



LISA HELEN GRAY

IMOGEN

A NEXT GENERATION CARTER BROTHER NOVEL

BOOK EIGHT

Imogen

A Next Generation Carter Brother Novel

Book 8

By Lisa Helen Gray

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FAMILY TREE

(AGES ARE SUBJECT TO CHANGE THROUGHOUT BOOKS)

Maverick & Teagan

- Faith (engaged to Beau)
- Lily (married to Jaxon)
- Mark
- Aiden (with Bailey)

Mason & Denny

- Hope
- Ciara
- Ashton

Malik & Harlow

- Madison (Twin 1)
- Maddox (Twin 2 – with Amelia)
- Trent

Max & Lake

- Landon (Triplet 1 – with Paisley)
- Hayden (Triplet 2 – with Clayton)
- Liam (Triplet 3)

Myles & Kayla

- Charlotte (with Drew)
- Jacob

Evan (Denny's brother) & Kennedy

- Imogen
- Joshua

Prologue

Imogen

At seventeen, I've had my fair share of crushes, but I never experienced love—until *him*. My mum often tells me I have my whole life to fall in love, so I shouldn't rush it. Sometimes I think she tells me that because she has to. That, or she feels sorry for me. Because lads are scared of me. They always have been. I think I intimidate them. I've always spoken my mind, but growing up with the Carter family, I inherited their confidence and their drive to take no shit.

My dad, however... He buries his head in the sand because he doesn't particularly want me to date. He has rules, but he's never been unreasonable about them.

Which makes this more frustrating.

Because I am in love with a guy who works for him. At least, I'm pretty sure that is what I'm feeling. When he walks into a room, my stomach flutters, and my heart beats rapidly. Words don't come easily when he's around, because when he speaks to me, I get a lump in my throat and my coherent thoughts become non-existent. He's the only guy who has ever crumpled my confidence. He makes me feel like how Gina Morgan must have felt in Year 7 at school, when she used to go bright red every time her crush walked into the room.

Ben Donovan has my heart and my attention. He is the fittest guy I've ever laid eyes on. And I think he likes me too. I feel it when he looks at me, which is weird to explain because you can't physically feel a look.

He bought me a bag of strawberry bon-bons because he knows how much I love them. He brings me drinks when I'm studying in Dad's office. And he speaks to me like I'm a woman, not a child. Then the other day, when a group of lads from another school were shouting explicit slurs at me, he wrapped his arm around my shoulders. He didn't even need to say anything. He gave them a death glare until they ran with their tails tucked between their legs, then proceeded to walk

me into my dad's work with his arm around me. I knew then it was time to make a move. I've been holding off for too long.

He started working for my dad at nineteen and I was nearly fifteen years old. Back then, I thought it was just a crush and I'd get over it. But the older I got, and the more I saw him, the surer I became that this was something more.

Hayden Carter comes rushing down the corridor to where I'm sitting at a round table, pulling me from memory lane. She's my best friend—even with the three-year age gap. At fifteen, Hayden is a badass, and she's my kind of crazy, which is why we get along so well. She's also my cousin. Not by blood, but my auntie is married to another Carter, so we are basically family.

And today, we are celebrating my dad's forty-fifth birthday, since he's adamant about not celebrating his fiftieth. He knew Mum was already planning it since he was away for his fortieth birthday, so they came to a compromise and threw one for his forty-fifth.

Everyone is here.

Even Ben Donovan, the guy I've been waiting for, for what feels like forever.

"What took you so long?" I hiss when Hayden takes a seat, flicking her long, dark hair behind her shoulder.

She pushes her chair closer and leans in. "Dad trying to take my food again."

"It's a buffet," I point out. She glares at me and I lean back, holding my hands up in surrender. I quickly amend my statement. "How dare he!"

"I know, right? I'm a growing kid, and he tries to steal the party sausage rolls from me."

I lick my lips at the mention of sausage rolls. I've been feeling so uneasy about tonight, I couldn't stomach food when they first opened the buffet. "Are there any left?" I ask, scanning the buffet table.

“Fuck no. What do you think took me so long? I ate them. Then I stole Dad’s *plate for Mum* and went and hid that one.”

My lower lip drops at her declaration. “Girl, you stole your mum’s food? That’s cold.”

“No, it’s what Dad tells people it’s for, but really, it’s everything he couldn’t fit on his own plate. We all do it. My spare plate is for Landon, Landon’s is for Liam, and Liam’s is for me. We have a system.”

“You do realise you guys are crazy?” I ask, arching a brow.

“Look, if you grew up with a bunch of wolves trying to steal your food, you’d do the same. Trust me. You’re lucky you only have Joshua to worry about. I have an entire pack to watch out for. You can’t trust any of them.”

Joshua is my younger brother, and honestly, aside from the stupid shit he gets up to with our other cousins, he’s never bothered me as a brother. We don’t fight like the Carters fight with their siblings. Not that they ever fight seriously. It’s all banter. Kind of.

“And that took you an hour?” I ask.

“Oh no, I kept slipping more vodka into your dad’s drink. He’s pretty wasted now, so even if he stumbles across you and Ben and questions it, he’ll believe whatever bullshit story you come up with.”

I wrap my arm around her shoulders. “Have I told you lately how much I love you?”

“Puh-lease. You owe me a triple chocolate fudge cake, and another bottle of vodka.”

My eyes widen. “The vodka was yours?”

She shrugs, her expression falling a little. “Technically, it was Landon’s. He’s been drinking his fucking sorrows away a lot lately, so I did him a favour.”

“And you want to return it to him?”

“Fuck no! I’ve got another party tomorrow and I want to get wasted.”

“Ah, okay. I’ll get it tomorrow for you.”

Since I’ve always looked older than my years, it’s easy for me to get served. I’ve never been asked for I.D. and we’ve always used that to our advantage.

“Thank you,” she responds, nodding solemnly.

“Do you know where Ben is?” I ask, my nose scrunching up when I spot my mum and dad making out on the dance floor. “Oh God, she’s touching his arse.”

Hayden snickers. “You’d better wear ear plugs to bed.”

I nudge her away from me. “Eww, Hayden!”

“Oh, lover-boy is in the bathroom.”

“He’s probably left there now,” I hiss. “You couldn’t have told me that before you sat down?”

“Easy, tiger. He’s just about to go in,” she explains, jerking her chin in the direction of the corridor.

And sure enough, Ben places his pint of beer down on the shelf outside the bathroom, before heading inside.

Panic grows within me. I’ve never done this before. Sure, I’ve had lads come up to me and flirt, but I’ve never been the one to go up and do it. And they’ve never flirted for long. Once they say something demeaning or cheesy, I tend to lay into them. Then I have to watch them hightail it away like their arse is on fire.

But I know Ben likes me. I see him watching me when he thinks I’m not looking. It’s only been the past few months that it’s been obvious, but I was only a child when I first met him. In a few weeks, though, I’m going to be eighteen, and we won’t need to worry about that.

“I don’t know what to do,” I stress, rubbing my palms down my black mini dress, which is feeling tighter than it did when I first put it on.

“Breathe,” Hayden demands. “You are a Carter, for fuck’s sake. You’ve got this.”

“I’m a Smith,” I remind her, panting.

She waves me off. “Semantics. You are a Carter at heart, and that’s all that matters. Now, you are going to go and wait outside the bathroom for him to come out. Then you can ask him to go outside with you, and then just go for it. Kiss him and tell him how you feel.”

“And that works?” I ask, biting my bottom lip.

“Trust me. I’ve seen him look at you. He likes you.”

I push back in my chair and get to my feet. “Wish me luck.”

“You don’t need it. You’re a Carter, remember?”

I squeeze her shoulder and then adjust my dress so I’m showing a little more boob. My feet feel heavy as I make my way down to the men’s toilets and lean against the wall, pulling my phone out of my bag. I might be outside here waiting for him, but I don’t want to make it obvious.

I hear the hand dryers going off inside the bathroom, and I know it’s only a matter of seconds before he comes out. I take a breath, scrolling through Facebook so I don’t look like a complete creeper. I know I’m acting crazy, but he makes me crazy. He ties me up in knots yet makes me feel free at the same time.

The door opens, and I hold my breath for a split second, peeking at the floor until I see his boots. Boots he’s always wearing. The only time I see him in trainers is when he is at the gym my dad has in the cellar of the building they work in.

“Immy, is everything okay?” he greets.

I look up, pretending to be surprised to see him. “Hey, Ben, I didn’t see you there.”

And my god, he is gorgeous. Even dressed casually he looks hot. A white, crisp shirt is untucked from his dark jeans, and his leather jacket hangs open, giving a tiny glimpse of the tattoos he has snaking up his neck.

