

taking a moment before she went on. “When my mum died, she left me a lot of money.”

“You’ve already told me that.” I glared at her, rolling my shoulders to try and ease some of the tension building there.

“I know. I did tell you. Yes. I’m sorry...” She was stuttering, fumbling over her words, and I started to wonder what’d happened to the confident girl I knew. The one who stood in front of me only days ago and got me to open up to her so readily. Because the girl standing before me now was a completely different person. “But I also told you,” she carried on. “That I wanted to use it... to do good things for people. When I found out you’d created your business... with Finn, I wanted to help.”

“By creating fake orders? For fuck’s sake, Morgan. If you were that desperate to help us, why didn’t you just invest in the business?” Nothing she was saying was making any sense.

“I didn’t want anyone to know I was helping you,” she shot back.

“But this isn’t helping. Our work is stuck in here, just sitting doing nothing. Why would you waste your money like that?”

She shook her head, and the pity in her eyes made me feel sorry for her. I knew what she was getting at. She wanted us to succeed. She just had a really shitty way of trying to help us with that.

I sighed and tried to put a positive spin on it.

“It’s fine. It’s done. But the fake orders have to stop... right now.” She nodded. “And maybe we can do something with this leftover stock,” I added. “Take them to a market or a craft fair, perhaps. We can sell them. It’s not a total loss.”

“I have more boxes in my garage,” she said, and I threw my head back in exasperation.

“Exactly how many boxes do you have?”

I don’t know why I’d asked that. I already knew the number of orders her fake company had placed, and it was a

lot.

“I don’t know.” She shrugged, dropping her eyes to the side to avoid my gaze. “A few... hundred, maybe.”

“Jesus, Morgan. Why? Why would you do that?”

She started to cry quietly to herself.

“I wanted to—”

“Don’t say you wanted to help,” I snapped back. “There’s helping and then there’s this. This is next level shit. It’s borderline stalking. It’s not right.” She sniffed and nodded sadly. “Did you do this with Ryan’s kit car business? Or Brandon’s company? Have you been bankrolling them too?” She shook her head, and the look of guilt hit me. “Then why our business?”

Her hands were shaking, and she covered her face, chanting over and over, “I can’t, I can’t.”

“You can’t what?” I urged. “Tell me.”

She took her hands from her face, her eyes streaming with tears as she cried, “I can’t tell you why.”

A ball of fear hit my stomach hard. My nerves were shredded, and my anger barely contained, but I wasn’t leaving this apartment without answers.

“You either tell me, or I’ll walk away, and we will never see each other again. I mean it, Morgan. Talk.”

She hiccupped as the tears stained her cheeks, her whole body quivering as she whispered, “I... I’m... I’m so sorry, Zak.”

“Why? Why did you do this?”

“I... It was...”

“What?”

Her eyes bugged out of her head, and her breaths turned to ragged pants. So, I stepped forward, ready to take her in my arms. I was sure she was about to hyperventilate, and the urge

to calm her down overrode every other emotion I was currently drowning in.

But then, as she spoke her next words, I felt myself shutting down.

Everything was happening in slow motion.

I'd been standing on a cliff, goading the rocks to break free under me, and now that they were, I couldn't take the brutality of the fall.

"It was me," she sobbed. "I started the fire."

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TWENTY-ONE

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MORGAN



Imagine every nightmare you've ever had, all rolled into one twisted horror scene of pure hideousness, and you still wouldn't be close to feeling what I was feeling in this moment.

I knew I'd have to tell him eventually. And I knew when I did, he'd leave me. But I thought I'd have more time. Yes, I was living a life of lies, existing on borrowed time, but I wanted to savour it. Take every scrap of happiness I could before it all ended.

The time I'd had, it hadn't been enough, but I couldn't lie to him anymore. I had to own up to what I'd done.

"It was me," I sobbed, feeling the pain of a thousand knives twisting in my heart, making it impossible to breathe. "I started the fire."

He stood still, staring at me. I thought maybe he hadn't heard me.

God, don't make me say it again, please.

I went to speak, the urge for him to say something back burning deep inside of me.

"I..."

"I heard what you said," he snapped, then sneering, he asked, "Is this a fucking joke?"

I twisted my hands together, my mind a fucking mess.

"No. I wish it was."

The deep creases on his forehead and the way he narrowed his gaze, scrutinizing me as if he either didn't believe it or simply didn't want to believe it, made the bottom fall out of my world. My whole body shook with nerves.

How are you supposed to react when your whole life comes crashing down around you?

I didn't know, but it was clear there was no coming back from this.

"I can explain," I pleaded, every fibre of my being begging him to stay and listen. I doubted he'd accept what I told him, but I had to try.

"I highly fucking doubt that," he cut in, venom dripping from every word. Then he huffed out a deep breath, and without looking my way, he stalked past me, heading into my living room.

I didn't expect him to stay. I couldn't really blame him for wanting to leave. But when I turned and walked back into my living room, I found him sitting on the sofa, his head hung low, and his hands fisted between his knees as he leaned forward.

"Well then," he hissed, peering up at me through hate-fuelled eyes. "Talk."

The ache in my throat made me question whether I'd be able to get through this. But I had to. I owed him that much.

I swallowed, trying to wet my sandpaper-lined mouth and throat, and then I slowly lowered myself into the armchair opposite.

"I don't know where to start. It's all such a mess." I wanted to reach out and touch him, soothe the pain I could see etched across his face.

But when he scowled at me and said, "The beginning would be a fucking good place, don't you think?" Cocking his head and gritting his teeth, I nodded.

Here goes nothing.

Or everything.

Whichever way you looked at it.

“Before I start,” I began to explain. “I need you to remember I was a different person back then.”

“I think I’ll be the judge of that,” he shot back cruelly. “From what I can tell, you’ve destroyed my fucking life, and now you’re revelling in the spoils of your evil deeds.”

“And I don’t blame you for thinking that,” I said through the tears that I was holding back. “But I didn’t mean for it to happen. I didn’t expect any of it to happen.” Then under my breath, I added, “I’m not evil.”

There was a moment’s silence as we sat facing each another. The ticking from the clock on the mantelpiece was the only sound I could hear, that and the ringing in my ears brought on by the stress of it all. It was a dismal soundtrack, counting down the seconds until my freefall into a fate of loneliness and despair. And it was all my fault.

“I didn’t have the best childhood.”

“You’ve told me that already,” he interrupted, then clamped his mouth shut to let me finish.

“But my parents, and what they taught me, it was all I knew. I had no friends. No other family members. Everything I learned, I learned from them. Everything I understood about the world was what they’d told me. I suppose, in a way, you could say I was conditioned. Conditioned to be the person they wanted me to be.” I hung my head. “Even abusers are loved by the abused, and that’s what it was like for me. They might’ve been cruel, but they were still my parents. They were my everything.”

I breathed in, trying to formulate the right words in my brain to make him understand. I couldn’t bear to look at him though. I didn’t want the hate in his eyes to cut my wounds even deeper. I was hurting enough already.

“That night, when you invited us to the community centre to see my father, she thought it was going to be the night that’d change everything. My mother thought you were officials from his office and that finally he’d stand up and acknowledge

her, let the world know that we existed. It's the only reason she let me tag along. I know you'd sent the invite to both of us, but normally, she wouldn't have taken me to something like that. But this was different. She was convinced it was her time to shine."

I took another breath to steady myself.

"But it wasn't like that, was it?" I continued. "You got us there under false pretences, and then you put the spotlight on us. You exposed his lying and cheating, the illegal stuff he was doing, the money laundering and what he'd done to Danny. And then you exposed us. Like the filthy, dirty secret we were. You shone the light on both of us and left us to be ridiculed by the people around us. By everyone in that town. You lit a fuse that shattered my life... and it didn't stop on that night. After his arrest, we got hate mail and death threats. People put all sorts through our letterbox. Dog shit, bullets, someone even threw a brick through the car windscreen with the message 'whores' attached. It destroyed her. It destroyed both of us.

"We lived in fear in this apartment. But my mum wouldn't leave. She refused. She still visited him every week in prison. She'd never give up on him or the lies he'd fed her about the life they'd both have when he got out. Even after everything you'd laid out in front of her, all the truths you shoved down our throat, she still lived in her fractured reality of false hope.

"I guess my mother was the lucky one. She had her dreams. And me? I had nothing but anger, confusion, and hate. I couldn't understand what I'd done to deserve that. Why were we getting so much hate, living in fear, scared to open the door, the post, even scared to answer the bloody phone... and all because my mum had fallen for the wrong guy. It was as if we'd committed his crimes. We were living like fugitives, murderers waiting for the guillotine that hung over us like a shadow of doom ready to cut us down at any moment."

I paused, but I still couldn't look at him. I had no idea if he was beginning to understand any of what I was saying. Everything had been so confusing back then.

Was any of this resonating with him?

“My life ended that night at Sandland Community Centre,” I whispered into the room. “It wasn’t worth living. People wanted me dead, and I wanted that too. But then, a part of me was curious. Perversely so. I wanted to see what impact it’d had on all of you. Were you suffering as much as I was? Did you have hate mail and death threats rammed through your doors too?”

“So, one day, I snuck out of the apartment when my mum was stuck in one of her depressive states, bound to her bed, sleeping and ignoring the outside world. I came to find you, and I watched you. I watched all of you. But it wasn’t the same. Far from it. You were all living your lives as if nothing had ever happened. You *had* lives, and I had nothing. Emily was living with Ryan. They were happy. They had everything to live for. Finn had Effy. Even Brandon had found someone to love him. And you? You were walking around Sandland like you didn’t have a care in the world. I couldn’t even show my face. It wasn’t fair. And I hated you. I hated all of you.”

I could feel the anger from years ago flickering back to life inside me, so I took a moment to compose myself and fight it down.

“That day, I decided I needed to get revenge for my own sanity. I had to do something to ease the pain I constantly felt. You were running events, people adored you, and I was hated for just existing. The bastard daughter of a thief who’d wronged a community. His sins were ours. Mine.

“I saw how people spoke about you all, revered you. You were untouchable. And it was like a virus had invaded my soul, growing and multiplying until all I could think about was how to make people see you for what you were. You weren’t Gods of Sandland. You were men who’d done a wicked thing to my family and then walked away from the rubble like it was a fucking disaster movie. Leaving me and my mum to pick up the pieces.”

“It wasn’t like that,” he muttered, his voice laced with regret. But I kept my head down. My emotions were too raw for me to look up. I needed to get to the end of my story.

“I know that now. But back then, I was consumed by hate. I wanted to wreck your worlds, like you’d wrecked mine. But I need you to understand, in all my anger and hate, all the fury I felt, I never meant to hurt anyone. Not really. I just wanted to do something to rattle your perfect worlds. Bring your events to a stop. You were partying in the wake of my tears, and it felt cruel. Like you were mocking me.”

“We should’ve reached out to you,” he said. “Apologised. Checked that you were okay.”

I lifted my head slightly and watched as he sunk back into the sofa and ran his hands over his face. He was listening, and he was hearing what I was trying to say. That’s all I could ask for right now.

“Emily did,” I replied. “She reached out, but I wasn’t in the right headspace to meet her halfway. I didn’t want to hear what I thought would be excuses. I didn’t trust her back then.”

I closed my eyes and rubbed my hands over my thighs, readying myself to take a step back to a time that haunted me every single day, but one that I’d worked so hard to try and reconcile in my mind.

“I’d heard you were putting on an event at the old plastics factory, and I went to check out the building beforehand to see the layout. I’d decided I was going to start a fire in a side room off the main area.” I heaved a sigh, struggling to relive this nightmare. “It was only meant to ruin your night. I thought people would leave, your reputation would be shattered, and the fire would just burn out. I never expected it to take off like it did, and I never thought it’d spread so fast. I was stupid, reckless. But I wasn’t evil. I really wasn’t,” I begged, hoping he’d believe me.

“But you just stood there on the field out the back, watching the carnage you’d caused?” he spat.

“No. I swear I didn’t. I was there too. I stayed in the building. I couldn’t leave when people were still in there, frightened, scared, running to get away and petrified they’d be trapped and die.”

The next part of the story was something I hadn't told a soul. It'd stayed locked in my brain for over five years. But now it was time to open the Pandora's box in my mind. It was time to face the truth.

"I saw you." I spoke so quietly I could barely hear my own words. "You were on the floor in the main area, you couldn't get up. There was some sort of wooden beam trapping your legs, pinning you in place, but I couldn't leave you. I grabbed your arms and tried to pull you free, but I wasn't strong enough. I couldn't do anything."

I swallowed to try and wet my dry throat. This was harder than I'd ever imagined.

"I felt that," he whispered in disbelief, and I peered up at him. "That was you?" Then he frowned in disbelief. "Why weren't you injured like me if you were there too?"

"I was wearing a mask. It didn't really help though. I was still admitted to hospital for smoke inhalation."

"Poor you," he sneered back, and I didn't like it. I knew he was beyond angry, but I needed him to see this from another perspective... mine.

"I know I deserved to suffer," I told him, knowing my pleas were pointless, but I still had to make them. "I wish I'd come out of that building with burns too, or better yet, that I didn't come out of it at all."

He remained silent as I let the enormity of what I was sharing sink in for both of us. Nothing would make this right, but the truth had to be told. I couldn't live with the guilt or hide it any longer. I'd been a coward for long enough.

Slowly, he shook his head and muttered under his breath, "I'd always thought I'd imagined it. But I felt it, that pull on my arms."

"I couldn't move you," I told him with regret. "I tried so hard, but I couldn't. I ran to the nearest exit and got the emergency services to follow me back in. They tried to grab me, shouting for me to stop, but I didn't. I led them to you." My breaths were ragged now. It was all spilling out of me like

a purge. “And I don’t expect you to feel grateful to me for that. I caused the fire. It was my fault, all of it. I tried to save your life, but all I did was obliterate it. And that is something”—my voice cracked under the pressure—“I’ll never get over. I’ll live the rest of my life knowing I’m the reason you’re in so much pain. I’m the one who stole everything from you.”

The clock continued to tick on the mantelpiece. The wind outside whistled through the windows and walls. And we sat there, neither of us able to speak.

Eventually, Zak was the first to break the painful silence.

“I don’t know what I’m supposed to say. I don’t know what you want from me?”

“I don’t want anything.” I faltered. “All I’ve ever wanted is to do whatever I could to put right my wrongs.”

“By throwing money at my business and jumping onto my lap at a wedding? Did you think sex would solve this?”

“No,” I said, pleading with him. “There hasn’t been a day since that fire where I haven’t done something to try and make amends.”

“You can’t make amends for something like that, Morgan.”

“But I tried,” I cried. “You haunted me, Zak. Your voice, the cries, the screams. All of it haunted me, and the life I’d led before, the one I thought you’d destroyed, it really was over. Nothing mattered to me after that. Only you.”

He thought he’d heard it all, but there was so much more to my story. Things I’d never told anyone.

“You were in the burns unit at the hospital,” I went on. “And they said only immediate family could visit. So, I told them I was your sister. I waited for those moments when your family would take a break, and I’d sneak into your room to sit with you. I didn’t ever want you to be alone. A few times, your family came back in and saw me there, but I told them I was a support worker, employed by the hospital to sit with the patients. I guess they were so consumed by grief, they never thought to question it. But I was there, Zak. I held your hand, and I prayed every goddamn day for you to get through it. I

told you how sorry I was, and I pleaded with God to help you, to give you the strength you'd need to fight. The strength to fight the pain I'd given you."

He looked straight at me now, his mouth open slightly as he took in what I was saying.

"You were there?" He frowned, his eyes narrowed on me.

"I was always there. At the hospital when you were in the burns unit. In the rehab facility when you were going through physio. When you were discharged, and you moved out of your old flat and bought your house in Willowbrook. I was there through it all."

"What?" He winced as if he was feeling the ghost of the pain from long ago. "I just can't get my head around all of this. It's a lot to take in."

I felt so much for him in that moment. I wanted to move to sit next to him. Take him in my arms and let him know it was a monumental pile of shit, but we could work through this. There could be a happy ending. He deserved that. But when I went to get up, his head shot up, and a look of pure panic crossed his face.

"The rehab centre?" he asked, his brow etched with confusion. "What happened at the rehab centre?"

I braced myself to open my heart even wider, spilling all my truths and bleeding out in the process.

In hospital, I'd held his hand as he lay in a coma. But at the rehab centre, I'd seen him broken, crying, screaming, and I'd screamed right along with him.

"When they moved you there, I worried I wouldn't see you anymore, or find out how you were getting on... so I got a job, cleaning at the centre."

"You worked there?" The level of disbelief on his face grew with every truth I told.

"Yes. I worked there all through your care."

"And you watched me?" He looked apprehensive now.

“I watched over you. It wasn’t anything creepy. I promise.”

He shifted in his seat, his jaw ticking as he tried to compose himself.

“I wasn’t at my best back then,” he said. “It was a difficult time.” Then he glared up at me. “You had no right to intrude on that. I don’t even like thinking about those days myself, let alone knowing you were there and saw it all too.”

I understood where he was coming from. But I also saw how hard he could be on himself. Zak was his own cheerleader, and his worst enemy all rolled into one.

“What you remember and what I saw are two completely different things. Do you want to know what I saw? What I heard in the staffroom from the people who worked closest with you?”

He didn’t nod at first, instead he hugged his arms around himself and shook his head.

“I don’t know.” He huffed out a long breath and threw his head back. “I don’t know anything anymore.”

“Then let me tell you what *I* know,” I said, determined to twist his altered memories into something he could be proud of. “Every day I’d hear the staff talking about the exercises they had planned for you. How they’d told you it’d be tough, it’d be painful, it’d push you to your limits and test you beyond belief. And every day you got up, you took what they threw at you, and you fought. They pushed you and you pushed back harder. But you wouldn’t give yourself a break. You were convinced that what you were doing was never enough. Everyone has their own journey, and no two paths to recovery are the same, but you taunted yourself, convinced yourself you were failing. They worried about you. And I did too.”

“The staff were amazing.” He sighed to himself. “They gave me the tools to pick myself up again. Eventually.”