He brushes his sandy blonde hair from his face, and his startling green eyes meet mine. They don't pick apart the dress I'm wearing like so many others here attending or working the party have done. He sees me. "Is everything okay?"

I glance at the door that leads out to the front of the building. The centre my mum hired for my dad is huge. It has a venue space and a member's room, both of which have bars inside. There are two changing rooms and a sports hall, and outside it has a cricket field, a basketball court, and a field of AstroTurf for football and hockey.

"I think I'm going to get some fresh air," I reply.

Before I can ask him to join me, he speaks, his eyes soft and on me. "I'll come with you. There was a kid out there earlier causing trouble."

I'm jumping with glee on the inside. It's working. All I've wanted to do is get him alone. Get him to admit he feels whatever this is between us.

We begin to make our way down the corridor to the exit. "You finished your assignment?" I ask.

He works guarding those who need it. The last assignment he had was protecting a lad who was testifying in court against a gang member. Ben was supposed to stay with him until the lad went into witness protection.

"Yeah. He's safe now. The gangs in that area are known to recruit school kids. It's a shame him and his family have had to leave the life they know, and all their family, but it needed to be done."

I never thought of it like that. "I'm glad he's safe though. I heard Dad talking to Mum about it. He said there was a scene at the courthouse."

"Yeah. The gang was there, waiting to take him out. Thankfully, the family hired us beforehand so they never got near him."

We step out into the cold, night air, and I rub my hands up and down my arms. "Looks like that kid you mentioned has gone," I murmur, searching the area. No one else is outside on

this side of the building. Those who smoke are gathered in the patio area on the other side of the building.

“Yeah,” he responds, slipping off his jacket. “Here, you look cold.”

He throws it over my shoulders, standing so close I can smell his cologne, which has a warm and spicy tone to it. I slip my arms through the jacket, and go for it.

My fingers gently touch the hard lines of his abs, and I step closer. He tenses. “Immy, what are you doing?”

I steel my spine. “I like you, Ben, and I think you like me too.”

Glad I wore the ridiculously high heels, I lean up on my tip-toes, my lips meeting his. He places his hands on my biceps, and for a split second, I think he’s going to kiss me back. That dream is short-lived when he pulls back just as quickly as I moved to kiss him.

“Immy, what the hell are you doing?”

“I... I like you.”

“This can’t happen,” he orders, his eyes narrowing.

“Why?”

“Are you really asking me that?”

“You like me. I know you do,” I argue, but there’s no heat behind those words, just humiliation.

“You are a child, and let’s not forget, I work for your dad,” he explains.

“I’m eighteen in a few weeks,” I whisper.

His expression goes blank, his green eyes growing distant, like he’s removing himself from the situation. “I’m sorry if I’ve given you the impression that I like you in that way. I don’t. I wanted to make a good impression on your dad since he hired me so young, which is why I’m nice to you.”

“I...” I don’t know what to say.

This is not how I imagined the night would go. I thought for sure he liked me.

“Immy,” he begins.

“It’s Imogen,” I snap.

“Look, I’m sorry. This is just a crush that you’ll get over. I can pretend that this didn’t happen.”

“Don’t do me any favours,” I brokenly argue, slipping his jacket off. I hand it back to him, hitting his chest as I do.

Before he can see the tears fall, I step away. “Where are you going?”

“For a walk,” I call back. “And don’t follow me.”

I hear him sigh as the first tear falls. I’ve spent years obsessing over every little thing he has done. I’ve refused to go on dates, or join in on days out with my friends. All because I wanted to wait for him, and to show him I am not a child.

I should never have talked myself into doing this.

A sob catches in my throat as I make my way down the side of the building, to where the concrete steps are. They are used for spectators to sit and watch the cricket matches.

“Imogen?”

I glance up at the sound of my friend’s voice. At the top of the steps is Zach Armstrong, sitting back against the wooden bar. He has on a pair of jeans and a polo shirt; his body lean and tall. I make my way up to him. We’ve been friends for years now—ever since we had to do a science project together. “What are you doing here?”

“I came to see you,” he tells me, his hazel eyes watching me. “Why are you crying?”

“It doesn’t matter,” I tell him, ashamed of the answer. “Why didn’t you come inside?”

“Your cousins wouldn’t let me. I’m actually hiding from them.”

I grimace. “Which ones?”

“Liam and Maddox,” he tells me as I take a seat next to him. “Tell me why you’re upset.”

I rest my elbows against my knees, pulling my hair away from my face as more tears fall. “I made a fool out of myself in front of someone. He doesn’t want me.”

Zach clears his throat, his hand touching my thigh. “I like you.”

I sit up, searching his gaze to see if he’s sincere. “What?”

“I’ve always liked you,” he rushes out.

“I…” I’m about to give him the same speech Ben just gave me, and it doesn’t feel good.

“Please, just give us a chance. We’ve been friends since forever, and you know I’d never hurt you like that guy.”

“You don’t know who I’m talking about,” I whisper.

“I do. That punk kid who works for your dad. He’ll never look at you like you are anything but a kid. Trust me. I heard them talking about it.”

“What? Who? When?”

“Remember when we were studying in your dad’s office for the science project?”

“Yeah.” And I do, because it was the first time my dad didn’t go all dad on me about boys.

“One of the other guys who works there asked him why he spoke to you all the time and was teasing him about liking you. He got defensive and admitted that you were just easy to manipulate and that you were nothing but a child. He said you could never get a boyfriend because you act so immature, and he thinks you have mental issues.”

My throat closes up, and I struggle for a moment to process everything he said. Ben really thinks those things about me. His declaration earlier proved that. And he’s not the first boy who has declared such feelings about me. Tommy

Badminton called me out in Year 9, telling everyone I couldn't get a boyfriend because I acted so crazy.

Maybe they're right.

"I really liked him," I admit.

"Because you never gave anyone else a try. Please, Imogen, give us a chance. I've liked you for so long, and I know together we'll make a great couple."

I think about it for a moment. Maybe me never having a proper boyfriend is what put Ben off. He probably called me a child because I have no experience as a woman.

That said... "I don't want to ruin our friendship."

"Why don't we just see where this can go? We don't even have to be official or anything. We can be friends. I mean, don't you want to get back at him for hurting you?"

I glance at him. "What do you mean?"

"The best way to hurt him back is to be with someone else. If he doesn't see you the way I see you, he isn't worth it anyway. We can try this together, and if it doesn't work, we can go back to being friends."

"And you'd be okay with that?"

"Yeah. I've liked you for ages, Imogen. I'll do anything to make you see I'm the right person for you."

Am I really considering this?

My heart aches, and Ben's words are still floating around in my mind, hurting me deeply.

And Zach has been my friend for a while. He's good looking in a pretty, boy-next-door way, but I've never really considered him to be anything more than a friend.

But he's right about Ben.

I'm never going to get over him if I'm wallowing around in self-pity.

Or if I'm single.

It will just prove that everything Ben said was true.

I brush my tears aside and clear my throat. “Okay, I’ll try.”

He grins, his entire face lighting up. “You won’t regret this. I’m going to make you so happy.”

CHAPTER ONE

Imogen

Present

Another year older, and already I can feel the pressure of my life weighing down on me. I'm not where I want to be, and there are times when I still feel seventeen, stuck in a life I want to grow out of. At twenty-four, I should be living a life where the only concern I have is moving out of my parents' house or finishing a degree. But I've done those things. Albeit, I only moved into the bungalow next door and I've only *just* got my degree.

A degree I have no idea what I want to do with. When I got my degree in technology, it was to help my dad with his business. I like computers, and since Dad hates all the office stuff and prefers being out in the field, it was a win-win for both of us. But working for him felt like a setback from everything I had been trying to run from.

Ben Donovan.

A guy who still haunts me, and the humiliation still burns. Even after everything, these feelings I have for him never subsided. I've tried so hard and failed every time. He still turns my world upside down, and he still renders me speechless. Secret glances and hidden feelings have been my life ever since the night of my dad's birthday party.

Wanting someone I can never have is a sickness I can never be cured from.

So I added a business administration degree to my CV and thought if I could be a personal assistant to my dad, I could be that for another company.

And I have.

I am now an assistant administrator for the CEO of one of the largest gaming companies in the UK. Castle and Games have been launching new software and games successfully for eight years now and are one of the most profitable

organisations in the tech industry—aside from the originals, like Sony, who have been around for generations.

But my life still doesn't feel complete.

Zach, who has been my official boyfriend for two years now, finishes giving my order to the waitress. Like I can't speak for myself.