“Yes, they did. But you were the one who used those tools. You took what they gave you and you crawled your way to recovery. Every step, every lift, every exercise you did was

because you pushed yourself. They encouraged you, helped and supported you, but it was your strength that got you there.”

He sat speechless, contemplating what I’d said.

“I know I did an awful, wicked thing.” I stared at my hands as I spoke. “But from the moment that fire took hold, I spent every minute of my life trying to make it better. I know that sounds feeble. Nothing could make it better, but I had to try. When Mum passed and she left me all that money she’d saved, I knew I had to use that too.”

I stopped to take a breath as my truths settled around us like fallen ashes. Then Zak sat forward.

“You destroyed my life, but you tried to save me. You stalked me in the hospital and rehab, and then you manipulated my business.”

“Stalking sounds wrong, and I didn’t manipulate you, it wasn’t like that.”

We were going around in circles. I don’t think he saw it the same way that I did. I wasn’t sure he ever would.

“I can’t take this in.” He stood up, and the reality that he was about to leave, probably for good, turning his back on me to never see me again, made me feel sick with regret. Lost and hopeless.

“I know it’s a lot, and it’ll take time—” I begged him as he retreated, but he cut me off.

“I need to leave. Please don’t call me.”

His steps were unsure at first, and I thought maybe he might turn back around and say something else to me, tell me he didn’t mean it, that it’d all be okay, but he didn’t. He got to the doorway, and then, dropping his shoulders, he sighed, opened the door and left. Leaving me with the weight of my remorse and a painful hole in my heart. A hole he’d ripped out and taken with him. A hole that I knew would never fully heal.

TWENTY-TWO

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ZAK



I walked away from her in a daze, feeling like I'd survived a nuclear attack, and now I didn't know what to do with myself. I wanted to hate her, but I couldn't. If I was honest, I didn't know what I felt, but it wasn't hate.

Pity?

Maybe.

Confusion?

Certainly.

Disappointment? Complete and utter devastation?

Definitely.

And in many ways, that was worse than outright hate.

All these years, I'd wondered what I did to deserve being targeted, injured, and forced to live this haunting half-life.

Why me?

We'd all been there that day. We'd all exposed her father.

Why did I have to be the one to suffer?

Memories from my recovery came back to me as I walked away, flooding my brain with a patchwork of emotions. My time in the hospital, when I had to come to terms with what had happened. I couldn't accept it back then. I'd refused to look at myself and my scars. I'd avoided mirrors. All I wanted to do was block it out. I didn't want to see it. The victim lying in the hospital bed, that wasn't me. The scars on my body, they

weren't mine. It took me so long to accept what I saw. If I was honest, maybe I still didn't accept it, but it was me. It was what I had to live with.

Then flashes of rehab filtered through. The frustration that everything was moving so slowly; that my recovery made a fucking snail look like Speedy Gonzales. How pointless it all felt and how I'd cry every day wondering why I was doing this. Why not just give up? I wanted to die, and I felt angry that I'd survived to be left with a life filled with nothing but pain. I'd be better off dead. I'd be less of a burden to everyone. And then, I'd see the other patients around me. People with burns a lot worse than mine, burns that scarred their whole face. Soldiers with missing limbs who seemed to have an inbuilt determination to power through, and it made me feel guilty. I still had all my limbs. My burns could be covered with clothes. They had it worse than I did, and yet, seeing their strength made me feel even shittier about wallowing in self-pity. I was stuck in a vicious circle of shame and regret.

For years I battled, learning to be me again, or a version of me that I could live with. I had good days and bad, but eventually, I'd learned to accept my scars and try not to let them define me. I hated socialising because I didn't want to be stared at and I struggled to answer the questions people always asked. I didn't want to be seen. I wanted to fade into the background. I'd tried the therapy the doctors referred me to, and eventually, I'd found pottery. Pottery made me feel good about myself. It was something for me. Something I could lose myself in. I thought I was talented, successful, but now it felt like everything was a lie. She'd paid for my success. Her money made me feel in demand, but I wasn't. She'd made me feel attractive, wanted, but that wasn't true either. She was righting her wrongs; she'd said that herself. I was the pity fuck. Something I never thought I'd be.

Or was I?

I couldn't make sense of anything, so I got in my car and drove home, not even registering that I was driving. I was on automatic pilot, and I just needed to get to my safe space. My haven in Willowbrook.

Once home, I locked the door and sat on the sofa, staring into the room in silence. I didn't want to go to my workshop. I didn't want to do anything. I felt numb.

Later that night, as I lay on the sofa with my thoughts, my phone rang, and Emily's name popped up on the screen. I let it ring out and saw that she'd left me a voice message. I wasn't going to listen, but then curiosity got the better of me and I clicked play.

"Zak, are you okay? What's going on? Morgan turned up here earlier today and she hasn't stopped crying. I can't get any sense out of her, but I'm guessing it's something to do with you. I know you've been seeing each other... and don't worry, I haven't told Ryan or anyone else. Just... call me. Please. I want to know you're okay. I'm here for you too."

I threw my phone down and squeezed my eyes shut. I wasn't ready to face the world or talk to anyone. But then it struck me how persistent Emily was. If I didn't do something she'd be turning up on my doorstep. So, I typed out a text.

ME

We argued. I think it's best she tells you why. I'm okay. I'll call you soon.

My fingers hovered over the screen, and then I added,

Is she okay?

And I pressed send before I started second-guessing everything and deleted the damn thing.

The dots on her end danced around to tell me she was replying.

EMILY

Okay. I'm here if you need me. Morgan is staying with us tonight. She's upset, but she'll be okay. I'll keep you posted. Love you. X

I turned my phone off. I'd responded, and that was enough. Hearing she was upset made my chest contract and sting in pain, but we had to have space. Emotions were too heightened right now. We wouldn't be able to reconcile anything. We needed... well, I needed time to digest it all.

A lingering voice in my brain started to repeat over and over, 'She's upset. She hasn't stopped crying', and I thought to myself, maybe I was harsh to think she'd duped me or made me her pity fuck. That wasn't who she was. The Morgan I knew wouldn't do that. But then, another voice echoed, 'But who is she then? Do you really know the real Morgan Rotherham? All you've seen is what she wanted you to see.'

I was so confused.

I didn't know what to believe.

I fell asleep that night on my sofa, dreaming of sunshine eyes and tender touches that brought me back to life. Then I spiralled into a nightmare of heat, smoke, and the unbearable pain of choking on the filthy acrid air around me. The feeling that I was drowning, being pulled under before getting spat out again, made me wake up with a start, panting and covered in sweat. Old wounds I thought were closed had been wrenched open, and now I was bleeding out with no idea how to stop it. It was like I'd been hurtled back to that time of misery and hopelessness all over again. And I didn't know if I would survive it a second time. I didn't know if I had the strength to even try.

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TWENTY-THREE

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ZAK



SUNSHINE

I'm so sorry.

SUNSHINE

And sorry won't ever cut it, I know that. But I am.

SUNSHINE

If I could change the world for you, I'd do it in a heartbeat. You didn't deserve any of this.

I didn't respond to any of her messages. I couldn't.

For days, I lost myself in my work, focusing on my pottery and the sculpture I was creating. It was my passion piece. I hadn't decided what to do with it yet, but right now, it was the only thing that let me switch off. I say switch off, but what she'd done never left my mind completely. My work was a distraction but only fleetingly.

When I thought about Morgan and the fire, my feelings kept altering.

Yesterday, I was drowning under the weight of regret. We'd made such a mess of our lives. How had it got to this? Everything was so fucked up. Why did it have to happen like this? It all felt so unfair.

Today, I felt hurt.

Hurt that she'd lied to me, hidden her secret for so many years. She'd duped my friends and led me to believe she was someone she wasn't. Harsh, I know, but that's how I felt.

Tomorrow, I'd probably be back in the swamp of self-pity. I couldn't second-guess what I'd feel next, but I was tired, bone tired from trying to smother my emotions and not let them consume me.

SUNSHINE

You'll always be my happiest memory and my biggest regret.

Her messages were killing me, like little knives of guilt stabbing at my already broken heart. But there was nothing I could say to her yet that would make this better. I didn't have the words.

I sat up, night after night, analysing what'd happened. And I got it. In a way, I understood why she did what she did. Life had been cruel to her, and so were we, but it didn't excuse the decisions she'd made afterwards. Here, there were no rights or wrongs, just disaster after disaster, snowballing until it'd become this monumental boulder that neither of us could break. All we could do was brace ourselves as it hurtled into our lives and wrecked everything in its path.

Why hadn't she gone to the police?

Because she was scared. She didn't want to go to prison.

Why didn't she tell Emily?

Because Emily is the only family she has left now, and she didn't want to lose that. After a shitty childhood, she'd finally found someone who was on her side, who loved her unconditionally. Why would she sacrifice that?

Why had she targeted me the way she had?

The questions and answers, arguments and excuses whirled in my mind, driving me to distraction, and I was just about to mull over them some more when I heard the door to

the workshop open behind me. I turned to find Emily standing on the threshold with a forlorn look.

“You’re not answering your phone.” She greeted me with an admonishing half-smile and cautiously stepped into my space.

“I never answer my phone,” I replied abruptly.

I knew why she was here, and I had my guard up. My defences were locked and loaded.

She heaved a weary breath and sat down in one of my office chairs. I continued standing where I was, my eyes fixed on the sculpture in front of me, trying to focus on how to get the right effect on the clay and not feel overwhelmed by my panicked thoughts at her being here.

“Zak, we’re all worried about you.” She had kindness and empathy in her voice, but that was the last thing I wanted from her. “I know what’s happened, but you can’t keep locking yourself away like this. You need your friends around you. Now especially.”

“Has she told you everything?” I turned, waiting to see the reaction on her face, and when her eyes softened and dipped to the floor, the hint of a grimace ghosting over her face and then disappearing as soon as it came, I knew she had. Emily was trying to hide her disappointment, but she couldn’t hide it that well.

“Yes.” She spoke so quietly I almost didn’t hear her. Then she cleared her throat and looked up at me with the dogged determination I’d come to know her for.

Emily oozed empathy from every pore, but the thing was, she had it for everyone. She’d see both sides, accept them, and then try to console everyone. But sometimes, it was the grey areas in-between that were the hardest to come to terms with. That was where the true danger lay. Nothing was black and white; not even Emily and her good intentions could change that.

I turned away and carried on moulding my sculpture.

“Then you’ll know why I don’t want to talk about it,” I stated, using my fingers to distract me, pushing and twisting the clay until I grew agitated that it wasn’t working the way I wanted it to, and I cursed, “For fuck’s sake,” before grabbing a cloth from the side to wipe my hands. I was too wired to focus.

“If you need help with that, why don’t you ask Finn? Or you could call Liv, she has a few friends who are artists,” Emily said, and my hackles rose at her attempt to meddle in my work as well as my private life.

“I don’t need any help,” I snapped back. “Not with my work and not with my fucking life either.”

“Ignoring it won’t make it go away, Zak. None of this is going away. It’s messy and awful but we need to deal with it. We need to talk about it.”

Anger I couldn’t fight anymore surged through me, and I threw the cloth I was holding across the room. “What the *hell* do you want me to do?” I shouted, dropping down hard into a chair, every muscle growing tense as I tried not to lose my shit with the wrong person, but I was failing miserably.

“I want you to talk to me,” Emily urged. “Or Ryan. Anyone. But don’t lock yourself away. Hiding here with your thoughts, letting them fester and grow until they become so big you can’t control your anger, that’s only going to hurt you more. None of us want to see you going through that.”

“So, what do you suggest?” I said in exasperation. “Do you think I should just shrug it off? Act like nothing happened? Forgive her for ruining my FUCKING LIFE like it was nothing?” I knew I was losing control. The erratic nature of my thoughts and emotions made it hard to rein myself in. This was why I didn’t want to see anyone. I was better on my own. I could handle my emotions better if I didn’t have to face them.

“No. That’s not what I’m saying, and it’s not what she’d want either.” Her calm and measured voice was in stark contrast to my own aggressive tone.

“It could have been any one of us in that building,” I said, trying to temper my rage. “She could’ve killed Ryan, you, anyone. I was lucky to get out alive. Some days I wish I hadn’t.” She winced as I said that last part, but I didn’t care.

The last few days spent mulling over everything had made me swing from pity to anger faster than a fucking pendulum. I hated it. I needed to get back to the numb state I’d lived in before. I needed to get back the life I’d had before Morgan fucking Rotherham crashed into it with her sunshine and treachery. A life where I didn’t have to feel.

“She knows she fucked up,” Emily replied. “Look, I’m not going to gloss over it and say we’ve all forgiven her. What she did was wrong. Hiding it was awful. She did something terrible, unspeakable, but we can’t make it unforgiveable. We just can’t. Everyone deserves a second chance... eventually. She knows it’s going to take time for us to accept what’s happened. And I’m not here to argue her side, although I am standing by her... she’s my sister.” Her voice broke as she struggled to get her words out.

“Then why are you here?” I was frowning so hard my head was hurting. I just wanted it all to stop. For Emily to leave so I could bury myself in work again and not have to think about what a mess my life was.

“I’m here because I want to make sure you’re okay.”

I paused, choosing my words carefully.

“*Okay?*” I cocked my brow. “How could I ever be okay after all this?”

She sighed and gave a slow, meaningful nod.

“I can understand you feeling like that. It’s going to take time for all of us.”

But she only lied to you. She did so much more to me.

“Does Ryan feel the same?” I asked, wanting to gauge the reaction from the others.

“He’s struggling. He wanted to come today, but I begged him not to. I wanted it to be just us. I didn’t want Ryan’s

feelings to fan the flames of your own.”

“So, he feels the same as me?”

“I don’t know, Zak. Why don’t you tell me how you feel?”

I took a moment to compose myself. The jumble of emotions inside me threatened to tumble out like a waterfall of angst, confusion, and hurt. I was worried I wouldn’t even make sense when I did speak. I was so mixed up.

“I feel betrayed,” I said, hanging onto my composure by a well-worn thread. “I feel humiliated, hurt, used, angry, and... lost.” The last word surprised me, but it’d come from my heart. I couldn’t stop it spilling out any more than I could’ve stopped the other words. I did feel lost. Lost in life. Lost in my emotions. And if I was truly honest with myself, lost without her.

Emily nodded slowly and bit her lip in thought. “Please don’t come at me for what I’m about to say, but I need to say this.”

“Go on,” I urged, sitting forward in my seat.

“All those words you’ve just said, they’re all the same words Morgan used to describe how she’d felt after what happened at the community centre, when she found out about Dad and his lies. That’s the way we all made her feel. And I’m not saying that to guilt trip you. I just want you to see it from her perspective.”

I stiffened, hearing her twist my words to form a defence annoyed me.

“But the difference is,” I snapped. “I’m not going to charge off and set fire to a fucking building to make myself feel better.”

I’d heard Morgan’s side of the story, and I got where she was coming from, but that fucking pendulum of doom, the one playing tricks with my brain, kept reminding me that she’d had a choice that night, and with choices come consequences. Consequences that I was stuck living with for the rest of my miserable fucking life.

“You would never do what she did,” Emily pointed out. “Because you were brought up to know right from wrong. Your family gave you morals and principles. So, when life rose up to bite you on the ass, you had better ways to bite it right back. You’re a fighter. But back then, she didn’t have that.”

I was a fighter. Now, I felt like a failure.

“You don’t need to make excuses for her. I’ve heard it all from Morgan herself.” I hung my head, the tiredness making it hard to sit here and listen to any more of this.

“I’m not making excuses; I’m giving you facts.” Emily paused, placed her hands carefully in her lap, and after a beat, she spoke in a lower, more soothing tone. “Her actions back then weren’t right; she knows that. I guess what I’m trying to say is, don’t hate the sinner, hate the sin.”

I peered up at her, every breath like a piercing ache in my chest.

“That’s a really big ask.”

And it was one I was fighting with on a daily, if not hourly, basis.

“I get that,” Emily stated. “And it’s something I’m struggling with too. I’m angry that she didn’t tell me the truth, but at the same time, I understand how frightened she was to talk about it. It took so much for her to tell us.”

“Do you think she’d have ever admitted it if I hadn’t shown up at her apartment that day?” The thought that I could’ve built a new life with her and never known what she had done troubled me. Could she ever be trusted?

“I think she would’ve,” Emily replied with quiet confidence. “I think living with her guilt was becoming impossible.”

From what she’d told me, guilt was all she’d known. It’d totally consumed her life. Where I’d had bitterness, she’d had guilt that she’d clung to like a fucking security blanket.

“A guilt she kept to herself for five fucking years,” I reminded Emily.

“A pain she suffered for five years.”

I huffed and shook my head; we were going around in circles, and I was exhausted.

“*I had pain. Pain she gave me. You can’t compare what I suffered with what she went through.*”

“I’m not trying to do that,” Emily shot back. “Nothing could compare to what you went through.” She sighed and pinched the bridge of her nose to try and soothe the tension. “We’re going back to therapy, Morgan and I, and together, we’re going to learn to come to terms with this, if we can. I think therapy might be something that could help you too. I think you need to talk to a professional, Zak. All of this has opened old wounds for you that I don’t think had ever really healed.”

“I don’t need to see a therapist,” I snapped defensively.

“Why not? There’s no shame in it.”

“There’s no fucking point to it, either,” I bellowed, heat burning my cheeks as I argued back.

“I think there is. I don’t think you’ve ever got over what happened to you. You’ve worked really hard to move on with your life, and you put on a good show for the world, on the rare occasions you put yourself out there, but it’s not real, is it? A lot of it is just that... a show.”

I held my tongue, angry that what started as a check-on-Zak visit was turning into a bash-Zak’s-coping-methods visit.

“And I truly believe,” Emily went on. “That you won’t really be able to move forward until you’ve made peace with your past. An awful, hideous thing happened to you. It changed everything, your hopes and dreams, your goals in life. It set you on a path you didn’t choose. It wasn’t fair. I’m so glad you found art to help you channel some of your energies and bring purpose back to your life. You’re so talented. But you turned your back on other things you were good at, like music, deejaying...”