He's still the same Zach from school, but in many ways, he's changed—especially in the past two years we've been together.

We tried to do the whole relationship thing back on my dad's birthday, but after eight months, we ended it. I don't know if it was because it felt forced or because we weren't that into each other. But I played along for as long as I did, hoping one day I would feel something.

I didn't, so I asked for us to be just friends.

I tried to date other people after, but the relationships ended badly. None of them lived up to who I wanted. Zach, however, did. We barely argued. He never cheated or disappeared on nights out. He never ignored my calls or texts. There were so many signs shining like a beacon to be with him.

Two years ago, my love life was in a shambles, and I was asked to take a package over to Ben's. A beautiful woman answered the door, and she was everything I wasn't. It made me realise Ben would never look at me in a romantic way. She had a stunning figure and beautiful facial features. Even in a T-shirt—that clearly wasn't hers—she outshined me.

That was the day I finally took my relationship with Zach to the next level and we became a couple. I had someone who wanted me, and a part of me wanted to want him. I wanted to want someone who wasn't Ben Donovan. And it wasn't like Zach made me miserable. I love being with him. We're good together.

Or we were.

Every day since we got together, there's been a missing piece inside of me. It's not because I don't love him. I think in

my own way, I do. He just doesn't make my stomach flutter, and I'm never excited to see him.

Like today. I told him I had plans with my family for my birthday, but instead, he chose to go around me and talk to my mum about cancelling them.

He brought me to a lavish restaurant, where the food is out of my comfort zone, and I probably won't eat. I could have been eating a triple whopper burger at my favourite beef house. Instead, I'm here.

It's not the first time he's done something like this. He loves me and wants to be with me, but he makes me feel invisible. He never used to act like this. And the more I let him get away with his actions, and the more I let snide comments pass, the more I lose of myself. I don't know who I am anymore. I don't recognise the woman who stares back at me in the mirror.

I stare at Zach again, trying to conjure up feelings that I just don't feel anymore. I don't want to hurt him. He's been my best friend, my first, and my boyfriend for a couple of years. He's saved me from heartbreak and humiliation after every breakup or incident in my life.

But somewhere along the way, he lost me.

I've been trying to break it off with him for nearly a year now—ever since he began to change. His change in behaviour made me realise my feelings never went past what I feel for my other friends. And every time I came to the conclusion I couldn't fix this between us, it's like he knew it was coming. He would change and say something sweet, or remind me he is all I'll ever have.

I'm not this person though. I don't string people along. But there is just something about Zach that stops me from speaking the truth. And maybe that is love. I don't know.

Or maybe I don't want him to hurt the way I hurt when Ben let me down.

I do know this isn't fair to him or to me. I didn't want it to come to this but today has proved it's my only choice.

He reaches across the table to take my hand, pulling me from my thoughts.

“So, your new game is a big deal,” he remarks, trying to keep the conversation going.

I rub at my temple, feeling a headache brewing. “Yeah. Only a few of us have access to the data until the launch. There are too many companies who would do anything to get their hands on this game. It’s going to be good.”

He lets out a breath, smiling as he gazes around the lavish restaurant. “I bet you didn’t think you’d be in a restaurant as nice as this,” he announces.

I just want to go home. I haven’t even had a chance to spend time with my dad because he left really early this morning. “No, I thought I’d be with my family, eating a burger.”

“You don’t want to eat that crap. I’ve told you before, if you want to lose those hips, you need to lose the chips.” He laughs at his own joke.

All I do is feel more self-conscious. I’m not overweight by any means, but I do have wide hips, a big arse, and tits. They are insecurities I know most people won’t complain about, but his little *jokes* make me feel worse about them.

“Zach,” I begin, needing to just get this over with.

He squeezes my hand. “It’s not only our six-year anniversary, but—”

“We’ve been together for two,” I remind him.

He waves me off. “We’ve been together longer than that and you know it. It’s the best choice you could have made. We fit together. You know what I need and I know what you need.”

He has no clue what I need.

“Zach, I—”

“I think it’s time to show everyone how serious we are together. You’ve got your new job now, and I’ll be finished

with my law degree soon.”

Dread hits my stomach at where this is going. Or at least, where I think it’s going. “I don’t feel too good,” I manage to choke out, just as he says, “I think we should move in together.”

Oh God, no.

“Zach...” My phone rings and I quickly dig it out of my bag.

“Don’t answer that. It’s rude,” he scolds, glancing around like he’s caught me whipping out drugs and not my mobile.

I glance at the screen, seeing Mum’s name. “It’s my mum.”

“She can wait. This is about our future. She’ll understand.” He takes my phone from me, placing it next to his knife and fork. I bite on my lip, staring at the phone like I can will it to me. How dare he! I ignore a lot of things when it comes to him because he loves me. In a small way, I love him too, but lately, he’s been cocky, pushing boundaries he never pushed before, and I’ve had enough of it. I pull myself from my thoughts, realising he’s still rambling. “What do you think? Should we move in to mine or yours? Yours is a little small and might be a little embarrassing for your new job. They expect you to be—”

I shake away my anger, meeting his gaze. “I’m not moving out of my home.”

“Why would you not want to move in to mine? It makes no sense. Mine is far nicer.”

His parents bought him his obnoxious home as a gift when he passed his first year of law school.

“I’m not moving in to yours either.”

“Oh, I get it. You want to find a house that is ours. I mean, it’s doable. My parents won’t—”

“No, I mean—” My phone begins to ring again, and I bite my bottom lip. My mum only ever calls continuously if it’s something important. “I really should get that.”

“Call her after,” he demands. “This is about our future, for Christ’s sake.”

“Zach, this isn’t working,” I snap, snatching the phone off the table.

“Christ, if it’s that important, just ring her back. I thought today was about us.”

“No, it’s *my* birthday that *you* ’ve completely high-jacked.”

His eyes narrow into slits. “Fuck’s sake, Imogen. I’m trying to do something nice, something most guys won’t do, and you’re being ungrateful.”

“I’m being honest. There’s a difference. I told you I didn’t want to do anything with you today because I celebrate it with my family. You didn’t listen.”

“Are you seriously trying to put all of this on me? I did something nice, Imogen. Can’t you just say thank you and enjoy our meal? I think our anniversary is more important than anything else right now.”

I tuck my hand under my thigh to stop myself from punching him in the face. If he was anyone else, I would have already knocked him out. But it’s Zach. We have history. And he’s always been there for me.

My phone rings again, and dread fills my stomach. He quickly snatches it, answering it. “Hello, Mrs Smith, it’s Zach. Can Imogen call you back? Thank you.”

He didn’t even let her speak. I heard her answer, “Thank God, Imogen,” before he took over the call.

I snatch my phone from his hand and grab my coat from the back of my chair. “We’re done.”

“You keep letting them control your life. You need to grow up, Imogen. All your family take up so much of your time because you let them.”

“No, they don’t. I give them my time because I love being with them. And they love me. Believe it or not, Zach, some of us love our family.”

“What is that supposed to mean?” he asks, his voice high-pitched.

“It means you treat your parents like a cash machine. And they give it to you because you are an only child, which is probably why you don’t understand my relationship with my family.”

“You know what, I don’t have to listen to this. I do everything for you, Imogen. I offered to pay your bills whilst you were looking for a new job.”

“No, you did it so I didn’t take up my dad’s offer of working for him,” I correct harshly.

He scoffs. “I’ve been with you through everything and this is how you treat me. You know what it’s like to be hurt by someone you care about. Yet you stand there, breaking my heart.”

I stare him in the eyes, feeling his words down to my core. He’s supposed to love me, yet he hurts me every chance he gets. I’ve brushed it off so many times, but he tears me apart every time he uses a tally chart to compete in our relationship. “Yeah, I do know what it’s like.” And I hope he catches on to it meaning him. Because he has—*is*—hurting me.

I walk away, weaving in and out of the tables, being careful not to knock into anyone in my haste to get out of here. Tears of frustration burn my eyes. Why, out of everyone, is he the only person I allow to treat me like this? I know I haven’t exactly been honest with my feelings, but I don’t break him down until he feels like crap. I’ve worked hard to make this work, to keep us together, but he pushes back every single time.

I hit the doors, rushing outside of the restaurant as my phone begins to ring. I take a breath, wanting to calm my racing heart. But suddenly, Hayden Carter pulls up with Clay driving in a dark blue car, music blasting, and my heart begins to race once again.

And I know whatever my mum has to say is bad. It must be really bad for my cousin to come and seek me out.

Please let my family be okay.

I slowly lift the phone to my ear as I answer the call, my eyes never leaving Hayden as she gets out of the car. “Hello,” I greet, my tone void of any emotion.

“Honey, there’s been an incident. Your dad needs us.”

My knees threaten to give out. “Is Dad okay?”

“Yes, sweetie. But...”

“Mum, please. Who is hurt?”

“It’s Ben. The assignment he was on... it’s ended badly. Ben got stabbed, and they only found them in the early hours of this morning. Your dad has been up the hospital all day.”

Hayden reaches me and I fall into her arms. “Keep it together,” she whispers, taking the phone from my hands.

“Hi, Aunt Kennedy, it’s me, Hayden. We’re going to bring her to the hospital for you. Yeah, she’s okay. I think she was just worried it was her dad you were calling about. I know. Love you too.” She ends the call and shoves my phone into my bag. “We’re going to go to the hospital and you are going to stay strong.”

“He was stabbed,” I whisper, as all the emotions I tried to keep at bay come flooding back. “How can I stay strong? It’s Ben. You know what he means to me.”

She closes her eyes for a moment. “And it’s because of what he means to you that you need to stay strong.”

I wipe away the tears, letting out a dry laugh. “All these years I’ve been telling myself I’m over him, but look at me. I’m still obsessed over a guy who has no interest in me.”

“You know that’s not true,” she scolds.

I arch a brow. “Really? Are you still singing that same tune? This is me, Hayden. Be real.”

She punches me in the arm, and fuck it hurts. “Do I coddle anyone?”

I eye her hand, worried she’ll punch me again. “No.”

“No, I fucking don’t. When I tell you he’s into you, he’s fucking into you. No way would I steer my family wrong. Ever.”

“Sorry,” I grumpily respond.

“Something stopped him all those years ago; the same thing that is stopping him now. I don’t know what, but trust me, whatever it is, it’s the reason he hasn’t made a move. I’ve seen the way he looks at you.”

“Like he pities me,” I snort.

“No. He looks at you like the world is crumbling around him, but you’re the only person who matters.”

“Imogen,” Zach snaps. “I thought we were going halves since it’s both our anniversary. You could have at least left me some money.”

“Let me stab him,” Hayden pleads, gripping my hands.

“I knew you would regret the things you said,” he boasts, taking in the tears on my cheeks. “You have to know we are perfect for each other.”

“Zach, please don’t do this. Not right now.”

“You broke up?” Hayden asks cheerfully, like she’s been told she’s won the lottery.

“No,” Zach sharply responds, as I say, “Yes.”

“What do you mean, yes?” Zach asks. “We had a disagreement. I don’t think it warrants us to break up.”

I can’t pretend anymore. The ache in my chest grows at the panic in his voice, but also the condescending tone he’s using. I don’t want to hurt him, but this isn’t working out between us, and we’re lying to ourselves thinking otherwise.

“Zach, you know I value our friendship,” I begin, ignoring Hayden’s snort. “You mean a lot to me, which is why I can’t do this anymore. We don’t fit. As hard as we try, we just don’t fit.”

“What are you saying?”

“You know what I’m saying. I said it to you inside the restaurant. We’re done.”

His top lip lifts at the corner into a snarl. “After six years together?”

“Two,” I correct, reaching forward to take his hand. “I’m sorry you’re upset. It was never my intention. But this is over now. We’re done.”

“Why, though? I know you better than anyone ever will, and I still stuck around.”

“Zach, you don’t really know me.”

“Yes, I do,” he argues.

“Then why did you cancel my plans with my family?” I demand.

“Because it’s our anniversary.”

“No, it’s my birthday. You’ve known me a long time and you know my birthday is special to my parents. I was a premature baby, and my mum and dad could have lost me. But besides that, you should know no one will ever come before them.”

“Not no one. You mean me. Your mum likes me, so it’s your dad who has put you up to this. This has come out of nowhere,” he comments, his eyes narrowing on Hayden. “And I bet it was you who turned him against me.”

“I gave you so many signs, Zach, so many that this wasn’t working and to give you a chance to fix things.”

“And you lost her dad’s respect when you purposely made her late for curfew,” Hayden supplies in a bitter tone.

He gazes at me, his expression scrunched up in a plea. “Please don’t do this.”

“I’m sorry, Zach, I truly am, but I’m sure about this. From the moment I said I was done in there, a weight has been lifted. I’ve put so much pressure on myself to make this work, to feel what you feel, but it’s too much. I care for you, Zach.

You are one of my closest friends. But I can't be in a relationship with you anymore."

"There's someone else, isn't there?"

I let go of his hand, hurt by the accusation. "What?"

"It's fucking him, isn't it?"

My eyes widen at the aggression in his tone. "Who?"

"That criminal. The one who is always sniffing around you."

Hayden coughs into her fist. "He means Ben."

"Ben isn't a criminal," I respond in his defence.

Zach laughs. "Yeah, he is. You're such a fool. He's had the wool pulled over your eyes for years now."

"What are you talking about?"

"He's a thief. He got caught and had to pay for his mistakes, so he worked for your dad."

"Has anyone told you recently that you're a dick," Hayden spits out, pulling me closer to her side.

"What do you know?" I ask her, since she doesn't seem as surprised as I do.

Hayden squeezes my arm. "Your dad's car was stolen and Ben was found by the police with it. But it's not what you think. He had no choice."

Zach laughs harder. "Don't make excuses for him. No one is forced to do anything."

"He was trying to save his brother from a gang that was forcing him to do illegal shit. He was only twelve, and when he refused to do what they asked, they threatened his siblings. Again, he was twelve and scared out of his fucking mind. If you ask me, Ben should have been rewarded for being so fucking noble."

I wave my hand between them, shaking my head. My heart breaks for Lucca. He's a kind soul and funny as hell. I can only imagine what that did to him. "It doesn't matter what

Ben did years ago. This has nothing to do with him. I'm not seeing him or anyone."

"You expect me to believe that? You just happened to break up with me for no reason."

"Oh, for fuck's sake," Hayden barks. "She's always been too good for you. If you ask me, she's a saint for putting up with your self-obsessed arse all these years. Ten minutes with you would make me commit murder."

"Wouldn't be the first time," he retorts sharply.

"Be grateful she's offering you friendship because I'd only give you a choice of where you want me to stab you. You are so self-absorbed you don't even realise she isn't responding to you during a conversation. You don't see it when her face falls into a sad pout because you've spoken over her. You never notice when she's had her hair done. And you've never once cottoned on to the fact she doesn't love you back. If you ask me, you got a miracle when it comes to her, because if you were anyone else, she would have buried you a long time ago."

"Well, it's a good job no one is asking you," he argues before turning to me. "Come back to mine. We can talk about this in *private*."

"There's nothing left to talk about," I tell him, sadness pouring into my heart. "And I have to go to the hospital. The call you refused to let me take... that was my mum asking me to go to the hospital."

He steps back, placing his hands behind his neck. "I didn't know."

"Because you never asked. Now, I'm done here," I tell him. I take Hayden's hand. "Take me to the hospital."

He calls my name but I ignore him, steeling my spine so his pleas don't crush my soul any more than they already have.

CHAPTER TWO

Ben

Every inch of my body aches. Sweat beads at my temples, running down the sides of my face as I try to shift into a comfier position.

When I took the job protecting a family of three from a serial killer—who happened to be the twin brother of the man I was protecting—I didn't think it would end up like this. I didn't assume it would be an easy assignment, but I never imagined I would end up in hospital with a severe concussion, recovering from a stab wound. I've lost so much blood, I'm lucky to be alive.

But I would do it all again. I've only known the couple and their daughter for a short amount of time, but during that time, I've grown close to them. They're good people, and have huge hearts.

The one good thing to come out of this is that the serial killer is now back behind bars. All of his victims' families will finally have closure, and no one else he planned to target will be hurt.

The sweet nurse who has been coming in to check my bandages and vitals, clucks her tongue. Her blonde hair is swept back into a tight bun near the nape of her neck. She has kind eyes and a sweet smile. She's not as young as the other nurses, which I prefer. The first nurse to attend to me seemed unprofessional and shouldn't have been in here. She asked a bunch of questions she had no right to ask, and flirted to the point I had second-hand embarrassment. I was glad when she got removed from the room. It gave me a chance to finally relax and let my guard down.

"I told you to stop moving before you pull a stitch," the nurse softly scolds.

"Sorry." I grimace. "It's uncomfortable."

She grabs a pillow from the chair, bringing it over to place behind me. She gives it a few taps to fluff it up before stepping back. “Is that better?”

I test it, and sigh with gratefulness. “Thank you.”