“I didn’t want to do those things anymore,” I cut in. “I didn’t want to just slot back into my old life like nothing had happened. Those things, they didn’t make me happy anymore. They just reminded me what I’d lost.”

“I get that,” she replied. “I know there are still wars you’re fighting even today. Battles and wars you don’t need to fight alone. You have friends, family, people who want to help you. Please, Zak, let them try. That’s all I’m asking.”

My heart was beating out of my chest, and my hands fisted so tightly I could’ve given Brandon a run for his money in the boxing ring.

“I get what you’re saying, but I don’t need your help,” I stated clearly.

“We all need help,” she said, her eyes pleading with me to change my mind.

I shrugged.

“I don’t know. Maybe I do need to work a little harder on myself.”

She smiled kindly back at me.

“Work on not being so hard on yourself.”

“But I can’t brush it all under the carpet,” I interjected. “I can’t pretend what she did was nothing. Because of her, I live in a body I despise.”

“And because of her, you began to open up. She showed you you’re worthy of love.”

I snapped my mouth shut, afraid of what I might say next.

What Emily was saying was right. Morgan had made me look differently at myself. With her, I’d started to hope that maybe I wasn’t this deformed, disfigured blight on society that needed to hide away. A monster of a man that let the pain inside turn him into a snarling, unapproachable demon. I thought I was better away from everyone else. I didn’t want my darkness to drag everyone down.

But she didn’t see that.

She saw beauty, at least that's what she'd told me, and I'd started to believe her.

God, how I'd wanted to believe her.

"She knows you need time," Emily added, seeing my temper change and my mood soften. "And she's trying to give it to you. I know she's messaged you and you haven't responded—"

"I don't know what to say to her," I added, interrupting her.

"I know. I don't think you have to say anything," Emily replied. "Give it time. Everything is raw right now. Take time for you, and when you feel ready, we'll all be here. But please, think about seeing someone. The right counsellor could help you so much."

She stood up and then turned to leave.

"Whatever you decide to do," she said over her shoulder. "It will be the right decision. Whether that's walking away and starting a new life without her or taking the time to find your way back to her, however long it takes. And I know she'll wait forever."

I didn't reply. I just sat and watched Emily walk away, closing the door behind her. Decisions needed to be made, but I felt too confused to make them.

Later that night, I stood naked in my bathroom in front of the full-length mirror. It wasn't the first time I'd done this, looking at myself to assess what I saw. But before, it'd always been with a harsher, more critical eye. I preferred to avoid mirrors at all costs, and in the past, I'd occasionally forced myself to look at my reflection as a kind of purge. Hoping that maybe the more I stared at it, the more I'd accept it. And to a degree, I did.

But tonight, I regarded myself with a different mindset. I wanted to find something to like about myself, instead of focusing on what I hated. I tilted my head to the side so I could clearly see the mottled skin at the base of my neck. Then I let my eyes sweep down my body as I studied the different shades

and tones of my skin, the ridges and bumps, the smoothness and shine. I'd painted one side of my body in tattoos, using a tattoo artist I'd grown to trust over the years because I wanted to take back ownership of my body. I'd wanted to create my own art. But as I stood in front of the mirror and traced my fingers over my scars, I realised I'd been trying to cover up something I'd never be able to hide.

This was me.

This was who I was now.

I had scars and they'd always be there.

Battle scars.

I'd lived a life and I'd survived.

What could be more important than that?

It was time to stop hating my body for what it'd been through. Time to appreciate it for what it was and how it'd saved me.

I took a deep breath, and placing my hands on the glass, I leaned forward and stared at my reflection.

This has to stop, I told myself.

Accept who you are now and move on.

All the hatred and criticism, it can't go on.

This is who you are.

What you see isn't changing, but how you feel about it... that you can change.

I walked back into the bedroom, grabbed my phone, and scrolled down the list of numbers to find the one for my old counsellor. Then I fired off a text to let him know I needed to speak to him, and that I'd call him in the morning. Tomorrow, I would start to work on myself. Tomorrow, I would take a step into the unknown. It wouldn't be easy, but I had to find a way to build my self-confidence without using a crutch like sex or Morgan. I had to do it for myself. I needed to learn to like myself, not just for how I looked, but for the person I was now too.

I was Zak Atwood.

Burns victim.

Survivor.

I wasn't the same man I once was, and that was okay.

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TWENTY-FOUR

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ZAK



Three Months Later

SUNSHINE

I just wanted to say I miss you.

SUNSHINE

I wish it could've been different. I wish I could've been better.

SUNSHINE

You were the best thing to ever happen to me.

I'd been seeing Rob, my counsellor, for a few months. He met with me twice a week and was always a phone call or text away. I don't know why I hadn't given him a chance before, but he'd become my lifeline. We talked about my family, friends, and my fears about letting them all down. He listened to me relive the fire, the fallout afterwards, and everything I'd done to try and bury it and move on. He helped me find new ways to cope, new ways to see myself, and it was helping. I felt a little brighter, less heavy.

And he listened to me talk about Morgan. My guardian angel with a secret that broke her. I told him all about how she'd bulldozed into my life and that, spurred on by alcohol, I'd responded. She'd landed in my lap, followed me to the grove and used her own brand of sunshine to block out my darkness. I explained how I'd used sex to cope and, in many

ways, to forget. I even told him about our pact and what finding out about her secrets had done to me. I laid it all out for him, and he didn't judge. He offered support. At the end of the day, if I wanted to be with Morgan, I had to learn to be at peace with myself first.

IT WAS A BLUSTERY, cold autumn day, and the wind whipped around me as I stood on a patch of wasteland in Brinton Manor. I zipped up my jacket to try and stay warm and glanced around at the run-down area around me. The floor was littered with empty bottles, cans, and plastic bags that danced in the wind, catching on the wired fence that was supposed to keep the public out, but it didn't. The wire had been cut a long time ago, even though the signs said 'Danger, Keep Out'. I hadn't listened either. I'd climbed through the broken fence, but I had my reasons. This was where the plastics factory had once stood. This was where my life had changed forever.

Rob had been the one to suggest I come here. He'd encouraged me to face my fears and had even offered to come with me, but I wanted to do this alone. I had to. For years, I'd pictured this place as the gateway to hell. A symbol of rotting evil that filled me with dread. I hadn't been to Brinton Manor since that night. I couldn't bear the thought of the place. Rob acknowledged that but thought seeing it for what it was might help me. It wasn't hell. It was nothing. Just a charred carcass and barren land that Rob said I should visit, look at, and then put behind me, with his help, of course.

I peered up at the black skeleton of a worthless building that the council hadn't even pulled down. It was an eyesore, ugly and useless, but that's all it was. There was no gaping, burning hole in the ground threatening to drag me to hell. It wasn't haunted by demons, only memories. Memories that were painful, they'd always be painful, but they didn't choke me like they used to. Satan might've touched this place once, but he wasn't here now.

I breathed deeply as I stood in front of the burnt-out building. My chest felt tight, and my ears were ringing, but I repeated to myself, 'It's over. It's in the past. This place can't hurt you anymore'.

This factory was as black as my heart used to be, but now, my heart had started to change. Buds of hope were blooming. Hope and forgiveness. They were tiny and needed a hell of a lot of nurturing, but they were there. Like a scattering of spring flowers in an empty field. Eventually, they'd multiply and grow stronger.

I was so lost in my thoughts that the crunch of footsteps coming from behind startled me, yanking me out of my head and back to the here and now. I spun around, expecting to see a policeman standing there, ready to tell me to move on. Or a local who'd come to seek shelter or use this place for something shady. What I didn't expect to see was Morgan, standing still, staring at me with petrified wide eyes like she was seeing a ghost, and she expected me to evaporate into thin air at any moment.

She had her padded coat wrapped tightly around her, and her long hair was tied up in a ponytail that whipped around in the wind. She looked stunning, beautiful, and yet so afraid. I didn't like to think of her being scared. Not of me. And I realised right then that seeing her today, having her right in front of me, had made some of the pain in my chest ease up a little.

"I'm sorry," she stuttered. "I'll go. I didn't know anyone would be here."

She turned to walk away, but I called out, "It's okay. You don't have to leave."

I didn't want her to go. I wanted to know why she was here. I also wanted to take that fearful look off her face and bring back the sunshine that always glowed from her. Sunshine that was nowhere in sight as she stood in front of me now.

"How are you?" she asked, as she kept her stare pinned to the ground and her hands stuffed firmly in her pockets.

“I’m... getting better,” I replied. “I’m seeing a counsellor.”

She lifted her head to look at me, and a flicker of light shone in her eyes, then faded away. Like a spark had tried to ignite but died.

“That’s wonderful. I’m glad you’ve found someone you can talk to. It helps.” She bit her lip, then added, “I’m seeing someone too.”

And my heart dropped, thinking she meant she’d met someone else.

Another guy.

“She’s really good,” she went on, and the swirling, sick feeling in my stomach evaporated. “She’s helping me work through my issues. Accept my failings and piece myself back together. It was her idea that I came here today. She thought it might help if I visited the places that still plague me from the past.” The relief from hearing that made me blow out a deep breath.

“That’s great, Morgan. Really, it is.” And with a slow laugh I added, “Sounds like your counsellor and mine are on the same wavelength.”

“Yeah, it does,” she replied, but the hint of remorse on her face tugged at my conscience.

We stood in an awkward, tense silence, both of us struggling to find the right words to say. Standing opposite each other but unable to properly look each other in the face. I kicked the stones on the ground as she glanced around her, like she was trying to find the answers on the wind blowing around us.

“You look good,” Morgan eventually whispered, breaking the silence. “Counselling obviously agrees with you.” She gave a weary half-smile and added, “And getting rid of dead weight like me helps too, I suppose.”

Her words were like a match that struck my fuse, and I stalked towards her and took her face in my hands, lifting gently so she’d look at me.

“You’re not fucking dead weight,” I hissed. “Don’t ever say that about yourself.”

She blinked, and a tear fell free, trickling onto my thumb, so I wiped it away.

“Maybe my counselling isn’t working as well as I thought,” she said with a pitiful laugh. “You’re getting better though, that’s what counts.” Then, with a quiet, solemn edge, she added, “Better without me.”

I hated to hear her talk like that, and I brushed my thumbs over her cheeks, leaning closer to her, hoping she could feel through my touch what her self-loathing did to me. Hurtful words from her mouth, words that put her down, were like swords piercing my soul. I knew that she’d done something terrible, but I couldn’t bear to think she was still back in that place five years ago, crucifying herself all over again. And I realised, in that moment, that I didn’t want to hold onto the pain anymore, the ache that festered inside us. We had to find our peace. Otherwise, this was going to kill us both. There was a reason we survived that fire, and it wasn’t so we could destroy the rest of our lives. Something good had to come out of this.

Maybe it already had.

“I’m not better without you,” I told her. “I’m better because of you.”

I studied her face to make sure she understood what I was saying. The way she smiled told me she’d heard me, but her eyes begged me to make the pain she still felt inside go away. That was something I wasn’t sure I was capable of doing. That healing had to come from her.

“I have my demons, Morgan. Demons only I can get rid of. I need to be alone to deal with them because it isn’t fair to expect anyone, especially you, to go through it with me. And I think it’s the same for you. We both need to put our demons to rest. Then, we’ll come out of this better people.”

“But why?” She reached up, placing her hands over mine. “Why do we have to do that alone? Why can’t we do it

together? I would do anything to help you.”

“I know that,” I replied, closing my eyes and willing her to see the logic in my decision. “But I have to do this myself. We both do.”

She bowed her head and stepped away from me, and seeing what all this had done to her, killed me.

“Don’t do that,” I said, putting my arm out to take her hand, but she shook her head and put her hands back into her pockets. “Don’t lose that sunshine I love,” I begged.

She glanced up at me now with hope, but her words made me ache for her all over again.

“Just because I smile, it doesn’t mean I’m happy,” she replied.

“But you will be. I can’t be with you right now because my darkness would destroy you. Look at what it’s done already. You feel things so much, and I need to protect myself and you. But your sunshine gives me hope, and one day, I want to feel that sunshine again. Please, Morgan... please don’t let what happened destroy your light. Thinking about you, about my sunshine, sometimes, that’s the only thing that gets me through the day.”

“You’re dark because of me,” she cried. “You’re suffering because of what I did. Stupid decisions that I’d do anything to go back and change. Every shitty thing that’s ever happened to you is all my fault.”

“And I saw light because of you,” I argued back. “I felt happiness for the first time in years because you gave that to me. You gave me something I’ve never had, not even before the fire. You gave me a reason to live.”

“And a life you hate.” She let her head fall forward again.

“A life I’m learning to accept.”

“Why can’t we do this together?” she pleaded with me again.

“I already told you. I have to learn to like myself before I can move forward.”

She walked towards me, placed her hands on my chest and grabbed the lapels of my jacket.

“But I love you,” she said, her voice breaking as she tugged on my jacket, like it’d make the words penetrate deeper. But she didn’t realise that her words couldn’t have hit me any harder. I felt them everywhere. “I love you enough for the both of us,” she continued. “And you don’t have to say it back. You don’t have to say anything. But I need you to know that, Zak. I need you to know that there isn’t a day goes by where I don’t think about you. Not one minute when I don’t worry or miss you. I’ll always be here. I’ll never give up. Not on you or us.”

“I know.” I pulled her to me and held her close. “I’m going to need you to hold onto that love for me. Keep it locked away somewhere safe.”

Because I can't be the man you need me to be right now, but one day, I'm going to want that love back. One day, I'll be worthy of that love.

“Will you ever come back to me?”

Her whispered words cut deep, and I swallowed, trying to keep it together.

“I hope so, but I need to come back to myself first. I need you to understand that.”

I felt her nodding against me, and I sighed, breathing her in as I held her in my arms, and then I had to walk away.

I came here to get closure, and I’d done that. But seeing her reminded me I still had a long way to go.

TWENTY-FIVE

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ZAK



As I drove home, a torrent of emotions raged through me, engulfing me until I could barely breathe. All this time, I felt like I'd been going through the stages of grief. I'd had moments of disbelief in the hospital in those early days. Then disbelief had turned to anger. Why was this happening to me? What had I done to deserve it? Depression became the friend I wallowed with as I blocked the rest of the world out, and then there was denial. That'd been the one I clung to the longest. I'd lived a life of denial for years. But meeting Morgan had changed that. Through her, I'd started to move to the last stage. The stage I was working so hard with Rob to get through. That final stage that was so near I could almost feel it.

Acceptance.

With a heavy heart, I turned into my driveway and saw the familiar car parked up ahead. As I parked alongside it, I could see there was no one inside. Seemed my friends had taken it upon themselves to let themselves into my house again. I should've known it wouldn't take long before they intervened. I was surprised they'd left it this long.

I got out of my car and made my way to the house. When I entered, I saw Ryan, Brandon, and Finn sitting in my lounge.

"I see breaking and entering is becoming your speciality," I announced as I slammed the front door shut.

"Breaking and entering has always been our speciality," Brandon announced proudly. "Have you forgotten how many

buildings we've broken into over the years?" Then lifting a four-pack of beer up, he added, "At least we brought our own booze this time."

"I think I'll stick to coffee," I replied, striding past them and heading into the kitchen.

I made myself a coffee, ignoring the murmur of their voices from the living room, and then I walked back to where they were and leaned against the wall, sipping my hot coffee.

"We need to talk," Ryan said.

I scanned the room, looking at each one of them.

"Sit down, Zak. We're just here to talk. You don't need to be on edge." Brandon's bravado was gone, and he glanced up at me with sincerity.

I stared back at him, exhaustion from a day already overloaded with guilt and emotions that I could barely handle weighing down on me. But I did what he said. I sat down in my armchair and gripped the armrest like I was on a flight about to take off and I was a nervous flyer.

"What do you want to say?" I asked, trying not to be defensive, but defensive was second nature to me, especially in an intervention like this.

"Can I go first?" Ryan asked, looking at the others for permission.

Finn and Brandon nodded, and so I turned to focus on Ryan, waiting for him to call me out for what'd happened between Morgan and me.

"We've tried to give you the space you wanted. Since the accident..." he said.

"The fire," I corrected him. "It wasn't an accident. It was a fucking fire. Get it right."

"Since the fire," he repeated. "We've tried to live with the decisions you made. You didn't want the attention, and we understood that. You didn't want us to crowd you or force you to do or say things you weren't comfortable with, and that was okay. Hell, we even brushed off the fact that you ignored us

because we knew you'd been through so much. Finn was still talking to you on a regular basis, and yeah, that was only about work, but at least you were communicating with one of us. But I think we made a mistake. I think we were wrong to leave you alone. Even though that's what you asked for, we did it and we shouldn't have."

"What makes you think I'd have let you in anyway back then?" I asked, knowing my stubborn self from before would've fought them at every turn.

"Because we'd have never given up," Brandon piped up. "Because you never gave up on us and we owed you the same thing. You know we can be just as stubborn as you are when push comes to shove."

I shrugged, kind of agreeing with what he said.

"We made a decision to give you time," Ryan went on. "But all we gave you were excuses to distance yourself from us further, and that stops. Today." He leaned forward in his chair, his elbows rested on his knees and added, "We miss you, mate. Nothing is the same without you."

"And we should've said this to you sooner, we know that," Finn interjected. "But we were scared... well, I was scared to upset you. And I blame myself for so much. I should've been a better friend."

"You were the friend I needed you to be," I told him.

Finn didn't need to feel blame or guilt. He'd introduced me to art therapy. Because of him, I'd had an outlet for my pain, and I was able to build a business from it. He had nothing to be sorry for.

"You helped me get back on track," I reminded him. "The business, *our* business, it was my lifeline."

"We should've been your lifeline," Brandon cut in. "We wanted to be, but we never pushed hard enough. We should've tried harder."

"You have your own lives to lead," I said, giving more excuses.

“Lives we want you to be a part of,” Ryan spat back. “Hell, you walked out of Finn’s barbecue, and we should’ve followed you. Emily told me not to and I fucking let it go, but I should’ve listened to my own instincts. I should’ve done more.”

“You had Kai to look after. You have a wife. And anyway,” I added. “Morgan came by that night.”

“Morgan.” Ryan’s eyes darkened, and suddenly, the thought that they might blame her for everything made me protective of her.

“I don’t hate her,” I announced fiercely. “And I don’t blame her for what happened, not really. The whole thing is a pretty fucking massive shit show, but I can’t pile all of the blame on her. I can’t let her take on all that guilt. No one should have to live with that.”

“But she lived with it for five years,” Ryan stated, shaking his head.

“She lied to all of us,” Brandon muttered.

“She did everything she could to make it better,” I argued back.

“So, you’ve forgiven her?” Brandon turned his head to ask me, curiosity burning in his eyes.

“I’m coming to terms with it,” I answered. “And you should too. She was alone and frightened. We fed her to the wolves and walked away like it was nothing. She was just a wounded animal fighting back. She never meant for it to get out of hand like it did. I think you of all people should be able to understand that, Brandon.”

Brandon narrowed his eyes at me, so I chose to give him a little reminder of what he’d done in the past.

“You bullied Emily, and she forgave you. You got in the fucking ring with Harper’s brother, and he died in that fight, and she fucking forgave you. You left us all for months, without a word to let us know that you were okay, and guess what? We fucking forgave you!”

“I earned your forgiveness,” Brandon hissed.

“And you don’t think Morgan has done that too?” I snapped. “The girl has devoted her whole life to seeking forgiveness, and she did it all without fanfare. It was subtle, honest, humble.”

“You say you’re coming to terms with forgiving her,” Finn cut in. “But from the way you’re talking right now, I’d say that forgiveness is already there.”

My eyes swept around the room, assessing what they all thought from their expressions. Then my gaze landed on Ryan, who was gritting his jaw.

“Are you going to get back with her?” he asked me.

“Is this the part where you give me the big brother-in-law speech about how I’m not good enough for her and you’ll kick my ass if I put a foot out of place? Or is the ass kicking imminent?”

Ryan huffed out a laugh, and then his eyes grew weary as he frowned at me.

“Why would I do that?”

“Because you’re protective of her. Because she’s had such a hard time and you see her as a sister. I heard all about how you warned Kian off and sent Marcus Bridge packing ‘cos she could do better.”

“Marcus fucking Bridge is a drug dealer who’ll end up in prison, if he isn’t there already,” Ryan sneered. “Of course I bloody warned him off. He was a fucking liability. And Kian? I like the guy, but I don’t want him for a brother-in-law. You could tell him it’s chilly outside and he’d run to get a bowl and spoon. He’d climb a glass wall to see what’s on the other side. He’s a good lad, but he’s not for Morgan.”

The others laughed, but I didn’t. So, they weren’t good enough. What reason was he going to give me for why I wasn’t good enough either?

“And then there’s me,” I said, getting in first. “The emotionally unstable one. A guy who can’t show his feelings

and is about as welcome in any social gathering as your friendly neighbourhood alligator. I'm the one they all want to avoid, so let's be real here. Kian and Marcus aren't looking so bad now, are they? I bet they didn't make her cry and send her spiralling into intensive rehab like I have."

Ryan sat taller and pointed right at me.

"Just stop right there. First off, you didn't send her spiralling into rehab; she's having fucking therapy to help her deal with her past. And yes, she cried, but I'm guessing you've had a few tears yourself. But, mate, where the fuck is all this coming from? You're not emotionally unstable. You've been through something none of us can even begin to imagine, and we were there. We saw what happened and how much pain you went through. Out of all of us here, you're the strongest one. You're the best of us.

"Okay, so you might be a little less friendly than before, but we get that. You might not like going out as much as you did, but it is what it is. That doesn't make you a bad person. But can I tell you what makes you a fucking awesome one? You've gone through all of this without turning to drink or drugs. Life tried to drag you down a dark hole and you fought back. You didn't let it destroy you. You've taken every shitty thing that's ever happened to you, and you've fought, you've turned your life around, created a successful business. You've stared death in the face and said, 'fuck you', then given it the middle finger as you rebuilt your life. You have a home, a family that loves you, friends who would do anything for you. You might think you're not good enough, but let me tell you this, I haven't met a man yet that's better than you. If Morgan brought you home to us and told us you were the one, I'd be happy. Happy for her and you. She deserves the best, and you, you're fucking one in a million."

I was stunned into silence.

"Hear hear," Brandon chimed as Finn nodded in agreement.

"What went wrong with us?" I asked, slumping forward and holding my head in my hands. "I feel like I lost you all. I

was so torn up with bitterness, anger, and resentment, that it all became too much. I couldn't be around anyone else because I didn't want my hang ups to drag you all down."

"You could never drag us down," Finn stated. "We're your friends. Whether it's good times or bad, we'll always be there. It's exactly what you've done for all of us. When my uncle came back to Sandland and I had to leave home, you gave me a place to stay. You even offered me money. And night after night, you sat up and listened to me. You supported me through all of that."

"I won't forget what you did for me," Brandon spoke up. "How you supported me through every fight. All those nights playing FIFA and drinking beers in your apartment while you let me chat shit about boxing, Lockwood, and all the fucking bullshit that followed me around. And then there was Harper. You were with me all the way through that, helping me. And I won't forget the cups of tea you always made me too."

"Black, two sugars." I laughed under my breath. "And don't forget the decent biscuits."

"Damn right." Brandon smirked.

The room fell silent, until Ryan cleared his throat.

"I'll never forget what you did for me either," he said quietly. "When my mum died, your house was the only place I felt at peace. Dad was giving up. My brothers were fighting. But coming to your house after school, playing on your X-box and having dinner with your family, it gave me something I needed back then. It made me feel like I belonged somewhere. I missed Mum, but sitting with you playing games, talking about pointless school shit made me feel normal. I wasn't the kid with the dead mum like I was to everyone else, at yours, I was just Ryan. You and your home were a haven to me. There were no tears, no shouting. I didn't feel on edge like I did at my house. You gave me that. Please... let us do that for you now."

I took another sip of my coffee, overwhelmed by how touched I felt at what they'd said. I'd fucked up and pushed

them away. But they'd come back. They hadn't ever really left, and I was so thankful for that.

"I think the first thing we need to sort out is a weekly night out," Ryan went on. "Or a day, if that's better. Just us. Four friends being there for each other. Whether we talk shit or sit in silence, it doesn't matter, as long as we're all there."

"And we respond to messages," Brandon added with a pointed stare. "Even if it's a one-word answer. We want to know that everything's okay. Does that sound fair?"

We all nodded.

Then Finn piped up.

"And you need to stop being so hard on yourself. If you're having a bad day, that's okay. If you need someone to talk to, call us. It doesn't matter what time it is. Hell, I'd stay up all night with you if it'd help. And if all you want is someone to listen, we can do that too."

"I'm not the same man I was before the fire," I explained, because I felt like I needed to warn them that I could be moody, standoffish, and some days I didn't like myself all that much, but that was something I was learning to overcome.

"And that's okay," Ryan replied. "Brandon's moods swing faster than his punches most days. God knows how Harper puts up with him sometimes."

Brandon cackled and blew Ryan a kiss. "I love you too, man."

"Finn, you know I love you," Ryan went on. "But sometimes I feel like I need a Mensa level IQ to work out what you're thinking. If Zak's a closed book, then, Finn, you're the special edition with the lock and key."

Finn shrugged. "Effy gets me."

"We all get you," Brandon added. "We wouldn't change you for the world." Then he turned to me. "We wouldn't change you either."

"Our friendship won't ever change," Ryan said. "We'll always be here for you. We've got your back."

“We need you,” Brandon added. “Like we said before, it’s not the same without you. We’re the Renaissance men. It only works when all four of us are there. The three musketeers are ancient history.”

I laughed at how ridiculous he sounded.

“The Renaissance men?” I shook my head. “Are you still using that old nickname?”

“Only when he wants to try and make himself sound educated,” Ryan joked.

“I don’t need to try.” Brandon sat back and put his hands behind his head. “Brilliance comes naturally to me.”

“Even light bulbs appear bright... until you get closer and touch them,” Ryan quipped, and Brandon laughed back at him sarcastically.

I sat with them, watching them trade insults and bat jokes back and forth. In the end, they stayed for hours, chatting like it was old times, and I realised how much I’d missed them. Rob had always told me to reach out to family and friends. He said being with others would help, especially those who’d gone through the hard times with me, and I had to admit, I think he was right. No one really knew me like they did, apart from Morgan. It was comforting, unnerving, and familiar all at once. Unnerving because there was still a lot they didn’t know. But comforting because I knew it didn’t matter what I did or said, they had my back. Always.

TWENTY-SIX

And some breaking news just in... police are dealing with an ongoing emergency at Sandland Community Centre following reports of two civilians spotted on the roof of the building who are threatening to jump.

The community centre is currently closed to the public for building maintenance, and sources say it is of paramount importance that they ensure the safety of the individuals involved due to the hazardous nature of the building at this current time.

All roads in the surrounding area are closed, and the centre has been cordoned off. Police negotiators are doing everything they can to bring the situation to a peaceful conclusion. They have strongly advised the public to avoid the area at this current time.

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TWENTY-SEVEN

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ZAK



The TV was on in the background, but I wasn't paying much attention. Brandon had put it on to catch up on the football highlights, so when he gasped, I assumed his team had lost. He could be dramatic like that sometimes.

"Oh God. Oh fuck. Mate..." he said, his voice laced with a haunting fear that made my own heart start to race a little in anticipation of what he was going to say. "Is that...?"

"Oh fuck, no." Ryan shot forward in his seat and slapped his hand over his mouth, the colour draining from his face.

"Is that... Morgan?" Finn added, squinting at the screen, and his eyes widened. "Fuck. It is her. What the hell is she doing on the roof of the community centre?"

I moved closer to the TV, grabbing the remote to turn up the volume.

"We're here with Sophie Newman, one of the first people on the scene," the reporter stated. "Sophie, can you tell us what you saw?"

Sophie panted, standing in the wind, staring down the camera in shock as she pushed away the stray hairs whipping around her face.

"I was walking my dog on the common next to the centre, and I heard shouting." She turned away from the camera to stare up at the roof of the community centre. "I looked up there." She pointed, and the camera panned across the common to focus on the two girls on the roof. "And I saw two women standing on the edge of the roof. I think they were going to jump off. I started shaking, waving my arms, and I shouted for them to stop. But I'm not sure if they could hear me over this wind. I called the police, but they're still up there. The police haven't been able to bring them down yet." She shook her head, looking panicked and in a daze. "Everything happened so fast I didn't know what else to do."

I couldn't take in what I was seeing.

I was in shock.

My hands had started shaking, and my mouth went dry as the camera zoomed closer to the building, and I saw Morgan and some other girl standing on the roof, teetering on the edge as they held hands. And it hit me.

That was my whole life standing up there.

My everything.

And she was about to do something that'd crush me more than anything that'd ever happened in my life.

She wanted to end it all because of me. And when the realisation of what that meant sunk in, my heart stopped. The breath in my lungs turned to ice, making it impossible to breathe, and my mind went into freefall, wiping out everything else like it was on reset and reprogramming so that all that mattered was her. All I needed was her.

I had to get to her.

She had to know this wasn't the way.

I loved her.

I fucking loved her, and I couldn't let her die.

That was the one thing I'd never survive. Living in a world without Morgan was something I never wanted to experience.

Nothing else mattered now.

Only her.

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TWENTY-EIGHT

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ZAK



ME

Morgan, don't do this. Please come down. I need you, and I'm sorry. Please talk to me.

ME

I can't live without you.

ME

I love you, Morgan. I really fucking love you.

ME

Not like this. Please, God, not like this.

I sent text after text, but they all went unread. She wasn't answering her phone, and it was killing me. I hadn't even bothered to switch the TV off when I'd bolted from the house to get into my car and get to her. Hell, I don't even know if I closed or locked my door, but I didn't care. Saving her was more important.

Ryan, Brandon, and Finn followed me as I shot out of the house. Brandon and Finn got in their car and drove behind me, and Ryan sat in my passenger seat, trying to ring Emily so he could tell her before she saw it on the news like we had. I wouldn't wish that on anyone.

“Babe, answer your fucking phone,” he begged on her voicemail. “I need you to call me now. It’s important.” He shut the call off and tried again, but when it went straight through to her voicemail, he cursed and threw his phone onto the dashboard. “It’s gonna be okay,” he repeated like a mantra, trying to calm us both, but words were pointless. The only thing that’d calm me would be having Morgan safe and in my arms. I guessed Ryan felt the same, judging by the quiver in his voice. He didn’t believe what he was saying either.

“Nothing about this is fucking okay,” I snapped, swerving my car through the country lanes and cursing that I didn’t live closer to Sandland. “None of this is fucking okay.”

Ryan didn’t respond. He sat there, lost in his thoughts just like I was, biting his nails and jiggling his leg from the nervous energy flowing through him. My own racing thoughts were swinging from prayers to heaven, begging for her safety, to damning myself to hell for destroying her in the first place. She didn’t deserve to go like this. Why did it have to happen this way?

Then, quietly, he asked, “Why did she go there?”

I knew exactly why she’d gone there. She was doing what I’d been doing at the plastics factory. She was facing her fears, trying to put them to rest. Coping with the past by accepting it, but the past was just that... over. But we weren’t, and I’d spend every day of my goddamn life telling her how amazing she was if we could get through today.

Would we get through today?

Thinking of the alternative sent a cold rush through my veins, and my chest burned as I panted in and out, trying not to lose it completely. Every muscle in my body tensed, feeling the pain of what I’d done, or rather, what I hadn’t done today to put her mind at ease. She thought there was no hope for us, and this was her way of solving her problems, but it wasn’t. It was so wrong, and I had to tell her that.

I shouldn’t have pushed her away.

I should've told her what she meant to me; now, it might be too late.

I was a fucking fool.

Please God, give me the chance to talk to her. Don't let it be too late.

Eventually, I managed to find my voice and I told him, "Her counsellor suggested she visit the places that haunted her. Places like the community centre." I was only able to state the facts. Anything else, and I'd have broken down. I needed to keep it together so I could drive to her as fast as I could.

"Well, that's some shitty counsellor if it's ended with her on the fucking roof," Ryan spat, and I tried not to let the guilt I felt explode and shoot out of me like a fucking fireball.

I was seconds away from breaking, but I couldn't. I had to be strong for her.

"How do *you* know that's what she was doing?" he asked, and I felt the weight of Ryan's stare as he turned to look at me.

I kept my eyes on the road, pushing my foot down harder to increase my speed, and I felt the car lurch forward, a little bit like my heart that'd been lodged in my throat from the moment I saw her on my television.

"I bumped into her, earlier..." I swallowed, my throat bobbing as the shards of glass coating my throat made me wince. "At the plastics factory. She told me that's what she was there for."

Ryan nodded and then turned his attention back to his phone, redialling Emily's number. He wasn't stupid. He could read between the lines and knew my sanity was hanging by a thread. Any more questions, and I was likely to blow.

As we drove closer to the community centre, we could see the crowds gathered there.

"Fucking vultures," Ryan sneered as I manoeuvred the car through the streets, not caring that I was speeding.

The people we passed spun around to look at us as my car charged down the road, but I couldn't give a fuck. Let them

look. I'd gone past the point of no return. Life had just twisted on a knife's edge, and time was standing still. The walls around my world were closing in, suffocating me, and the sand in my timer was slowly trickling away to nothing. I had to do something to stop it.

Eventually, we pulled up at the front of the police cordon. Tape was wound around the streetlamps to keep people out, and the police were standing guard, refusing to let anyone go further down the road. I abandoned my car on the pavement, forcing the crowd to disperse as I steered my car without care. Then Ryan and I got out, striding towards the police with purpose as Brandon and Finn joined us. Nothing, not even their weak-ass cordon, was going to stop me from getting to Morgan. I'd take on anyone who tried.

A burly, stocky policeman saw us coming forward, and he put his hand up, almost touching my chest.

"Gotta stop you there, Sir. No one's allowed past this point."

I shoved his hand away and glared at him, baring my teeth.

"That's my fucking girl on that roof," I snarled, pointing my finger in his face. "Either you step aside, or I'll go through you. But either way, I'm going down there." I nodded down the road, where I could just make out the edge of the community centre building from around the corner, and a fiery twist of pain and guilt washed over me, making me feel sick to my stomach.

The policeman took a step back, crossed his arms over his chest, then opened his legs a little wider where he stood to give himself an air of importance.

"No one crosses this point," he repeated. "I don't care who you are. The police are dealing with this. It's an ongoing situation."

"A fucking *situation*?" I sneered, my shoulders tensing as my anger reached fever pitch. "That's my whole fucking world in danger down there."

He didn't react, just nonchalantly reached for his radio to call for backup.

"Copeland here, over. I need assistance at the cordon on Bramwell Street." He eyed me critically. "The family have turned up."

He clicked the radio off, eyeballing me like I was a raging bull and he was ready with his cattle prod. But it'd take a lot more than his taser to stop me.

"I. Need. To be. There," I hissed, stepping forward. "I can help. I can get her to come down. Just let me through."

"You're probably the reason she's up there in the first place," the policeman muttered under his breath, and I snapped.

"What the FUCK did you just say to me?" I launched myself at him, ready to tear him to pieces, but Ryan, Brandon, and Finn pulled me back.

"Come on, mate. Let's move to the side," Ryan whispered, patting my chest to try and calm me down. "We're not gonna get anywhere with him."

"You can't reason with stupid," Brandon growled, leering at the policeman like he was ready to show him exactly how strong his left hook was.

The policeman didn't care. He kept his cool, looking straight through us as if we were nobodies. I stared him down, but reluctantly, I let the others steer me towards the side of the road. My breaths were ragged, and every instinct was screaming at me to storm the police line, fuck the consequences, and do whatever I could. Then, just as I was about to do just that, Brandon put his arm around me and lowered his head closer to mine.