“You have a lot of visitors. Are you sure you don’t want me to let some come in and see you’re okay?”

“My mother worries. She’ll be the reason I pop my stitches,” I tease, wincing at the throbbing in my side. “She’s seen I’m okay.”

“Why don’t you really want them to come in and see you?”

I sigh, meeting the kind woman’s eyes. “Because I can’t take the pain I see in her eyes when she looks at me in this condition. She lost my dad to a knife attack. They owned a restaurant together, and one night, she didn’t come home on time. He went to check on her and found three men robbing the cash registers. One of them had a knife to my mum’s neck, and he tried to help her. He got stabbed and died in her arms before the paramedics arrived.”

She leans on the bed next to my feet. “I’m so sorry about your dad.”

“It was a long time ago.”

“Still, let me go get them. They’re worried, and the last time I looked, I think she had your siblings with her.”

I don’t know why I picture Imogen, but I do, and I have to ask: “Is there a girl with auburn hair with them? She has hazel eyes, and will have ridiculously high heels on.”

“There’s a man with his wife, daughter and son out there. The man hasn’t left but the wife and children came back this morning and have been sitting out there all day, waiting for news.”

It has to be Imogen.

I bow my head, glancing at my lap. I made a lot of mistakes over the years, but she is my only regret. Regret that I never gave in. Regret that I didn’t tell her how I feel. And

regret for being unable to stay away, even when I know I should.

When I was lying in the pantry, bleeding profusely, I thought of Imogen. She's the only person who has ever made a crack in the walls I've put up, and the only woman I've ever liked who has been untouchable. For so many reasons.

But it was her I wanted to see before I died. It was her voice I wanted to hear. And I wanted her touch, to make me forget about the pain, and what I thought was to come.

Death.

"You can tell them to go home and that I'm fine," I tell the nurse.

"Why are you punishing yourself? You have people out there who want to come in and check on you. They clearly care a lot about you."

I can't meet her gaze. "Because I let my boss down. I can't face that just yet. I let them all down."

"How did you let him down?" she asks, getting to her feet to check the drip.

"Because the people I was protecting got hurt. If it wasn't for her crazy-arse friends, we'd most likely all be dead right now."

"Hey, what you did for that family was heroic. The nurses talk, and from what they have said, the family you saved are so grateful to you, and they feel awful you got hurt."

There's a knock on the door to the private room I'm in. I glance up as Cole and Emily step inside. Both look like they've been in a car wreck. Bruises cover every inch of their skin, and Cole looks like he's been in the ring with River Knight.

I finally close my lips from the shock of seeing them so soon.

Emily tucks her blonde hair behind her ear as tears fall down her cheeks. "I'm so sorry you got hurt," she declares, moving closer to the bed.

Cole clears his throat, his Adam's apple bobbing. "Man, what you did for me... I'm so fucking grateful."

"I didn't do anything," I choke out, my throat suddenly dry.

Cole walks to Emily's side, next to the bed. "Yes, you did. That knife was for me. Not you. If you hadn't pushed me aside when you did, he would have gutted me there and then out of anger. You gave me time."

"You gave *us* time," Emily whispers. "I know it wasn't the plan, but it still helped everything fall into place."

"How did your friends capture him? The police said his ankles and wrists were tied, and he was laying on his front when they arrived."

Emily's cheeks flush as she glances away. "It doesn't matter. What matters is that you're okay and we're so grateful to you."

"I know money isn't going to change anything that happened, so I did something that would mean more to you. I have paid off the debt for your mother's restaurant. The entire building now belongs to you and your family."

My jaw drops. "Cole, we can't accept that."

Since the economy has gone to shit, there have been property owners who have abused it and profited by increasing their costs. My mum was behind on the rent because her mortgage rate went up. With five children to support, and with the restaurant closed for repairs, she began to struggle. What he's done has saved our family. Our livelihood will be restored. But mostly, my mum will get to keep the one place she feels the most connected to my dad.

"Well, it's done. And even if I listen to you, I don't think they'll approve a refund. We want to do this."

"But I was doing my job," I argue. "And not doing it well, so this is unnecessary."

"I was going to do this before you got stabbed. You researched me, so you know what companies I own and why I

own them,” Cole begins. “I researched you too, and I found out that your mum cooks for the homeless and hires school kids to deliver food packages each night. It’s one of the reasons she was going out of business.”

It is. She’ll never stop cooking for them. Even before they had the restaurant, she would be in her kitchen, cooking up meals for those in need. She does it for low income families who she knows are struggling.

“We’ve also set up a charity so your mum will no longer be the one paying for the food. And with her help, we will get other businesses with good resources and with a high number of homelessness in their area to join.”

“Thank you,” I breathe out. “She will no doubt invite you to eat at her restaurant.”

Emily smiles up at Cole, leaning into him. “She’s offered to cook for our wedding.”

My eyes widen. “You’re getting married?”

Taking his fiancée’s hand, Cole nods. “We are.”

“Congratulations.”

The door knocks against the wall as the storm of my mother enters the room. “*Mio figlio*, you worry your mother,” she declares loudly.

Emily leans closer, squeezing my hand. “We will come and see you when you’re back home. Thank you again for everything you did for us.”

“*Everything*,” Cole insists.

“You’re welcome. And thank you for what you’ve done.”

When they leave, the nurse following after them, I let out a tired breath and turn to my mother. She is in her fifties yet still manages to look in her forties and has the energy of a toddler. Her black hair is pinned up at the nape of her neck, and she’s wearing the necklace my dad gave to her, which she attached his wedding ring to. Her thick, dark eyebrows rise as she stares at me. All my sisters and younger brother take after

my mum. They have her dark eyes and dark hair, whereas I take after my dad. I have his eyes and his colour hair.

“I’m sorry, *Mamma*. I was resting.”

“You’re forgiven, *mio figlio*. Your sisters will be here shortly. They picked up Lucca from football for me.”

“You let Stefania drive?”

Stefania is the oldest female sibling, and although she was blessed with brains, driving is an impossible mission for her. Sometimes I wonder if she passed her test because of her beauty, because the girl has had more minor incidents than anyone I’ve ever known.

“Of course not. How that girl passed her test is beyond me. I let Carina drive,” she explains.

My eyes widen. Carina isn’t a bad driver, but her attention span is shockingly a lot like the Disney fish called *Dory*.

“You would have been better letting Isabella drive. She’s more responsible,” I point out.

“That girl can’t take her eyes off her phone,” she remarks. “Soon, your brother will pass his test, and he can drive himself.”

“*Mamma*,” I chuckle, grimacing at the pain when it pulls the stitches taut. “Ouch.”

“*Mio figlio*, I’m going to set up a bed at home for you,” she whispers, her words broken.

The pain in her eyes hurts more than my injuries. “Mum, I have a home.”

“You have a flat. There’s a difference,” she argues. “How will you get around?”

“It’s all on the same level, *Mamma*. I’ll struggle more with you by going up and down the stairs to go to the bathroom. I’ll be okay. I’m not leaving for another couple of days yet, so we’re good.”

She takes a deep breath. “Then I have a couple of days to change your mind.”

“You won’t but you’re welcome to try.”

She fixes the blanket at my waist. “You are stubborn like your *papà*.”

“That’s not a bad thing,” I point out.

Her head lowers, her gaze on the blanket, where my injuries hide beneath it. “You scared me, Benjamin.”

“I didn’t mean to. I promise.”

She places her hands on her lap, forcing a smile. “Our *amato* Imogen is outside. Have you seen her?”

I smile at her endearment of calling Imogen our beloved. Mum has always loved Imogen. There are times when I think she likes her more than me.

“Are Evan and Kennedy with her?”

“Yes, and Joshua just arrived. Evan really wants to see you.”

“Will you go and let him know I wish to see him, please? The nurse said he has been there since they brought me in.”

“He has. He worries too, my son. I think he feels guilty.”

“He has no reason to,” I assure her.

She gets up, but before she leaves, she leans over and presses her lips to my forehead. “I’ll go let them know, and then I’ll go and meet your siblings at the entrance.”

“Thank you, *Mamma*,” I respond.

I lean back when she leaves, my mind clouded with thoughts. Evan will never replace my father, but there is no denying he has become a father figure in my life. He has been someone I’ve looked up to, and is the person I owe my life to. He saved me from a prison sentence. Dropping the theft charges wasn’t enough for the police as they didn’t believe I wasn’t associated with the gang. Evan did believe me, and took time to gather evidence to prove my statement. Thanks to him, I have no criminal record, and my affiliation to the gang was erased, since I had only been doing it to save my brother. It was my brother who stole the car. It was a miracle I even

caught up to him, considering I was on my bike. But he was also a twelve-year-old who hadn't driven before. He was a mess, sobbing that they made him do it, and he didn't know what to do.