"Keep your cool," he said with a quiet urgency. "We'll get down there, but not with PC fucking Jobsworth watching us like a hawk."

Brandon put his face right in front of mine, forcing me to look him in the eye, and then he motioned gently for me to

follow his line of sight, and there, a little way down the road, was Tom.

Tom had gone to the same high school as us. He was the one who helped us back in the day when we were running our illegal parties. If the police had been called and were on their way, he'd give us the heads up just to make sure we'd evacuated the premises and wouldn't get arrested. He was a good guy. A bent copper, but in the best way. He knew sometimes you had to bend the law. Rumour was, he did the same for the soldiers of Brinton Manor. Only, their law bending was more brutal than ours.

"Tom," Ryan whisper-yelled.

Tom's head swivelled in our direction as he heard his name being called, and his eyes darted around to see if anyone was watching. Then, he walked casually over to us, putting his hand out to shake ours.

"What are you guys doing here?" Tom asked, assessing the crowd as he spoke.

"We need to get down there. That's my sister-in-law on the roof," Ryan told him. "And Zak's girl too."

Tom nodded without saying a word, rubbed his jaw in thought, then said, "Give me two minutes."

We watched Tom walk over to where we'd just been standing. He pointed around as he spoke to the police stationed there, gesturing like he was trying to explain a change in circumstances. And then, he turned and started to walk back over to us. The other police took their notebooks out and strode towards the people in the crowd with purpose. Tom had obviously given them a job to distract them.

"If anyone questions you," Tom stated as he came closer. "Make sure you tell them you snuck through the cordon. My name doesn't come into it. Understood?" He lifted the police tape for us to walk under. "And when you get down there, promise me you'll keep your cool."

We nodded, and he gritted his teeth like he was going to say he didn't believe us. But then he thought better of it,

turned his back to us, and made his way back over to his colleagues, pretending he hadn't seen us.

I didn't wait for the others. I took off, sprinting down the street to the community centre with a nauseous dread dragging me down. My focus was trained on the corner of that damn building, desperate to get to the end of the street so I could see her for myself. I could sense the others were close behind me, but the pounding in my ears and the thump of my heart beating out of my chest made it difficult to concentrate on anything else.

Panic.

Pure unadulterated panic was all I felt.

Please, God, let her be safe.

I swear on my life, I'll do anything if you just make sure she comes out of this alive.

I'd never prayed to God, not even in my darkest days. After the fire, I decided there couldn't be a God. What sort of deity let people like me and all the others in that hospital suffer? But right now, I was praying that there was a God up there and that he could hear me. I'd curse my own damned soul to eternal hell if it meant she could live another day on this earth. They say only the good die young, but she was too fucking good to prove that bullshit theory was correct.

I raced around the corner, coming to a stop when I saw a group of people at the entrance to the building, along with three or four cop cars scattered about. Then, glancing up, I saw her. She was holding another girl's hand as they stood staring at the ground below them. The sorrow on her face nearly broke me, and I faltered, unable to catch my breath as I took in the scene. It was high up there, so fucking high, and the drop was onto solid concrete. She wouldn't stand a chance. I knew I had to get nearer. Maybe I could catch her when she fell, and it'd all be okay. I couldn't give up hope. Anything had to be possible, right?

I put one foot in front of the other, walking in a daze to where a small group was gathered, not even noticing who they

were. It was as if my footsteps had to be gentle, this situation was too fragile, and I didn't want to make a wrong move. Tentatively, I looked up to the top of the building, and at that moment, her eyes met mine.

I covered my mouth with my hands and shook my head, then mouthed, 'Not like this. Please, Morgan. Please come down'. Every fibre of my being urged her to do what I said.

How had it come to this?

Suddenly, a gruff voice cut through the air, invading my thoughts and yanking me back to my harsh fucking reality.

"I wondered how long it'd be before *you* showed up."

The venom in that voice made me screw my face up, ready to argue, and when I turned to look at the group that we were standing next to, I saw Adam Noble, Colton King, Devon Brady, Will Stokes, and Tyler Evans sneering back at us.

"What the fuck do you want?" I snarled, moving forward to face-off with Adam, who was standing a little farther forward than the others.

"Couldn't help yourself, could you?" Brandon hissed, coming to stand beside me. "Wherever there's bullshit, you show up. Bad luck follows you around like a bad smell." He sniffed the air, then added, "You are fucking bad luck."

"Why *are* you here?" Ryan asked, standing on the other side of me and crossing his arms tightly over his chest.

"Not that it's any of your business," Devon piped up. "But that girl up there is one of ours. We're here to help her."

"Morgan?" I asked in confusion.

"No, dumbass," Colton spat. "Isabelle."

"You're *helping* her?" Brandon laughed sarcastically. "Looks like you're doing a really good fucking job of that." He pointed to the roof where both girls were standing frozen to the spot, staring into the distance, lost in their own world.

"Don't fucking judge us," Tyler snapped. "Your girl is up there too. I'm guessing she isn't there on a fucking day trip."

“You’ll be taking a fucking trip to the hospital if you speak to me like that again,” Brandon snarled, and Adam moved forward as Brandon looked ready to pounce.

“Don’t act like you’re better than us,” Adam growled. “The only difference between you and me is you were born in Sandland, and I wasn’t.”

“What the fuck does that have to do with anything?” Brandon argued.

“It means you can drop the holier than thou bullshit. If you’d been born in Brinton Manor, you’d be standing right here beside us. Don’t act like you’re something you’re not. You’re one of life’s rejects who’s fighting back, just like we are. But you’re lucky you were born on that side of town and not ours. You got to grow up with the rich kids. It doesn’t make you better than us, though.”

“We’re not rich kids,” Ryan cut in.

“Oh yeah?” Adam cocked his head to the side. “So how many foster homes have you been in? Which children’s homes did you run away from?” He turned his nose up as he looked us up and down. “I bet you’ve never had to go without a meal because they cut your benefits. Or worse than that, going through the fucking bins and sleeping rough ‘cos you have nowhere else to go. No, you had your heated homes and food on the table. Families to waste money on you, setting you up so you could put on shitty parties in your stuck-up neighbourhood.”

“We worked hard to make something of ourselves,” Ryan argued, pointing his finger right in Adam’s face.

“Can we all just shut the fuck up,” I shouted over them. My nerves were shredded, and I didn’t have the time or care to argue this pointless bullshit. “There’s more important things happening here than you trying to justify your shitty existence.” I glanced up at Morgan, not giving two shits what the fucking soldiers of Brinton Manor had to say.

“And that’s exactly what we’d expect from someone like you,” Colton sneered at me.

“What the fuck’s that supposed to mean?” Brandon barked, walking over to stand nose-to-nose with Colton King.

“It means,” Colton replied, meeting Brandon’s fury with his own. “You’ve always thought you were better than us. Stop sugar coating your shit. What we do is exactly the same as you.” Colton tilted his head and gave Brandon a shit-eating grin. “Only we do it better.”

“What? You kill people better than us?” Brandon smirked and stepped back, giving Colton a slow clap. “Congratulations, moron.” Then he shook his head with a look of disgust on his face. “Seriously, what the fuck are you on?”

“The top of the fucking world.” Colton laughed back. “That’s what we’re on, shithead.”

I was about to shout at them to shut up again, all that mattered was getting Morgan down, but I didn’t need to.

“I should’ve known you wouldn’t be able to keep your cool.” Tom walked towards us, glancing from the soldiers to us and back again. “Do you think it’s helping anyone, having you two going at it while they’re trying to get those two girls down safely?” He shook his head, gave a disappointed sigh, and then folded his arms over his chest.

“Colton’s right,” Tom stated. “You aren’t that dissimilar.”

Ryan went to argue, but Tom held his hand up, forcing him to be quiet and listen.

“You both break the law. I should know, I’ve spent years covering both of your asses.” He gestured to where we stood. “You work for your community, bend the rules to make it a better place. The parties you used to put on, they were your payback to the people of Sandland. I get that.” He tilted his head towards the soldiers. “And you work for your community too. I don’t need to say you bend the rules, you twist them until they’re a fucking pretzel, but you have your reasons, and I get that too. You want to make Brinton a better, safer place to live. Your payback might be a little more brutal than theirs”—he gave us a nod—“but it’s still payback. It’s still something you’re doing for the good of the people.”

“You can’t compare us, that’s fucking insane,” Ryan argued.

“I’m not comparing your methods,” Tom spat back. “I’m not stupid. But your intentions? They’re not as different as you might think. At the end of the day, you’re doing what you believe is right. And I won’t take sides. I have respect for all of you.” His eyes landed on the soldiers. “I’ve known Colton all my life. He was my best friend at school. He might have a weird way of showing it, but he’s a good guy. One of the best.” He turned to face us then. “But when I left Brinton Manor and moved to Sandland, changing high schools at thirteen, it wasn’t easy. But you guys were the ones who helped me. I looked up to you. Hell, I still look up to all of you. That’s why I’d do anything to help you. It’s the reason I joined the police force, to make a difference. Okay, I learned pretty early on that justice doesn’t always come packaged neatly by the laws that be, served the way it should be. It’s messy and raw, dancing between the lines of right and wrong. It’s the grey areas where you all live. But standing here arguing isn’t helping. If you want to do something to help, then work together to help us get those girls down safely.”

“So, we’re supposed to ignore the fucked-up history here?” Brandon snapped, totally missing the point Tom was trying to make. “They made Finn’s life hell.”

Finn cleared his throat. “We don’t need to drag that all back up again. I’ve gotten past it, it’s over. Forgotten. All that matters is saving those two girls. We owe it to Morgan to put it all behind us. For her sake.”

“I haven’t fucking forgotten,” Brandon snarled. “And I’ll never forget.” But the way his body backed away from the stand-off he’d created said otherwise. He knew how fragile this whole situation was.

“Well, you need to today.” Tom walked forward to stand between us. “There’s more important things at stake here.” He glanced from one group to another and added, “I’ve spoken to the lead negotiator. They said one of you can meet with him, give him something he can work with to bring this to a peaceful conclusion. But only one.”

“I should go,” I jumped in, stepping forward. “If I can talk to her, let her know I’m here, I can get her to come down.”

“With all due respect,” Tom replied, placing his hand on my chest to stop me in my tracks. “I don’t think that’ll make a difference. From what we’ve gathered so far, Morgan isn’t the one threatening to jump... it’s Isabelle.”

We all stood for a moment in silence, and then Adam stepped forward.

“I’ll go.”

The thought that Morgan’s safety lay in the hands of Adam fucking Noble didn’t sit well with me. Actually, that was a fucking understatement, I’d rather have sent Kian in to do the negotiating. Adam Noble was about as subtle as a brick flying through your window.

But before I could argue, Tom said, “I’ll set it up,” and walked away.

“Why the fuck is Morgan up there if she isn’t the one threatening to jump?” Ryan screwed his face up, staring above us at where they both stood. He was struggling to fully comprehend what the fuck was going on, just like the rest of us.

“I don’t know, but we need to get up there,” I stated, scanning the building to see if there were any gaps in the police barriers, so I could sneak past and get to her.

“Because she’s a chip off the old block and can’t keep her nose out of other people’s business,” Colton sneered. “Like sister, like brother.”

“She’s my fucking sister-in-law, you piece of shit,” Ryan snapped.

“Tomayto, tomato,” Colton replied nonchalantly, shrugging.

“Are you really going to fucking argue with us, when that’s happening up there?” I pointed at the roof.

Colton’s jaw ticked, and I could tell he felt a hint of remorse as he stepped away from us.

“You’re a fucking dead man,” Brandon threatened.

“Can’t kill me if I’m already dead inside.” Colton’s face was stoic; the joker side of him was long gone now. He knew this was fucking serious. “Dead man walking?” He looked at Will Stokes, thumbing towards Brandon. “He thinks he’s in a fucking Tarantino movie.”

“Yeah, *Inglourius Basterds*.” Will laughed, but Colton narrowed his eyes at him as if he was silently scolding him.

“Fuck you,” Brandon snapped.

And then, we all looked around.

“Where’s Adam?” Will asked.

“Doing what Adam does best,” Tyler piped up. “Taking matters into his own hands.”

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TWENTY-NINE

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MORGAN



Three hours Earlier

After seeing Zak at the abandoned factory, I'd left Brinton Manor with a heavy heart. I know he needed time, but being away from him was torture for me. Missing him felt like an eternal ache. It never went away. He was my first thought when I woke up, my last prayer at night, and throughout the day, I worried about him. He was with me, always.

What if he never forgave me?

How would I move on in a world where he existed, but I couldn't be with him?

Those thoughts, and others like them, plagued me, day in, day out. But I didn't answer them. I couldn't. They were the kind of answers I couldn't bear to think about.

The girls had supported me, Emily especially. And Liv had told me, 'If he's yours, he'll come back. Just give it time'. But I knew that saying, if he didn't come back, he was never mine to begin with, and that was something that scared me to death because I wasn't sure he was.

So, I'd used every distraction I could to get through the day. On my counsellor's advice, I'd gone to the factory. Probably not the best timing because Zak had been there too, and even though he'd tried to console me, I couldn't let myself hope. Hope might lead to heartbreak, and I felt like I had to try and preserve something for myself. But then again, maybe it

was the best timing ever, because I got to be in his arms one last time. I had the chance to tell him I loved him.

Feeling a little deflated, I'd decided to kill two birds with one stone, or rather, face two milestones in one day. So, I'd headed to Sandland Community Centre, ready to walk into the building that'd changed everything in my life all those years ago.

Once I pulled up outside, I noticed the scaffolding, diggers, and other building equipment scattered around the area, but none of it was in use. The building was closed for refurbishment, but I wasn't going to let that stop me. I parked my car then got out, walking along the path to the front door, but it was locked. I peered through the windows, but I couldn't see anything. So, I decided to go around the back of the building. I thought someone might be there, a surveyor or a builder, and they might let me in, so I could take a look around. But when I got to the back of the building, I didn't need anyone to let me in, the back door was wide open.

I crept into the centre, picking my way over the rubble as I called out, "Hello," in case there was someone here. I didn't want to startle them with my presence, but no one called back. It was eerily quiet, apart from the distant drone of the traffic from outside. The builders must've forgotten to lock up properly when they'd left. Lucky me.

I made my way towards the main hall, where Zak and his friends had exposed my father years before, but once there, I saw the floorboards had all been taken up. I couldn't go in, and maybe that wasn't such a bad thing after all. I don't know why, but the building was giving me creepy vibes. I didn't want to be here any longer than I had to. In fact, I was ready to leave now.

I decided it'd be better to come back on a day when the building was open or bring someone else with me to face my past, so I turned to head back outside. And that's when I heard the faint sound of cries coming from above. I stopped and strained, trying to listen, and the cries, although muffled, turned to sobs. Someone was upstairs, and I had to go and see

them, make sure they were okay. It was the right and decent thing to do.

“Hello? Are you okay?” I called out, but no one responded.

So, carefully, aware that the building was under renovation and there might be parts that were unsafe, I climbed the stairs to the next level. I stood still on the landing, listening to see if I could work out where the cries were coming from, but I couldn't hear anything. It'd gone silent.

I stood still for a moment, waiting. And then I heard the faint sound of sniffing on the next level.

“Hey,” I called out gently. “Don't be scared, but I'm going to come up, okay? I just want to make sure you're all right.” But I got no response. My pleas were met with more silence.

I turned, creeping up the next flight of stairs, each step creaking and groaning under the weight of my feet. I didn't feel safe coming up here, but I couldn't turn back now.

Eventually, I made it to the top of the building, but I still hadn't found the person who was crying. I was just about to abandon my search, write it off as a stray cat or some other animal, when I turned a corner and saw another, shorter flight of stairs leading to an open door. A fire escape that led directly onto the roof of the building. Instincts told me I had to check up there. I'd come this far.

So, I climbed the final flight, pushing the door open wide as I walked out onto the windy rooftop.

“Stay back,” a timid voice cried out, and I turned to find a girl, around the same age as me, standing with her back to the ledge of the building. “Don't come any closer.”

I held my hands up, my feet rooted to the ground, because I didn't want to spook her any more than I already had.

“I'm not going anywhere,” I told her. “I just wanted to come up and check you're okay.”

“Okay?” She gave a regretful laugh. “Are you fucking serious? No. I'm not fucking okay!”

She wrapped her arms around herself and bent forward like she was in pain. But when I stepped towards her, she snapped upright and placed her hands on the ledge behind her, gripping the brickwork like her life depended on it. “If you come any closer, I’ll jump. I swear I will. Don’t push me.”

“I really don’t want you to do that,” I begged, placing my hands together like I was praying. “Nothing is worth that. Please. Just talk to me.”

“Why do you care what happens to me? You don’t know me,” she hissed.

“No, I don’t know you, but I do care,” I stated, trying to stay calm.

She narrowed her eyes at me, then dropped her gaze to the floor. “I could be the biggest piece of shit to ever walk this earth for all you know.” She took a deep breath and then muttered, “I feel like it most days, so why prolong the agony? I need to do the world a favour and leave.”

Her words burned deep, and I knew I had to keep her talking to have any hope of getting her off this roof safely. She obviously needed professional help, and I was woefully unqualified to deal with this, but I couldn’t leave her. I was all she had. I wouldn’t be able to live with myself if anything happened to her.

“Why don’t you start by telling me your name?” I asked. I was sure I’d seen a TV programme once about this kind of thing, and using the person’s real name was always advised.

She clenched her jaw, and I wasn’t sure she was going to answer me, but then she whispered, “Isabelle,” and clamped her mouth shut again.

“Hi, Isabelle, I’m Morgan.” I introduced myself, deciding not to say, ‘it’s nice to meet you’. She didn’t need my false sincerity. “Maybe you could tell me why you’re up here today?” I asked, pushing her a little harder to talk as I slowly inched myself forward. I wanted to distract her and get closer. Close enough so I could reach out and give her the helping hand she so desperately needed right now.

But her mouth stayed closed, and she shook her head. She wasn't going to open up to me that easily.

“Okay.” I sighed, wracking my brains to think of what to say next. “Why don't I tell you why I'm here...”

She glanced up at me, curiosity flickering in her eyes.

“I came here today,” I went on. “Because my life is fucked up. I hurt someone I love and I'm doing everything I can to make it right. If I ever can.” I shrugged. “I'm revisiting all the places that played a part in that and led me to do what I did. I'm hoping that by unearthing my demons and facing them, I can destroy them for good.”

“You hurt someone you love?” she asked, showing interest in my story as I kept edging closer to where she stood. “And because of that, have you fucked them up beyond all recognition? Have you made their lives so unbearably bad that they wake up every day wishing it was their last?”

I swallowed, trying not to let her harsh words and brutal honesty affect me.

“I don't think so,” I whispered, then with more confidence I stated, “No. I didn't. He's strong and kind. He's a good man. He's been through hell, but he doesn't blame anyone. He doesn't blame me, even though I deserve it. He shows me kindness and understanding.”

I faltered, struggling to find the words to describe how amazing Zak was.

“Lucky you,” she uttered. “I wish my brother had shown the same grace to me.”

One more slow shuffle forward and I asked, “Did your brother hurt you?”

She bit her lip, staring off into the distance as she sighed.

“He hurt a lot of people.” She turned to face me, and I could tell by the way her eyes darkened that she was lost now, trapped in the memories she was forcing herself to relive. “He killed people. Innocent people.” She sucked in a breath through her teeth like she was in pain. “And I didn't have a

clue. I fucking lived with him, I saw him every day, and I didn't have a fucking clue. What sort of a person does that make me? I could've done something. I could've saved so many people's lives if I'd just opened my goddamn eyes to what he was."

"It wasn't your fault," I said, pleading for her to listen. "His sins aren't yours to bear."

"Aren't they?" she snapped back at me. "Because he's dead now. He was put down like the dog he was. But me? I'm stuck still living in this nightmare. How am I supposed to go on, knowing how much he made other families suffer?"

"He made you suffer too," I said gently. "And you matter just as much as anyone else. You're a victim too."

She shook her head vehemently.

"I don't want to be a victim. I don't want this life anymore."

I slid another step closer, but her eyes widened, and she climbed onto the ledge to sit on it, then pushed herself up to stand.

"I told you to stay the fuck away. I'm not joking. I'll fucking jump."

My heart was in my mouth, my blood pumping through my veins and pounding in my ears. But I was wired, fired up, ready to do whatever I could to help her. And so, I strode forward, climbing up onto the ledge to join her, standing right alongside her in solidarity, and I held my hand out for her to take. She didn't respond at first, just stared at me in utter bewilderment, before uttering, "What the fuck are you doing?"

I let my hand fall to my side and shrugged.

"If you go, I go."

Her face screwed up as she processed what I'd said, the frown lines deepening on her brow as her body stiffened.

"Are you fucking crazy?" she gasped.

“I think I must be.” I swallowed, trying not to look at the ground and see how far up we actually were. “But I’m really hoping you’re not and that you realise what a monumental mistake it’d be to jump, because I really don’t want to die today.” I turned to look her in the eye. “And I really don’t want you to die either.”

I could hear someone below shouting up, “Don’t do it,” but I blocked them out. I had to stay focused on her.

She nodded, apprehension flickering over her face, then she looked down and shuddered when she saw the drop, and she took a step back.

“This guy you hurt, does he love you back?” she asked, distracting me from her story again.

“I don’t know,” I replied, trying not to let thoughts of Zak cloud my judgement. “He hasn’t said the words, but sometimes, when we’re alone, he does the sweetest things. And to me, that’s more important than saying I love you. He shows me he loves me.”

“That’s nice,” she said, her voice devoid of any emotion. “Kinda wished I could’ve had that.”

“You still can,” I urged. “Isabelle, I know you have guilt over what your brother did. I get that. But what he did wasn’t your fault. I’m guessing he was pretty good at hiding his true self to you, the rest of the family, friends, everybody. You can’t take the blame for his actions.”

“Try telling that to my brain.”

“If I could, I would. But do you know what? A counsellor could help you to see it differently. You just have to take a chance.”

“Oh yeah?” she replied with a hint of distrust and sarcasm.

“Yes,” I stated firmly. “All you need to do today is take a step back, climb off this ledge, and let me take you for a coffee. That’s all. Nothing else. The rest we’ll deal with tomorrow. Or the day after that. But not today.”

“You make it sound so easy.” She huffed.

“It isn’t easy,” I replied. “In fact, it might be the hardest thing you ever do, and there’ll be days when you feel just as shitty as today, but when you get through it, when you manage to pull yourself out of that well, you’ll see that it was worth it. YOU are worth it.”

“*Well?*” she asked. “What fucking *well?*”

I’d always compared my darkest days to being stuck at the bottom of a well. Only the walls are slowly closing in, the darkness is overwhelming, and that bucket and rope are lying on the ground next to you, taunting you that there’s no way out. When you look around, all you see is a black hole of nothingness, and when you look up to the sky, that circle of light gets smaller and smaller by the second, like the well is growing deeper the longer you’re stuck in it.

I explained that to Isabelle, but I told her there were people at the top of the well, support that could throw down a new rope, a ladder, any tools she might need to get herself out of there. The journey out would be tough. She might fall back a few times, but there was a way out of that well. It wasn’t her forever home. There was always hope for a brighter day.

Tears welled in her eyes as she listened to me, and then, she held her hand out to take mine.

“I guess you understand me a little more than I gave you credit for,” she whispered. “I’ve been stuck in my well for years. I don’t think the light above is visible anymore.”

“You might not be able to see it, but it’s there. You just have to trust me.”

I held her hand and let her stand in peace with her thoughts for a moment. Crowds were gathering below, and I could hear the wail of the police sirens in the distance. My phone had started to vibrate in my pocket with incoming texts and calls, but I let it ring out. I didn’t want to move and spook her. Isabelle needed time to process her thoughts, simplify this down to what happened next, and not get bogged down by the weight of her situation. I didn’t want the circus forming on the ground to unsettle her. So, I stood there holding her hand, squeezing gently to let her know she wasn’t alone. Being the

support she needed to survive the next second, minute, hour of the day. Because all that mattered right now was that she was okay. She was a ship lost in a sea of troubles, and I had to be her anchor.

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THIRTY

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ZAK



This wasn't the Adam fucking Noble show, and I wasn't going to stand by while he did his dark knight bullshit and fucked everything up. Whatever the soldiers touched always turned to dust. Theirs was the touch of death, but I'd die protecting Morgan from it. She needed me up there, not him.

So, I stormed forward, ready to push through the boundaries the police had set up and get into that building. I couldn't see Adam anywhere, but I knew that guy. He'd be heading in the exact same direction as me, and I had to get there first.

"Zak, wait," I heard Tom shout from behind, and then I felt a hand on my arm, pulling me to stop.

"Don't try and stop me, Tom," I seethed, shrugging away from his grasp. "I've gotta get up there."

"Please, just let us do our job. She'll be safe. I promise."

"Safe? She's balanced on the edge of a fucking building," I snapped. "No. She'll be safe when I get to her."

"You don't know Isabelle," he snapped in desperation. "You going up there could frighten her, it might make her jump."

"That's a chance I'm willing to take."

"But I'm not." He reached behind him, pulled out a pair of handcuffs and cuffed me to him before I could move. "I'll feel better if I know where you are."

“What the fuck, Tom?” I lifted my arm up, yanking it, but he pulled it back down.

“It’s for your own good, Zak. It’s the cuffs, or I’ll have to arrest you and put you in my van. And I really don’t want to do that.”

“But Noble can do whatever the fuck he wants?” I snarled as panic flooded my senses.

Tom shrugged.

“I haven’t seen him.”

“Bullshit.”

We stood arguing, me trying to talk him out of his decision to hold me hostage, and him trying to convince me he was right.

“You’re wasting time here,” I begged, and when he ignored me, I felt my aggressive side taking over. “I swear to God, if you don’t let me go, I’ll make your life fucking hell. I’ll tell them, you know. I’ll tell the police that you’re a fucking snitch. You’ll never work again.”

“I’ll take my chances,” Tom replied through gritted teeth.

“Why are you being such a fucking asshole?” I barked, twisting my wrist to make the cuffs dig in for both of us. I didn’t care. I wanted to hurt him. He was hurting me by keeping me here.

“I’m being the asshole that saves you from yourself,” he replied, then twisting the cuffs right back, he said, “Trust me.”

“I’ll never trust you again after today,” I snapped. “If she dies, it’ll be your fault.”

Back and forth we went, wasting precious time, and then... it happened.

It was as if the world around us just stopped.

No words.

No sounds.

Just a silent fear that catapulted us into another dimension. One we'd dreaded entering. But here we were.

My body froze.

Then the silence morphed into a dull, pounding thud as my mind screamed out what my mouth couldn't.

It was like being stuck in a disaster movie, hell on earth, and I couldn't press pause or rewind. I couldn't do a damn fucking thing to stop it. Everything was crashing down around my ears. The nightmare was real, and I was living in it, watching it, dying right there on the spot as it all unfolded in front of me.

A flash of movement, a flurry of panic, and I went numb as I watched the police run, holding a blanket as they caught her. There was so much confusion, I couldn't even tell if they had caught her in time.

"LET ME GO!" I shouted, and Tom unlocked the cuffs without arguing, letting me run forward on legs that'd become so shaky I didn't know if I'd make it.

"Please, God, no," I gasped as I drew closer. "No. No. NO!"

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THIRTY-ONE

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MORGAN



I wasn't sure how long we'd been up here, but my body was cold, and I felt numb. My legs were aching, and my head was reeling, trying to block out how high up we were. I focused on taking deep breaths and running through my mental checklist. I'd listened. I'd shown empathy. I'd tried to build a rapport with Isabelle, and for the most part, I think I'd done that. Now, I needed to think of a way to influence her more, make her change her mind and come off the ledge. I'd exhausted every avenue trying to buy us time, but I was running out of things to say.

So, I sang.

Just quietly, but enough to distract me, and hopefully Isabelle too.

I sang *Andy Grammer's 'Don't Give Up on Me'*, and when it spoke about reaching out my hand, I squeezed her hand to let her know I was there.

I wasn't giving up.

I didn't want her to either.

"I love that song," Isabelle whispered on the air.

"Me too," I said, after finishing for the second time. And then I made the mistake of looking down, and I saw him, looking right back up at me, his hands over his face as his heart broke at what he saw.

He'd come here, for me. And knowing that, seeing how desperate he was, made my heart swell, and then the guilt

surged into every corner of my being.

How could I put him through this?

He'd been through enough.

Even when I was trying to do something good, I still managed to hurt him.

"He came," I cried out despite myself.

Isabelle turned to face me.

"You were right then. He does love you," she said, tears welling in her eyes. "This is another way of him showing you that."

She sighed, then peered down at the ground as the police gathered and words were shouted through a megaphone that we couldn't really hear.

"They're here for me too, but they don't love me. Not like that. They pity me."

At first, I thought she meant the police.

"Who?" I asked.

"Adam and the others," she replied solemnly. "They feel guilty about what my brother did, because he used to work for them. They didn't see it either. We were all too late to make a difference."

She hung her head, and I could sense her tensing and getting agitated all over again. I didn't want her to start thinking about her brother. I wanted to steer her mind in a different direction. Dwelling on her reasons to be up here on this ledge, feeling like death was the only way out, was a surefire way to achieve that goal. And that wasn't happening. Not on my watch.

"If you could go anywhere, visit any place, where would you go?" I asked, trying to get her to think of a future where she could experience new and exciting things. I was getting desperate. Clutching at straws, but it seemed like a good idea.

She huffed, and then with a sad half-smile, she said, "You'll think it's crazy."

“Crazier than standing here holding hands?” I quirked my brow. “I don’t think so.”

She took a moment, then stuttered slightly before saying, “I’d love to see the sea. I’ve never been to the beach.” She gave a low chuckle. “Told you it was crazy. Twenty-seven years old and I’ve never visited the coast.”

“There’s nothing crazy about that,” I assured her. “And if you agree to step down and leave this building with me today, I’ll drive you there tomorrow.”

She glanced to the side.

“Do you mean that?”

“Of course.”

We both saw movement from the corner of our eyes, and I looked over my shoulder to see Adam Noble standing at the doorway I’d walked through earlier. He took slow, measured steps towards us and smiled to show he meant no harm. His cautious air and the gentle way he moved was something I wasn’t used to seeing from him.

“I’m not here to cause trouble,” he said quietly, reverently, treating the situation with the delicacy it needed. “I just want to talk.” He shifted his gaze from Isabelle to me and asked, “Are you both okay?”

I nodded, and he stopped just short of the wall we were standing on, assessing the area around him.

“The last time I was on a community centre roof like this, I got shot.”

I inwardly cursed his insensitivity. I knew he hadn’t done it on purpose, but reminding Isabelle of her mortality wasn’t a great strategy. As negotiators went, he wasn’t the best, but I had to give him credit for trying.

“Have you got a gun with you today?” Isabelle replied. “Maybe you can finish the job I started. That’s what you do best, after all.” She gave a sardonic smile and then turned to face him, but she continued to hold my hand. She wasn’t ready to let that lifeline go just yet.

“You know that’s not the answer,” Adam replied, giving her a pointed stare. “And you know this has to stop, now. It’s not fair on Morgan, or the people who love you both, but most of all, it’s not fair on you. You don’t deserve to be standing up here, Issy. Not because of him. What have I told you?”

He waited for her to repeat words he’d obviously drummed into her. Words that clearly hadn’t worked.

“I’m better than him. It wasn’t my fault,” she stated plainly, with zero conviction. Then she let out a long, ragged breath. “But I want it to stop. I can’t live with this pain anymore.”

“I know, sweetheart.” Adam spoke calmly, moving closer to us as he pleaded with her. “And I think... no, I *know* I got it wrong this time. I thought we could get you through this, but we can’t, not on our own. You need help from someone who knows how to fix this. We’ll always be there for you, but if you come down here to me now, I’ll take you to a therapist myself. I’ll pay for the best. I’ll do whatever it takes, Issy. Please.”

“But I don’t want to be a burden,” she cried, shaking as she gripped me tightly.

“You could never be a burden. Poppy adores you,” he said, reminding her of a bond she must’ve had with his daughter. “And we want you to meet the new baby. Olivia would never forgive me if I didn’t bring you home safely tonight.”

“I want to meet the new baby too,” Isabelle sobbed.

“If I tell you it’s a boy, will that make you come down?” he asked, and I felt Isabelle soften beside me.

“It’s a boy? Really?”

“Yes.” He sighed. “But don’t tell Olivia I told you. She made me swear I’d keep it a secret. I haven’t even told the others. Colton will be so pissed that you know before him.”

She started to laugh, and that magical link to her survival, the will to live kicked in, and she nodded. “Okay, Adam. I’ll come down.”

I let out a huge sigh of relief, but as Isabelle moved to step down from the ledge, she caught her foot on the uneven brickwork, and my relief turned suddenly into blind panic.

Everything happened so fast, yet time stood still, and there was nothing I could do to stop what was happening.

Isabelle fell backwards off the roof, and I felt myself falling too as Adam screamed out, “No!”

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THIRTY-TWO

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ZAK



I shot forward, running towards the police like my life depended on it as they held her in their blanket. In many ways, it did. Nothing mattered but getting to her.

Please, God, let her still be alive.

“Move out the way, get her to the ambulance!” one of the officers barked. As I drew nearer, I noticed wisps of blonde hair from the body cradled in the blanket, and a whimpering that told me she was still alive.

It wasn't my Morgan.

Thank God.

I felt a wash of relief, followed by panic.

She was still up there.

I had to get to her.

She needed me.

I couldn't bear to think how she must be feeling right now.

Without a second thought, I raced into the building and took the stairs two at a time, desperation coursing through me, fuelling me. But as I reached the last flight of stairs leading to the roof, I felt a heavy ache in my bones. I was scared. But I had to find the strength to get her through this. I just had to.

Bursting through the doorway, my whole body shook with emotion. And there, huddled on the floor, against the ledge she'd been standing on, sat Adam Noble, rocking back and forth... and in his arms was my Morgan.

“Oh, thank God.” I ran my hands through my hair, staring at the sky as I caught my breath.

“I’m so sorry,” Morgan sobbed as she saw me standing there. “I’m so so sorry.”

I strode over to where she sat and pulled her into my arms.

“It’s okay,” I whispered into her hair as I held her close and savoured the feel of her. “You’re okay.”

She leaned back to look at me, tears streaming down her face.

“But it’s all so messed up,” she cried.

I took her face in my hands, wiping the tears from her cheeks.

“You’re safe now and that’s all that matters. *You* are all that matters.” I squeezed my eyes shut as images of what could’ve happened to her today flashed through my mind. “Why did you do it? Why did you put yourself at risk like that?”

“She needed help. I couldn’t leave her.” She could barely speak. She was crying so hard. “Is she... dead?”

Adam had been sitting behind us on the floor with his head in his hands, and on hearing her question, he lifted his head to look at me, his eyes showing what he was really feeling. He was broken.

“She’s gonna be okay,” I said, speaking to Morgan but looking at Adam. “They’ve got her in the ambulance. I don’t know what her injuries are, but she is alive.”

“Thank fuck,” Adam gasped, throwing his head back and letting out a huge sigh.

Then he slowly pushed himself to stand and walked towards us.

“I’ll leave you alone,” he said, keeping his head down, but Morgan put her hand out to stop him.

“Thank you,” she whispered, then wrapped her arms around him and gave him a hug. “You saved my life today.”

Adam looked stunned at the gesture, then he gently patted her on the back before pulling away.

“You didn’t deserve to fall,” he told her. “You were there to help her. I only did what any decent person would do when I pulled you to safety.” He glanced at me, nodded, then added, “I need to go to Issy. She needs me now.” Then he turned to leave.

“I owe you one,” I called out after him.

“I’ll keep it in the bank,” he replied over his shoulder. “Never know when I’ll need a decent DJ for one of my clubs.”