I will never forget that moment. He had been so scared, so I had to save him. So as soon as I saw the flashing blue lights, I threw him out of the car, ordered him to run home to Mum, and drove away. I drove a few streets away from where I left him, knowing he wouldn't be able to catch up with me in the state he was in. I parked and waited for the police to find me.

Evan saw through all of that. I owe him everything because the policeman that arrested me had it out for the gang—and rightly so. They tried to mug his wife in town, but she put up a fight. A group of them attacked her, and her injuries were severe enough that she didn't make it off the ground.

The door opens, and Evan holds it open for his wife—Kennedy. “Hey,” I greet.

“Sweetheart, how are you feeling?” Kennedy asks softly, moving over to the side of my bed.

“I've been better,” I admit.

“Kid, you had me worried,” Evan declares, his jaw clenching.

I arch a brow. “I didn't mean to.”

“I'm so sorry, kid. I should have taken the job knowing how dangerous it was,” he replies, squeezing my calf.

“You can't protect everyone,” I point out. “This is my job, and I think I'm good at it.”

“You excel in it,” he responds earnestly.

“Then you know it's a responsibility we all take on. You can't save us from that. I'm just sorry I let you down. I thought our plan was solid.”

“It was solid. No one expected him to get into the home.”

I grimace at the reminder. I checked the security myself. “Do you know how Cyrus got in?”

“He cut the wires,” he explains.

“But they’re under the dirt.”

“He knew where to dig. It’s why none of you knew. All the sensors had been disarmed.”

“It’s a miracle they are all okay,” I murmur, lost in my thoughts for a minute. “They have a little girl. After they had the fight at the lodge, I tried talking Cole into being honest with Emily so her and Poppy could go back home. I nearly got a little girl killed,” I choke out, the real issue finally surfacing. It’s why I don’t deserve to take Cole’s thank you present. I could have been responsible for him losing the two most important people to him. “If he had listened to me, if they had moved back, she would have been killed and the blood would have been on my hands.”

“Hey, no, no, no,” Evan stresses. “You can’t think like that. You just can’t. It will eat at you.”

Kennedy takes my hand. “It will.”

I hate that he’s seeing me so weak. I wipe away a tear, frustrated with myself. “How can I not? Fuck, none of this should have happened.”

“I know a woman who was once caring for a baby,” Kennedy begins, her eyes closing, but it doesn’t mask her pain quick enough.

“Babe,” Evan softly responds.

Pulling herself together, she continues. “The baby was kidnapped in her care. Unspeakable things were planned for the baby, things no one should ever go through. Both she and the parents blamed themselves for that baby going missing, even though it was out of their control. It’s not something you ever move past or forget. But they weren’t to blame and neither are you. You didn’t put that little girl in danger. You didn’t, Ben. You saved her from losing two parents.”

I want to know who the baby was and why it’s affected them both this much, but something tells me if I asked, it would bring up memories they don’t want surfacing.

Evan clears his throat as he wraps his arm around his wife. “Look at it this way, kid. If Cole had listened to you and brought his family home, do you think he would have made them stay home alone whilst you were at the club?”

Now he’s put it like that, no, Cole wouldn’t have. I wouldn’t have. “No.”

“None of what happened is your fault. If you ask me, what happened was the best outcome considering who you were dealing with.”

“I’m just glad it’s over for them,” I answer, unable to cover my yawn.

Kennedy’s forehead creases in concern. “We should let you sleep.”

My gaze falls on Evan. “You look like you need sleep.”

He chuckles. “You took ten years off my life.”

“Mum said Imogen and Josh are outside,” I comment, knowing there’s not really a question there.

“They are. They wanted to come in and see you, but the nurse said only two visitors. We’ll come back up tomorrow and see you,” Kennedy promises.

“Get some rest,” Evan orders.

“Wait, when can I come back to work?”

He gives his wife a ‘what did I tell you’ look before meeting my gaze. “Not until after the New Year. But I expect you to be at the New Year’s party.”

“I’ll be there,” I promise. “But I don’t think I can go that long without work.”

“You’ve just had major surgery. And you already know you’ll get paid like normal,” he remarks.

“Then let me come in and catch up on paperwork,” I plead. “I’ll lose my mind being stuck at home.”

“Then I’ll do you a deal. You take the rest of the month off to get better, and you can come back on the first of

December. You know December is a slow month for us, so you'll only be doing paperwork anyway."

I let out a breath of relief. "Thank you, Evan. Thank you."

"No problem. But in the meantime, you need to concentrate on healing and getting back on your feet."

I nod in agreement. "I will. I swear."

Kennedy leans over, pressing her lips to my forehead. "Get better, sweetheart."

Evan takes my hand, his handshake not as firm as it normally is. "We will come by and see you tomorrow."

I nod, my throat tightening at the concern still in his eyes. "Okay."

When they leave, I stare at the door, hoping that just maybe Imogen will come in and say hello. But when another five minutes pass, I know she left with her parents. Which is probably for the best.

She is still off-limits, no matter how tempting she is.

CHAPTER THREE

Imogen

One week later

The office is bustling with activity, everyone excited for the launch that is happening after the New Year. There are only a select few of us who have access to the data, and I'm one of them.

In the tiny corner office they assigned me, I'm hidden away from prying eyes. Which is something I'm grateful for during this moment. I don't want anyone seeing me practically pulling my hair out. Due to the Monday I took off last week, my work load has gone to shit. More work piled up on my desk in my absence because I wasn't here to say I couldn't fit it in. And I don't want to let my boss down by returning it to the colleagues it belongs to. He might see me as difficult or unable to delegate. I don't want him to think he made a mistake in hiring me.

The unsettling feeling I've had in the pit of my stomach since I found out about Ben hasn't helped. It's all I've been able to focus on. I only got to sneak into his room for a short time. And there he was, bruised and pale in his bed, unbeknownst to my presence. He was Ben, but he wasn't. For those short moments, he was just a shell of the man I knew.

And it broke me.

He nearly died, and was still critical by that point, so I did the only thing I could think of. I took his hand and cried, pleading with the universe to save him.

I've always known my dad's line of work could be dangerous. Aside from the security they provide to protect clients from outside evil, they can also be in danger doing basic surveillance or investigation. Harris—my dad's friend and business partner—was investigating a spouse of a client who was stringing out their divorce. He uncovered more than he bargained for, and the spouse, thinking he got to Harris before the information was shared, cut the breaks to his car.

Harris had been lucky to survive the crash and the spouse had been lucky no other civilians in the accident had died.

Growing up, they were super heroes to me. Nothing could touch them. But since Ben, it's made me realise how easy it could be to lose Dad and those who work for him that have become family. And it's a loss I'd never recover from.

Larry Carpenter, my boss and the CEO of Castle and Games, steps into my office, a smile plastered on his face. He is the man I assist, and his office sits beside mine. This visit isn't a surprise. He comes in once a week to ask me if I'm settling in.

"Imogen, I hope you are settling in okay," he greets, keeping to his pattern of questioning.

I've been in the job for close to a month now, and I've loved every second of it. "I am. I'm sorry I haven't gotten chance to send the launch invitations out yet. I was wondering if there was any way I could take the list home with me and send them tonight."

"You know the policy," he tells me, like I'm worrying him.

"I know. I thought it was worth a mention as I wouldn't have done it from a work computer but my own."

"I appreciate your dedication but I'm sorry. This is something I can't allow."

"That's okay. I'll do it first thing when I come in tomorrow morning," I reply, forcing a smile.

"If the pace is too much for you, I can have one of the others take some of your workload," he offers, but I can tell by his tone that he won't be happy about it. He'll probably give me a strike for it.

You mean return it. I wasn't the others' assistant. I was Larry's. Yet all of them piled work onto my desk, expecting me to complete it, using the fake explanation that it was for Larry.

And this morning was spent playing the demo, searching for any errors or loopholes in the content. I got so engrossed in Sanctuary: The Last Man, I completely lost track of time.

“No, I’ve got it. I just wanted to free up some time to compile a list for potential demo candidates. I know this is something you don’t do, but I really think the new release could benefit from it,” I begin, and continue when he doesn’t shut me down. “This new game, in the right hands, could soar your launch. The gaming community is a competitive world, but I’ve played the demo, and I can tell you, if this hits the right gaming influencers’ hands before the launch date, it will sell itself. You could cut the marketing budget by half and use it to promote the extras you have planned to add in a year after release.”