“I don’t do that anymore.” I gave a hollow laugh.

“You should do. You were good at it.” And with that, he walked away, leaving me with the realisation that I didn’t hate him like I used to. He’d done something good today. I had to give him credit for that.

I peered down at Morgan, and took her face in my hands, kissing her forehead with all the tenderness I felt in my heart.

“Who’d have thought I’d have Adam Noble to thank for making all my dreams come true,” I whispered. “And is it wrong that I’m jealous that he saved you and I didn’t?” I traced my lips over her soft skin as I spoke. “I swear, from this day forward, I’m not letting you out of my sight.”

She glanced up at me, and every doubt I’d ever had about opening up to her, letting myself be vulnerable, loving her... it all fell away.

“I fucking love you, Morgan Rotherham,” I growled, and pressed my lips to hers.

She kissed me back, her lips hungry, but the wetness of her tears still trickling down her cheeks made me pull away. I brushed my thumb over them, wiping her tears away and willing the sunshine to come back.

“Don’t cry,” I begged her. “Everything will be okay.”

“Will it?” She sniffed. “I did a terrible thing. I hurt you.”

I placed my forehead gently against hers.

“And you saved me too. Yours is the only touch I’ll ever want. I crave it. Holding you in my arms reminds me there’s a future out there... our future. And I want it so badly. I want to live every day knowing I have you by my side...” I faltered. “I do have you, don’t I?”

“You’ll always have me. I’ve never given up on you, and I never will. I love you.”

I kissed her again, stroking her cheek as she fisted my T-shirt and pulled me to her.

“Make me a promise?” I asked, my lips grazing over hers.

“Anything.”

“Promise you’ll let me die first.”

She pulled back, a frown set deeply on her face.

“Why would you say that?”

“Because I don’t want to live for even one day on this earth without you. I couldn’t bear it.”

Her eyes softened, and her body melted into mine.

“Zak Atwood, how do you do it? I swear you’ve always held the key to my heart.”

“And I’m never giving it back.” I grinned.

“Does this mean you don’t need any more time?” she asked, a look of apprehension flickering in her eyes.

“It means I’ve realised how fucking precious time is, and I want to spend all of it with you.”

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THIRTY-THREE

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MORGAN



ZAK

Morgan, don't do this. Please come down. I need you and I'm sorry. Please talk to me.

ZAK

I can't live without you.

ZAK

I love you, Morgan. I really fucking love you.

ZAK

Not like this. Please, God, not like this.

Seeing the texts he'd sent me on that day, after everything that'd happened, meant the world. Like the little pieces of my heart were slowly fusing back together again.

He loved me.

After everything I'd done, he still found it in his heart to see through it all and let the good shine brighter.

Dreams did come true. I was proof of that.

I didn't get to take Isabelle to the beach the day after what'd happened on that rooftop. After the fall, she'd been taken into hospital and put under the care of the mental health team. She was lucky that her bodily injuries weren't too

severe. The police had caught her before she could hit the ground. But the damage inside of her was something else. Unseen fractures and bruises to her mind that would heal eventually, over time, with care, attention, and above all, love. Adam and the others from Brinton Manor had stayed by her side at the hospital. Their guilt was palpable, but their determination to help her shone through. It made me see them in a new light. Listening to the stories I'd heard; they'd always been the bad guys. Thugs who ruled their town with an iron fist. But that wasn't the case. They were just men who wanted a better life for the people who they grew up with. People they believed deserved a better shot at life. People like Isabelle.

I did the decent thing and visited Isabelle regularly, letting her know she had a friend in me too. And on the day they released her from the hospital, I drove her to the coast, and we sat together, eating fish and chips on the sand and being content to sit in silence and just be in the present. Hearing Isabelle's peaceful sighs as she watched the waves and the seagulls dancing overhead was like a soothing balm to my soul. She had a journey to take, a tough one, but she was here to travel it, and that was all that mattered.

As for mine and Zak's counselling, we were still working on ourselves. Sometimes attending sessions together, sometimes alone, but always steadfast in our resolve to make progress. Every little step we took was a step towards finding ourselves and each other.

I sat in the bedroom, rereading his texts, unable to keep the smile off my face, and I decided to respond, even though he was only in the living room.

ME

Just wanted to tell you I love you, and every day you make me smile.

I clicked send, waiting for the dots to dance on my screen to show me he was replying, but they didn't. Instead, I heard him clear his throat from the doorway behind me.

“That’s my job. Glad I’m doing it right,” he replied gruffly, then he stalked towards me with a wicked darkness in his eyes. “We need to shower,” he growled, leaning down to nibble the side of my neck.

I giggled from the tickle I felt there, my shoulders rising in a protective response even though I loved his touches.

“We don’t have time for the kind of shower you’re thinking of,” I scolded him, secretly hoping he’d prove me wrong.

But today was a big day.

The hospital was opening a new wing in their burns unit, and Zak had donated his sculpture for the foyer. It was still a top-secret project because even I hadn’t seen it yet. I couldn’t wait for the grand reveal later.

“I couldn’t give a fuck if we turn up late today,” Zak spat back. “My shower time with you is more important than anything else.”

“And you’d keep all those people waiting, just so I could scrub your back?”

He gave a low, wicked laugh that went straight between my legs, making me squirm in anticipation. “You’ll be doing a lot more than scrubbing.”

His growl that followed made my stomach flip, and I tilted my head up, my lips begging to be kissed.

He brushed his mouth over mine, teasing me, then took my bottom lip in his teeth, pulling gently before letting it go and kissing me roughly.

“You, Morgan Rotherham, are the best distraction.” He stood in front of me with a devilish grin. “Now get your clothes off and get in that fucking shower.”

He pulled his T-shirt over his head and unbuttoned his jeans, pulling them and his boxers down to his ankles, then kicking them off. It still made my heart swell that he felt comfortable enough now to do this, get naked in front of me

without a second thought. Of all the gifts he could've given me, this was the most precious.

“Don't threaten me with a good time, Atwood.” I pretended to scold him, then giving a sly wink, I stood up and flicked the straps of my dress off my shoulders, and let it fall to the floor. The way his chest constricted as he took a deep breath after seeing that I wasn't wearing any underwear spurred me on even more, and I took a step back to tease him further. “If you want to fuck me... you'll have to catch me first.”

I darted towards the door, but he was too fast, and he wrapped his muscly arms around my waist, hoisting me up into the air and then over his shoulder. I wriggled in his hold, making a feeble attempt to resist, but he laughed and slapped my ass.

“You've gotta be faster than that, Sunshine. Maybe later, I'll let my little kitten run free in the field out the back and give her a head start. I think a little game of cat and mouse might be fun.”

“But then I'd be the mouse, not the kitten,” I sulked, pouting even though he couldn't see my face. My petulance earned me another slap on my ass as we entered the bathroom, and he whisper-growled, “Stop being a brat. You'll always be my kitten. Now do as I say... get on your knees and suck my cock like a good girl.”

He walked us into the shower and turned the water on, but he positioned the jets so they were away from me.

I held his gaze as I did what I was told, getting on my knees and taking his cock in my hand. He was heavy, hard and thick, and the way he watched me as I gave him long, slow strokes gave me butterflies and made my pussy clench with need. His eyes were hooded as he watched me lean forward and run my tongue along the tip of his cock and then around the head before taking him into my mouth and sucking him like the tastiest goddamn lolly pop I'd ever had.

He threw his head back in ecstasy as I sucked and licked him.

“Fuck. You’re so good at that,” he hissed, closing his eyes, then dropping his head forward to enjoy more of the show.

I pushed him to the back of my throat, my head bobbing as I sucked him and let him fuck my throat. I could feel his hips rocking into me, and he grabbed a fistful of my hair, forcing my head up slightly to let me know he wanted my eyes on his as I sucked him.

“I love fucking your throat like this,” he groaned. “You take me so well.”

And I hummed in appreciation, making his eyes roll as he felt the vibration on his cock.

I skimmed my fingers up his legs, legs he used to be afraid to show me, but now, he didn’t care. He knew that his body was mine, just like mine was his. His to play with and do whatever the fuck he wanted, and right now, it felt like he wanted to come down my throat, judging by the way his cock was thickening and pulsing on my tongue.

He gave a strangled, guttural moan and pulled his cock out of my mouth, leaving me staring up at him, my mouth open, waiting to hear what he wanted next.

“I’m so close,” he muttered. “I need to come inside you.” He gestured for me to stand, and I did. Then he picked me up, forcing me against the tiles of the shower as he pulled my legs up by the back of my knees.

I wrapped my legs around his waist, and he thrust up into me without warning, making me gasp at his size. He felt so good stretching me, thrusting into me, making me cry out with how good it was.

“Fuck, you feel amazing,” he groaned. “This pussy is mine,” he stated, filling me roughly, thrusting hard, pounding into me relentlessly. “All mine. Say it.” I could barely breathe, but he repeated, “Say it... Say it, now!”

“Yours,” I gasped breathlessly. “I’m yours.”

“Say it again,” he hissed through gritted teeth as his thrusts turned furious, his hips smacking into mine.

“It’s your pussy.” I sighed and he grabbed my ass and squeezed hard.

“Good girl.”

Water cascaded around us as he fucked me against the shower wall, and I clung to him, riding his cock to get us both to the high we craved so badly.

His face was buried in my neck, groans and gasps pouring into my ears, sending me closer and closer to orgasm.

“Take it,” he moaned as he thrust harder. “Fucking take it.” His hips pistoned faster and faster. “That’s my good girl. Come on my cock. Let me feel what I do to you.”

I whimpered as my legs started to shake. I could feel myself falling into that toe-curling, head fuck of ecstasy as I came hard on his cock. My walls clamped down, my whole body following suit in spasms and waves of pure bliss that echoed through every part of me.

“That’s it,” he cried, his thrusts becoming more erratic as he started to come too. “Fuck, you feel so good wrapped around my cock. So fucking good.” And then he grunted as he came hard inside me, holding me in his arms as he took every second of pleasure he could get from my body.

My limbs were heavy as my body slumped in his arms, totally spent and utterly satisfied.

“I’ll always want you,” he whispered as he leaned his body against mine to catch his breath. “I’ll always crave this.”

“And you’ll always have it,” I reassured him. “I’m not going anywhere. This is it for me.”

He lifted his head to look at me.

“Me too.” He placed a gentle kiss on my lips. “Today, tomorrow, always.”

THIRTY-FOUR

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ZAK



I couldn't keep my hands off her. Whether she was washing the dishes and I had the overwhelming urge to go behind her and hold her, kiss her neck, just breathe her in. Or if she was sitting in the bedroom looking totally gorgeous and fuckable in one of her little sundresses. I couldn't control myself around her, and I didn't want to. It was like a valve that'd been shut off for so many years was now free, and boy was it making up for lost time.

She bewitched me, consumed me, and made me want to get naked with her every chance I got. My scars weren't the issue they used to be. I'd be lying if I said I didn't still feel a hint of contempt for the body I had now, but as time went on, I'd learned to live more harmoniously than I had done before.

And it was all because of her.

She didn't see the scars, she saw me.

She had changed my life.

Through meeting her, being free with her, and then breaking through the walls I'd held up for so long, I'd found a deeper connection. A connection we both craved but never realised we needed. I'd found my home, and it was everything. This feeling had reached inside of us, shook us to our very core, and thrust us into a world where her heart and mine were intrinsically linked. Her happiness mirrored my own. If she was sad, it cut me deeper than any emotion I'd ever felt for myself. She had the power to make my whole day brighter just

by being there. And I worked hard, so damn hard to try and do the same for her.

So, after our shower fun, we'd gotten dressed and driven straight over to the hospital for the grand opening. And now, as I stood on the stage to deliver my speech in front of the small crowd gathered here, I could feel the nerves settling in.

I scanned the sea of faces spread out in front of me. Doctors, nurses, physiotherapists, and other hospital staff that I recognised from my time on the unit smiled back at me. They looked proud, and I knew the old me would've shrugged that off. Told myself they were wrong, there was nothing to be proud of. But I didn't. I stood a little taller, reminding myself that I had achieved something. I was standing up here today. I'd made something that people coming into this hospital would look at and enjoy for years to come. Not only that, but I was alive. I'd survived and I'd found love, the kind of love I never believed existed, not for me.

I saw Morgan standing towards the back of the foyer with Ryan, Emily, Brandon, Harper, Finn, Effy, my parents, and my little sister, and I smiled. We were in a room full of people, but all that mattered was her. My sunshine. My lifeline. My reason for everything. She smiled back, and suddenly I wasn't so nervous anymore.

The manager of the unit cleared his throat and stepped towards the microphone beside me.

"I'd like to take a moment to thank you all for being here today," he said. "The work that my colleagues have done to raise money, as well as the amazing contributions we've received from local charities and you, the public, have made it possible for us to make these improvements to the burns unit here at Sandland General." He put his hand over his heart. "I am forever grateful for each and every one of you, and I know you'll all join me in thanking our staff for the way they have so tirelessly and unashamedly devoted their lives to helping and healing others, often at the cost of their own welfare and family life. And they do it without fuss or complaint. They truly are angels here on earth, performing miracles every day, and I will always be in awe of that. I do have a list of

contributors that I want to thank in a moment, but first, I'd like to introduce you to a very special guest. Someone who knows first-hand how crucial the work of this unit and its staff are to anyone that should need it. A few years ago, he was a patient of ours, and now we're proud to call him a friend. Ladies and gentlemen, Mr Zak Atwood."

I heard the applause, and a ripple of nerves hit me all over again, but I fought them down, shaking the manager's hand and taking my place at the microphone. I took a breath, quickly recalling all the bullet notes for my speech, and then I began to talk from the heart.

"Five years ago, my life changed in a way I never could've imagined. In the blink of an eye, my whole world collapsed around me, and there was nothing I could do to stop it. Absolutely nothing. Five years ago... I almost died."

I glanced at Morgan, and when I saw the tears in her eyes, it almost broke me, but I had to stay focused.

"And five years ago, I met some of the most selfless, honourable, empathetic, and hardworking people who walk these halls day in, day out. True, inspirational angels, who never complain but work tirelessly with kindness and grace. The circumstances for them coming into my life weren't great, to say the least." I gave a pitiful chuckle, and the audience murmured laughter back at me. "I won't lie," I carried on. "There were times I wondered... and even now I wonder, how they put up with me. I wasn't the easiest patient. I was stubborn, bad-tempered, and I didn't always do what I was told—"

"Not much has changed there then," a gruff voice in the crowd, that sounded suspiciously like Brandon, muttered loud enough for us all to hear, and another low ripple of laughter echoed around the room.

"I guess not," I joked back. "But these people, they never gave up on me. Day after day they fought endlessly, relentlessly and faithfully to pave the way towards my recovery, as they did for every other patient they cared for. From the doctors and nurses who tended to my burns, to the

surgeons, the physio team, the therapists, all of you here at this unit, you pieced me back together again, one shattered fragment at a time. I owe you everything. You gave me back my life. And without the care you gave, I wouldn't be able to stand up here today to speak to you all and offer you this small token of thanks."

I gestured to my work of art hidden under the cloth, ready to be revealed.

"As your manager quite rightly pointed out, you are angels on earth. The best of the best. You've restored my faith in humanity, and I hope that my work of art will go some small way to show you how much you are valued in this community. How much I value everything you've done and continue to do. You are everything that is good in this world, and I want you to know how much I appreciate you. I am in awe of you. Truly."

I paused to compose myself as the enormity of this moment suddenly hit me. A lot of people were watching me, listening to what I was saying. People who I loved and who had done so much for me, and I didn't want to fuck this up. I hoped my words were enough to convey what I felt in my heart.

"I'd also like to take this opportunity to thank a few people who have made today possible."

I scanned the room, noting the beaming faces around me, some with admiration, others with reverence and empathy brimming in their eyes.

"I'd like to thank my family for going through every second of pain with me, holding my hand, being there through it all. It was a life you didn't ask for, one you didn't deserve, and I never heard you complain, not once. You just accepted it and moved forward, showing me there was hope for me. You've always been my inspiration, and for that I am truly thankful.

"To my friends, I hope you know that you've been my rock throughout the years, all of you. Even when I pushed you away, you never turned your backs on me. Instead, you waited

patiently in the wings until I was ready to come back to my life and to you. I don't know what I'd do without you."

I felt their love from across the room, but I couldn't make eye contact. That would've set me off. So, I kept going.

"To new friends who've come into my life, I'd like to say a special thank you for taking a chance on me. Especially Kate Masters, Shelley King, and Bryony Stokes, who answered my call to arms at the eleventh hour and helped me create the artistic effect on this piece that I couldn't achieve on my own. You are some of the most talented yet humble artists I have ever met. And if anyone wants to see their work, head down to the King Makers Gallery in Merivale. I promise you won't be disappointed. Their work is some of the best I've ever seen."

I glanced to the side of the room, where the girls stood with the rest of the soldiers of Brinton Manor, along with Adam, Liv, and Isabelle, and I gave them a nod in thanks, which they returned. I never thought I'd consider them friends, not after the past we shared, but I did. Sometimes, life had a way of clearing the fog to show you what was really in front of you. Diamonds in the rough was an overused phrase, but for them, it was true.

"I'd also like to thank my good friend, Finn Knowles, who first introduced me to art therapy. He gave me the greatest gift of all, the gift of knowing how to appreciate artistic beauty. Through sculpting and pottery, I was able to find a release, a beacon in a world that'd seemed so grey and pointless before. He's worked with me on this piece as well, so he really should be standing up here with me today, but if you know Finn, he doesn't like the limelight. So please, on your way out, shake his hand. He's the guy standing at the back in the blue T-shirt. The one trying to pretend I'm not pointing at him." I laughed, and Finn blushed as Ryan and Brandon patted him on the back, but he still gave me a thumbs up. I'd pay for making a spectacle of him later.

Suddenly, my stomach rolled and nerves that I'd been able to hold at bay began to surface as I braced myself for the next part of my speech. Peering across the room, I saw her smiling

back at me. Gentle encouragement glowed in her eyes as she gave a slight nod for me to go on.

“But most of all,” I stated proudly, keeping my eyes fixed on hers. “I want to thank the one person who got me through it all. The one who made me realise that my life might’ve changed but it wasn’t over. Someone who fought harder than I ever knew was possible, to make my dreams come true and give me the kind of life I always thought was out of my reach. A life filled with love and laughter. A life worth living.” I paused, then added, “I never thought guardian angels existed... and then I met mine.”

The lump in my throat grew bigger, but I swallowed, determined to get through my speech without breaking down.

“There was one thing I always heard from a lot of the patients I met over the years through this unit, and that’s how difficult it was for us to accept our scars, to find peace in our bodies. My guardian angel not only showed me that peace, but she helped me to accept what I saw in the mirror and not to feel embarrassed or ashamed. She made me see beauty where all I’d seen in the past was ugliness and pain. She helped me to see my scars as a new part of me. Not imperfections, but... well, battle scars, if you like. A road map to recovery. Proof that I’d survived and lived to tell the tale.

“And it made me stop and think. Over a quarter of a million people in the U.K. go through some form of burns injury every year. Of those people, one hundred and seventy-five thousand attend accident and emergency departments, and sixteen thousand will be admitted to a specialist burns care unit, just like this one. Just like me. It’s frightening, life-altering, overwhelming doesn’t even come close to describing how you feel when you’re here. Eventually, over time, the wounds heal, but the scars you don’t see, the hurt inside, that takes a lot longer.

“I was lucky enough to meet my guardian angel who didn’t let the darkness in me scare her away. She embraced it. And I hope that every single person who comes through those doors, suffering the worst pain they’ll probably ever know, will find comfort, like I did. I hope they have somebody, or

eventually meet someone who'll take their hand and walk with them through the good times and the bad. I pray they'll find peace in the chaos and realise they are not the sum of their thoughts, which at times can be overpowering, frightening, negative in a way you've never experienced before. Whatever they go through, I hope they find a guardian angel to help them move forward and find joy in life again. Because I did. And at the end of the day, although we might think we're doing the world a favour by locking ourselves away, hiding from the shame we think we should feel, we aren't helping anyone. We need to work together, live and love together to make this world a better, more understanding place for survivors to be. Diminish the stigma, empower people. Show them they don't need to hide their scars, their face, or who they are.

“And that's what got me thinking about the representation, or lack thereof, for burns survivors in art. Where can we look to see people who are scarred just like us? If we're going to see the beauty in each other and ourselves, why can't we make that beauty an everyday thing? We need to see it proudly showcased in photos, videos, paintings, TV, film, advertising, everywhere. Then, it'll become art for everyone to see, not something that's hidden away. Authentic, intricate, beautiful. No longer flawed, just another form of art. Not something to be stared at or be scared of, but... normal. Every day.

“So, that's why I created my sculpture, this piece that I am gifting to the unit today. There are so many ways we can help burns survivors. As a survivor myself, I'm fully aware of that. But if seeing this artwork, seeing art in our scars helps just one person who comes through this unit, then it'll have been worth it. In honour of all the angels who work here, and my angel, my guardian angel, Morgan Rotherham, please allow me to present *The Beauty of Survival*.”

I turned towards the statue and pulled off the cloth to showcase the guardian angel I'd created underneath. Only her skin wasn't smooth and flawless like most statues. It was mottled, uneven, burned but beautiful, just the way I wanted her to be, all thanks to Finn, Kate, Shelley, and Bryony. Perfectly imperfect. The symbol of a warrior. Something that

other burns survivors could look at and see that beauty comes in all different forms.

The audience clapped, and I heard whistles from the back of the room. I felt proud, but the attention was starting to get to me, so I said my thanks and stepped to the side, admiring the looks my work was getting from the people around me.

“Thank you, Mr Atwood,” the manager said, stepping back in front of the microphone. “I think we can all agree that this statue represents beautifully what we’re all trying to achieve here. Hope.”

My mind wandered then, blocking out the additional speeches being made. I wanted to get to Morgan. Being with her would ease my nerves. I’d pushed myself today, big social gatherings were still exhausting for me.

Eventually, the crowds moved into a separate room where food and drinks were being served, but I stayed put. Then I felt her hand on my forearm, and every muscle that I didn’t even realise had tensed so badly relaxed from her touch.

“This is stunning, Zak.” She sniffed, wiping away her tears. “The speech, the sculpture, all of it was... perfect.”

I pulled her into my arms and held her, breathing in her scent, which was like a balm to my soul.

“I meant every word,” I whispered to her. “You saved me.”

I felt her shudder slightly in my arms, and I pulled away to see if she was crying. I didn’t want her to feel sad. But the way she beamed at me as I looked down at her, goodness shining from every pore, made me realise she wasn’t sad; she was proud.

“What does it say at the bottom?” she asked, nodding towards the plinth below the statue.

“Go ahead and read it,” I told her, and she did.

“The Beauty of Survival, by Zak Atwood. When you can’t see the light, let me guide you through the darkness, for I have enough light to pave the way for us both.” Her tears started to

fall freely now, and she turned to face me. “Zak, that’s beautiful.”

“It’s you,” I stated. “You’re the light, the angel... everything is you.”

“How do you manage to do that?”

“Do what?”

“Say the most beautiful things and make me fall even more in love with you every day.”

I put my arm around her waist and leaned down, kissing her gently on her neck. Then sliding my lips slowly over the shell of her ear, I said, “Because it’s true. Every word is the truth, and you deserve to hear it. For someone who never heard a word of kindness growing up, you always radiate warmth and goodness for others. You’re amazing, an anomaly. My proudest find and my greatest treasure. The day you landed in my lap was the best day of my life. I only wish I’d been able to thank you for what you did for me back then, how you watched over me after the fire.”

Her head dipped, so I hooked my finger under her chin to bring her eyes back to mine. “An accident brought us together,” I went on. “How that accident started isn’t important, but what came after... it means the world. And I never thought I’d say this, not about my life, but I wouldn’t change it. Not for the world. Because it brought me to you. I found you.”

“I love you, Zak Atwood. Even when you’re in your darkest mood and hate everything.”

“I could never hate everything,” I replied, placing my lips over hers. “I could never hate you. I’ll love you till there isn’t a moody huff of breath left in my body.”

“Promise?”

“Always and forever, Sunshine. Always and forever.”

EPILOGUE

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MORGAN



One Year Later

I took a glass of champagne from the tray of a passing waiter and sipped, the bubbles tickling and sparkling as the fizz hit my throat. It was hard to believe what'd happened in the year since I was last in this marquee, celebrating Finn and Effy's wedding. I couldn't believe how much my life had changed, and it was all for the better. Unbelievably so.

I had all my friends around me, the family I'd made for myself who respected me more than my own parents ever had. I had a man that I loved, who loved me back. A man who made every day exciting, surprising, living in the moment but dreaming big for tomorrow. And here we were, celebrating the Knowles's first anniversary. I couldn't keep the smile off my face. Life was pretty damn good.

I stood watching Zak at the DJ booth, doing what he loved. Playing music and getting the crowds fired up. Okay, it wasn't quite on par with the events he used to manage, but he was alive right now, his eyes dancing with as much joy as his body was. He'd always loved music, and I was so glad he'd started to DJ again. It wasn't often, but he was dipping his toe back into that pond, and I was so thankful for that.

I finished my glass of fizz and headed for the dance floor, ready to let my hair down and enjoy the night. Emily, Liv, Effy, Harper, and Isabelle were dancing together, and I joined them, giving Issy a side hug as I took my place next to her.

“It’s great to see you,” I shouted over the music. “How are you doing?”

“I’m good,” she called back. “I’ve met someone.” And then her face softened. “He’s called Kian. I think you might know him?”

Of course I knew Kian. A few years ago, he’d asked me out, but Ryan had warned him off. Ryan used to make a habit of doing that, meddling in my love life like he was my brother and not my brother-in-law. I hadn’t minded though, it showed he cared. Surprisingly, he’d never done it with Zak. He didn’t need to though. Zak was one in a million. We all knew that.

“Kian’s a good guy,” I replied, giving her an approving nod. “You deserve to be happy. I’m really pleased for you, Issy.”

Just then, I spotted Connor, Ryan’s brother, dancing pretty close to Kate Masters, and I gave him a wave. I didn’t really know Kate. I knew she’d helped Zak with his art, and I knew her sisters, Shelley and Bryony. If she was anything like them, I hoped something good came of Connor’s dance with her, because those girls were twenty-four-carat gold, and Connor deserved his own slice of happiness.

After dancing to a few songs, I felt thirsty and decided to take a break. I gestured to the others that I was off to the bar and made my way to the edge of the marquee, standing a little way back from the crowds so I could spend a moment taking it all in. In that instant, I felt his closeness, and Zak came to stand in front of me, mischief brewing in his eyes.

“Pretend you know me,” he said with a sly smile, copying the exact words I’d said to him a year ago in this very marquee. And before I could respond, he pulled me to him and kissed me, his lips pressing hard against my own.

I kissed him back, wrapping my arms around his neck and savouring every delicious second. Time always stood still when he held me like this. His kisses made me weak at the knees. I’d never grow tired of drowning in his love.

Slowly, he pulled away, and unable to hide his grin, he asked, “Are they looking?”

“Is who looking?” I laughed, still clinging to him.

“The redhead, the brunette, fuck if I know.” He smirked.

I glanced over his shoulder, then back at him. “I think we’re safe.”

He looked like he wanted some trouble, the best kind of trouble. His face had that boyish cockiness to it, like he was already picturing all the wicked things he wanted to do to me. I wanted that too.

“I think we should kiss again, just to make sure,” he stated firmly, and I threw my head back and laughed.

“Did you memorize every word I said to you a year ago?” I asked, narrowing my eyes at him.

“Of course I did. Every word, every movement, every look.” He tapped the side of his head. “It’s all stored in here. Safely locked away in my Morgan treasure chest.”

“I seem to remember you telling me you preferred your own company back then,” I reminded him.

“I used to. But now, I’m better when you’re with me. Being a moody fucker who scares everyone away is highly overrated.”

“You never scared me away.”

“You never gave me the chance,” he joked.

“Do you want to dance?” I asked, remembering his aversion to me even breathing the same air as him a year ago when I asked this same question.

“Do I look like a man that dances?”

“You were showing some pretty impressive moves at the DJ booth just now.”

“Okay, you got me. But I’d rather take a walk than dance.” He stepped back then hooked his arm out for me to put mine through. “I hear the grove is impressive at this time of night.”

The playfulness in his voice made my stomach flutter at the promises he hinted at.

I glanced to the side, noticing the cheeky half-smile he was giving me.

“Yes. Lots of trees to... lean on,” I replied sarcastically.

“I promise it’ll be worth your while,” he whispered to me.

“Taking a night-time stroll with a good-looking guy like you is always worth my time.”

We walked arm-in-arm out of the marquee, and as I glanced back at the others who were still partying, I noticed that no one had given us a second glance.

Once outside, the cool air hit me, giving me a headrush, and I clung a little tighter onto Zak’s arm.

“I think I’d had a lot more to drink the last time we came down here,” I said, shivering slightly. “The alcohol kept me warm.”

He moved to put his arm around me.

“I’ll keep you warm, Sunshine. Do you want to borrow my jacket?”

I nodded, and he stopped, taking his jacket off and draping it over my shoulders. It swamped me, but I didn’t care. I loved that I could smell his scent on the warm fabric, and I pushed my arms through the sleeves to drown myself in it further.

A flicker of panic ghosted over his face, but he pushed his hands into his pockets, and then he seemed to relax, taking them out again and sliding his arm across my shoulders.

“Aren’t you cold now, though?” I asked with concern.

“I’ve got all I need right here. I don’t feel the cold.”

We walked a little further, letting the music and bustle of the party behind us fade away. The farther we went, the darker the grounds became. A warm rush flowed through me, and I peered up at the night sky, marvelling at the twinkling stars overhead.

“It’s all so beautiful.” I sighed.

“It really is,” he replied, and as I lowered my gaze, all the breath in my lungs escaped when I saw what was down here.

The trees were decorated with a million fairy lights, sparkling as bright as the stars above us. On the floor of the grove was a fairy light trail, leading us to the tree where we’d stood on that first night. And in that tree were mason jars, with blue butterflies painted on them, lit up from the inside and swinging in the branches. It was breathtakingly beautiful. The perfect most romantic thing I’d ever seen, and I was speechless.

I stood still, taking it all in.

“Is this for me?” I asked, my words a whisper on the breeze.

“Everything is for you,” he replied, and I felt him come up behind me to wrap his arms around me and hold me tight. “Do you like it?” he asked.

I twisted in his hold to gaze at him over my shoulder.

“I love it. Thank you.” I turned to look at the grove again, lost in the magical wonder of it all. “What an amazing surprise.”

“I haven’t finished yet,” he whispered, and I felt his arms drop away from me, so I turned to see him take something from his pocket, and then, he got down on one knee, held the little black box up to me and said, “I don’t want to spend another day without making this official. You mean everything to me, Morgan. You’re my whole world. I love you more than I ever thought was possible, and so, please say you’ll be my wife?”

The waves of love I always felt for him morphed into a tsunami of utter devotion. There was nothing I wouldn’t do for this man, and being his wife was going to be an honour I would cherish for the rest of my life.

“Of course I’ll marry you,” I cried, moving to pull him up to me. “Now please stand up. I know how painful your legs can get, and I don’t want you hurting because of me.”

He laughed at me as he lifted himself up, and then he pulled me into him to hug me close.

“That’s what I love about you,” he muttered low in my ear. “Even when this moment should be all about you, you always think of others.”

“I’ll always put you first. That’s what I was put on this earth to do.”

“No.” He shook his head, resting his forehead against mine. “We’ll put each other first, because that’s how it should be. You and me against the world, Sunshine. Always you and me.”

He opened the box and took out the stunning diamond ring he’d chosen for me. Then he slid it onto my ring finger and lifted my hand to kiss it. And I took his face in both of my hands and kissed him back.

“I love you,” I told him, my voice breaking as I spoke.

“I love you too,” he replied. “I’ll love you forever.”

We stood together in that grove, holding each other, swaying like we were dancing a slow dance without any music. It was beyond perfect. A moment in time I would cherish forever. The perfect moment. With him.

As time went on, he sighed and asked me if I was ready to go back to the party. I wasn’t. I didn’t want to break the spell we were under, but he placed a gentle kiss on the tip of my nose and told me we could say our goodbyes and leave.

“Can we come back down here after?” I asked, peering around me. “I want to take some photos of this. It’s too pretty to leave behind.”

“You can take all the photos you want,” he replied. “Come on, Mrs Atwood. Let’s go and face the music.”

“I like the way that sounds.” I smiled up at him as we walked back up to the marquee, our arms wrapped around each other, holding each other as tightly as we could.

“You’ll like the way it feels later, when we get home,” he whispered with wicked promise.

We strolled back into the marquee with our eyes locked on each other, and it wasn't until I heard cheers around us that I looked away and noticed that every single person here was facing us, clapping, cheering, giving us a look that said they knew where we'd been. And then I saw it, a huge banner strung up across the back of the marquee saying, 'Congratulations on your Engagement, Zak and Morgan'.

I put my hand over my mouth, uttering, "Is this..."

"Yes, baby," Zak replied. "This is our engagement party." Then, leaning a little closer so only I could hear, he added, "You didn't really think Finn and Effy were having a one-year anniversary party, did you? I think that sort of extravagance would send Finn over the edge. He struggled to get through the wedding. You know he likes to hide in the shadows."

"So do you," I reminded him.

But he shook his head, and pulled me to his chest to hold me.

"I prefer to stay in the light now, especially if it's your light I'm standing in. It's the only place I ever want to be."

The music kicked in at that moment, a love song about stars lighting the sky above, and I walked hand-in-hand with the man who'd once told me he didn't dance onto the dance floor. But tonight, we danced together in the middle of the marquee, surrounded by our family and friends. We danced like no one else was there, and when the song hit the crescendo, and it said we could rule the world, I believed it. With this man, I could do anything, be anything. He made me feel invincible.

"Thank you," he said as we swayed together. "Thank you for bringing me back to life."

"Thank you for letting me be in your life," I replied, feeling truly grateful.

"As if I'd ever let you walk away." He leaned his head to mine. "You and me? We were written in the stars. It says so in the song... listen."

I laughed at him, and then tilted my head for a kiss.

“It said we can ride on the stars, not write on them,” I told him.

“Better fasten your seatbelt then.” He grinned. “I think we’re in for a fun ride.”

“And I’m here for it. The bumpy and the smooth. The light and dark. The good and bad.” I paused. “I wish I could freeze this moment in time. I don’t ever want to forget this.”

“You won’t,” he replied. “Because I’ll be right here to remind you. And life might get tough, but our love? That’ll never change.”

“Do you promise?”

“Yes. And it’s a promise I’ll make right here, right now. A promise that truly matters. That, and the one I’ll make on our wedding day... that I’ll love you forever.”

“Who knew the grumpy Mr Atwood would turn out to be such an old romantic?” I joked.

“Not me.” He smiled back. “But that’s what you do to me. You’re full of surprises. You are the surprise I never knew I needed and the one I can’t live without.”

“And you’ll never have to,” I replied. “Because we’re a team. The Atwoods. Grumpy and Sunshine, ready to take on the world.”

“Rule the world,” he corrected.

“We already do, baby.” I placed my lips over his. “We already do.”

The End

Thank you for taking the time to read Zak and Morgan’s story.
I really do appreciate it.

Have you started the Soldiers of Anarchy series yet? Book one, The Psycho can be downloaded [HERE](#)

THE
PSYCHO
SOLDIERS OF ANARCHY

There are three things that are certain in this life.

Death

Taxes.

And if I want something, I will get it, not matter what it takes.

And I want her, Olivia Cooper, whether she likes it or not.

She is all I think about.

She is my *obsession*.

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And finally, to you the reader. Thank you for taking a chance on my book. Thank you for reading Zak and Morgan's story. You make it all worthwhile.

Until next time,

Lots of love

Nikki x

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