He takes a seat in front of me, straightening his jacket and tie. “You really think that would work?”

I nod, excitement bubbling in my chest. Finding new ways to market and promote is a dream of mine. “I do. I’ve taken it upon myself to draw up some plans for you. In recent studies, it has been proven that those who release without a demo tank their release within the first month or suffer a loss of half of the sales prediction. I can’t speak for those games in general as I haven’t played them personally, so I can’t tell you if it was the game itself, or whether it was the marketing strategy. That said, the same pattern kept happening over the past few years. Influencers are now the market, and they sell thirty percent more products than ads do.” I hand him the pamphlet I put together. “Read through the pamphlet and let me know what you think. I have influencers in mind. That community is huge, but I’m positive I can get the game to the right audience.”

“I appreciate you going to this much trouble.”

Remembering everything I learned in university, I speak up, using a softer tone. “It was actually you who gave me the idea during Monday’s morning meeting. You mentioned reaching the right audience, so I looked through your archives and found your first software release. Your numbers hit a

record-breaking percentage, and I noticed you sent out demos to over twenty-thousand candidates all over the world.”

“Out of curiosity, do you think our marketing strategy is wrong?”

“Far from it. Your products have sold themselves, earning profits well above market predictions. But you have never released a game like this before. This isn’t an update on coexisting games. It’s new, and there are many more out there that market the same as this one. You just need to reach the audience who will promote that it’s better and bigger. You want it to stand out. You don’t just want to reach older generations. Most women and men above thirty have full-time jobs or a family to provide for. This needs to reach the younger generation too. A generation of gamers who play for a living. I already have twenty in mind because I not only play with them, but I know they do live streams, teaching others the tricks and the trades. They uncover the Easter eggs that, quite frankly, most gamers look past. They are the ones you want promoting this game,” I admit, shrugging, like it’s no big deal. “I’ve played this game, and I’m not just saying this because I work here, but it’s incredible. It’s different to any combat game I’ve played before, and I don’t think the current marketing plan will fulfil its potential to express that. I’m worried it will take months before we see the sales we are hoping for.”

“You’ve made good points, Imogen. Continue compiling that list and I will have a serious think about it.”

“That’s all I can ask for. This isn’t something you need to do, but I wouldn’t be the person you hired if I didn’t mention it. I really want this game to succeed, so if you say no, I will think of other ways to help market this.”

“No, it’s nice to see a talented young woman like yourself using their initiative. I’ve been too consumed with keeping it from our competitors. I guess I lost sight of the marketing.”

“Everyone here loves working for you, Mr Carpenter. No one here would dream of leaking all your hard work.” And I

mean it. I was surprised by the atmosphere when I first started. It didn't feel like work, it felt like a family.

He lets out a breath. "You'd be surprised by the number of people who would leak the software for a big payday. It's happened to us before, which is why we are being extra cautious this time."

"No, I understand, sir," I respond, and glance at the work on my desk, wondering how I will get this done in time. "Is there something else you would like to talk about?"

"On Monday, you mentioned your friend was hurt, which is why you needed the time off."

"He was. He works for my dad so he's practically family. You probably read about it in the newspaper or saw it on the news. He was protecting a family from a serial killer."

His eyes widen. "The Night Stalker Killer, who happened to be the twin brother of renowned businessman Cole Connor?"

"The very one. The killer, Cyrus, stabbed Ben and knocked him unconscious. My dad was beside himself when he got the news. Ben isn't just his employee. He's like a son to him. He's family to us, so it was hard on us all, so I'm so very grateful for your understanding, and for giving me that time off so early on in my job. They needed me."

"I'm so sorry about your friend. Laura mentioned you told her he liked a certain game."

"Yes, the Zombie Apocalypse Ground Zero game."

He pulls out a plastic case with the game cover on. "Here is the new version of the game. It releases Christmas, but I thought your friend might like to play it whilst he recuperates. Had I known who he was, and what he did, I would have put a basket together from the vault."

I take the game from his hands, my eyes widening. Because it's not only Ben who loves this game. I do. And I've been waiting for the pre-order to become available before purchasing it. The vault is where they store a bunch of merchandise from previous releases or new releases. There are

even some unreleased products down there that I nearly fainted over. As a gamer, it was an overwhelming experience to see it.

“Sir, I don’t know what to say. This is seriously cool of you,” I declare, forgetting where I am for a minute.

“You’re welcome,” he replies, smiling at my wide-eyed gaze. “I’ll let you finish up, and I’ll see you tomorrow.”

He stands, and I follow, reaching over to shake his hand. “Thank you. And I’ll have that information on your desk by morning.”

“Looking forward to reading it.”

Once he reaches the door, I call out his name. He stops, waiting for me to continue. “I really appreciate the opportunity you have given me. And I promise you will never regret hiring me.”

“Good to hear. You have a good day now.”

*** **

The day is coming to an end and my back is screaming with joy. Being sat for hours at a time is something I should be used to, being a gamer and all, but this feels different. I need a massage after this week is over.

A knock on the door distracts me from finishing my email. “Come in,” I call out.

George, who started working here the same day as me, steps inside my office. He works on the front desk of this floor, but his hopes are to one day work his way into creating games. I prefer him to Daniel, the colleague who works alongside him. Daniel is a force, and so strict and firm when it comes to his position. He takes everything so seriously.

“Hey, you have a visitor,” he greets.

I look up, taken aback at seeing Zach standing behind him. No civilians are allowed inside at the moment. “Thank

you, George.”

He nods, stepping aside to let Zach through. Neither of us acknowledge the other, which I think is what makes George hesitate to leave. “Hey, my shift ends soon. Did you want me to wait here and we’ll walk out together? We can talk about our next character challenge.”

He’s talking about a newish virtual reality game that went viral shortly after release. When we got talking during our time together in the waiting room, it got brought up. We exchanged user tags and have been playing together ever since. But we’ve already talked about our next conquest, which means he’s secretly asking me if I’m okay to be alone. Which isn’t surprising since the tension in the room is suffocating.

“No, you go on ahead. I won’t be long.”

When the door clicks closed, I glance at Zach. “You aren’t supposed to be here. The company doesn’t want outsiders on the main floor due to data protection.”

He holds his hands up. “I’m not here to fight with you,” he explains, taking a seat. “I thought I’d come and see if I can take you out for dinner. You walked out on the last one and ruined it, so I thought I’d give us another chance.”

“Zach, we’re over, and I think for the time being, we should keep our distance from each other.”

“We’ve been friends for years, Imogen. You can’t really mean that. Couples fight. It’s what we do. Unless I was right and there is someone else.”

“You know that’s not the reason,” I tell him, shaking my head. “I think we are two very different people. And whilst it might work for some, it doesn’t for us. You’ve changed a lot since we got together. I had never known you to be so judgemental. More, I hate the way you try to keep me from my family. I brushed it off because I never listened or fell for it, but you continued to try.”

“Is this really about our anniversary?”

“No, it isn’t about my *birthday*. It’s about the time I wouldn’t go on holiday with you. You knew I went yearly with my family and again with my cousins. And again, when I wouldn’t go to yours for Christmas. My family invited you, but it was only me chided for saying no. Did you see *me* not speak to *you* for hours? No. Because I’m not twelve. And I don’t even want to get into New Years Eve or my mum’s birthday.” Which happened to fall on his birthday too. I offered to compromise. I’d spend the morning with Mum, the day with him, and have dinner with the family. But no. He couldn’t get over the fact I would choose them over him.

He slaps his hand down on my desk. “For fuck’s sake, Imogen. All that is petty shit. Can you blame me for wanting to spend time with the woman I love?”

“You don’t love me. If you did, you wouldn’t have given me ultimatums every time something didn’t go your way.”

“I just can’t believe you wanted this out of the blue.”

“Listen to me, Zach,” I harshly remark. “This wasn’t out of the blue. Not for me.”

“There’s someone else. There has to be.”

“Zach, please don’t ruin our friendship with accusations that aren’t true. I thought you knew me better than that. I would never do that to someone and you know it.”

He relaxes back into his seat. “No, you’re right. This has just been a lot to process. I don’t know how to be without you. We’ve been together for so long.”

His claim about the length of our relationship sounds so genuine, like he truly believes it or sees it like that. And maybe that’s what love looks and sounds like. But every time he’s mentioned it, a shiver has slivered down my spine, and I get this urge to remove myself from the situation. It makes me question if I really know him.

But then I look into his eyes, and I see my friend. My harmless friend.

“I’m sorry that’s how you feel. I don’t want to hurt you, and you aren’t going to change my mind.”

“I guess I’m not,” he replies, lowering his head.

Someone knocks on the door, and my eyes widen. What if it’s Larry? If he sees Zach, my job here will be cut short.
“Come in!”

The door is pushed open, revealing Laura, carrying a basket full of goodies. She is the woman who is in charge of PR, conferences, and other stuff. Castle and Games got lucky because she is the most sought after liaison in her field. Her face is lit up with a beautiful smile, enhancing her high cheekbones. She jerks to a stop when she sees Zach sitting on the chair in front of my desk.

“Sorry to bother you, but Larry wanted me to drop this gift basket off to you for your friend who was hurt.”

I stand, helping her with the basket since it looks heavy.
“Thank you, Laura. He didn’t need to do that but it’s appreciated.”

She glances at Zach once more, conflicted. “I don’t want to talk out of turn, but if Mr Carpenter sees him in here, you will be in trouble. With Sanctuary releasing in a few months, the entire building is on lockdown.”

“We’re actually just leaving,” I assure her, grabbing my things.

“Yes. I’m sorry to have bothered her at work, but it was important,” Zach responds.

“Okay, well, Mr Carpenter will be leaving shortly so I’ll go and distract him so you can leave,” she tells me. “I’ll see you tomorrow.”

“Thank you, Laura,” I reply, adding the game Larry gave me earlier into the basket.

“Sorry,” Zach declares as she leaves, leaving the door wide open. “I didn’t mean to get you into trouble.”

“It’s done now. Let’s go before he sees you.”

I step out of the office as Zach hisses. “Shit, I left my phone on your desk.”

I tap my foot restlessly, my gaze focusing on Larry's office door. I love this job. It might not have been what I was originally looking for, but I love it. I'm good at it.

A few seconds later, he steps out, holding his phone up. "Got it."

"Close the door, please," I reply, and once it's done, I scan my card over the fob, locking it. I keep it unlocked throughout the day because of how many people come and go from my office.

As we reach the elevators on the other side of the floor, I pray Zach doesn't try to invite me to dinner again. What we had is over, and he needs to get used to that.

CHAPTER FOUR

Ben

Carina drops a plate on my lap, and I hiss out a breath when it catches my stitches.

“Jesus, Carina. I’m recuperating, you know.”

“Oh, I know,” she sasses back, waving a wooden spoon in the air. “I don’t need reminding of that.”

If the food didn’t smell so good, I would refuse to eat it. But spaghetti puttanesca is my favourite, and only Carina can cook like Mum can.

I shovel a forkful into my mouth and let out a moan. I’ve only been allowed soft foods since I woke up after surgery, and although Mum has been cooking soup to make up for the awful hospital food, it feels good to finally be back eating something with texture.

When Carina begins to bang around in the kitchen, putting stuff in the washer, I finally give in. She’s been acting like this since the very first moment she saw me in hospital. If this was my mum, who is full Italian, there would be no tip-toeing around it. Mum would have already given me an hour-long lecture. Which I know for a fact because it’s exactly what she did.

“Carina, just spit it out before you give yourself an ulcer. Or give me one.”

I hear the washer tray get pushed in seconds before I hear it close. I keep eating, waiting for her to join me. When she does, her expression is thunderous, her soft, tan skin brightening at the cheeks.

“You want to know what’s wrong?”

“Yes,” I reply, scooping more food onto my fork.

Shit, this is good.

“I’ll tell you what’s wrong. I told you working there was a mistake. You don’t owe him anything, most certainly not your life.”

“I thought you liked Evan.”

“I love Evan and his family,” she rushes out, flicking her chestnut-coloured hair behind her ear. She’s the only sibling, aside from me, who didn’t inherit our mum’s black hair. I got my dad’s light, sandy blonde hair, and Carina is in between. “But you started there under the belief that you had to, Ben. And look where it’s got you. I know this is the worst it’s ever been but don’t think for a second you hide the other stuff. I’ve seen the bruises, I’ve read about the close calls in the papers, and I heard your nightmares at the hospital. You need to quit.”

I finish chewing my food before placing the plate to the side, on the portable tray Mum purchased for me. “Carina, you can’t ask me to do that.”

“Yes, I can. I’m your sister, for God’s sake. Do you think it was fun getting that call from Mum about you being in hospital? Because I can tell you, it brought me to my knees, brother. It wasn’t even a surprise because I live waiting for that call. Lucca is safe now. You don’t owe Evan anything, and you never did. Anyone in your situation would have done the same.”

“He saved me from prison,” I tell her, watching her eyes widen. “Mum and I decided to keep it from you, but that’s what my future held. The police saw my tattoos, they saw me with Mum, and labelled me a thug. I didn’t see a way out and neither did my lawyer. I was going to go to prison for gang related crimes and I would still be there if it wasn’t for Evan. He believed me, and saw something those policemen didn’t. He fought for my freedom and won. So yes, I owe him, but I don’t work there because of that. He showed me there is a safe way to get justice and that there are loads of people out there like Lucca. Like me. They need help, Carina, and I provide that.”

A tear rolls down her cheek. “When you put it like that, how can I argue? What you’re doing is noble, but at the same

time, stupid. I don't want to lose you like we lost Dad. You mean too much to us, and I don't think we'll get through that grief a second time. Mum is the centre of our world, but you are the glue that keeps us together. This was too close a call, Ben. Next time, you might not be so lucky."

"I won't sit here and promise you anything because it would be a lie. I don't know what the future holds. But I can promise you I won't be taking on any more serial killer cases."

"Just please... if it gets too much, or you think the situation is becoming dangerous, ask for help. I don't want to visit you in the hospital again."

"Aww, you do care," I tease.

She rolls her eyes. "No, the parking is way too expensive, dickhead. You owe me seventy pounds."

"Think of it as partially paying me back the three hundred I loaned you for university." It wasn't really for university and we both know it. She'll just never admit it.

She tilts her head to the side, her forehead creasing. "Ben," she whines.

I hold up three fingers. "Three years ago."

"Arsehole."

I chuckle, forgetting my stitches for a minute. "Is that why you've been in such a foul mood?"

"Yes. I'm mad at you for getting hurt. You told me it wasn't dangerous."

"Because I didn't want you to worry about me."

"We all worry about you. Mum worries you don't eat enough, Stefania worries about you being alone, I worry about you getting killed, and I think Lucca worries he'll let you down."

"For starters, Mum worries about everyone not eating enough. Stefania just wants to be an aunt before she becomes a mum. Yours is valid but is never going to happen. And Lucca has never let me down," I argue. "And you missed Bella."

“Isabella might have everyone fooled with that phone of hers, but I see her. She pays more attention than people think. She doesn’t particularly worry about stuff because she’d rather fix or approach a problem than stress over it.”

“She’s sneakier.”

“Don’t I know it,” Carina retorts. “She snuck out the first night you were in the hospital. I went into her room to check on her and her bed was empty. I drove around for a little bit with no luck, but as I got back to the hospital to speak to Mum, I saw her outside with the boy who likes her.”

“You didn’t drag her back home?”

“No because she was watching over you. How could I reprimand her for that when we all wanted to be there to watch over you?”

“I am sorry for putting you all through this.”

She leans over, placing her hand over mine. “Just promise me, if you ever need to talk, you will come to one of us,” she pleads, lowering her gaze. “I heard you crying out in your sleep.”

“I will,” I promise, swallowing past the lump in my throat. I didn’t know I had been doing that, and I’m embarrassed that she witnessed it. “What was I crying out for?”

“It wasn’t a what,” she responds. “It was a who.”

I swallow, glancing away. “Who?”

I didn’t want to admit to my fears, even if I was unconscious. That night with Cyrus plays over and over in my head. I remember calling out for Cole, and then again when Emily got dragged away. I had been immobile, unable to do anything to help them. I had to listen to her cries, to their goodbye, powerless to help.

Carina takes me off guard with her response. “Immy,” she answers, just as there’s a knock on the door. She glances that way, her brows pinching together. “I’ll let whoever that is in, and then I need to go. I have to help with the evening rush.”

“Thank you for coming and cooking me food.”

She grabs her bag off the armchair as she gets to her feet. “I left some extras on the side for you. When they’ve cooled, pop them in the fridge. Bella is coming tomorrow, and trust me, you don’t want to eat what she cooks up.”

I smile at that. “Got it.”

She leans down, kissing my cheek. “Be well. And call me if you need anything.”

“I will. Love you, sis.”

“Love you too, you goof.”

She makes her way to the door as someone knocks again. She picks up some fallen magazines and places them on the side table next to the door.

She pulls it open, and from where I’m sitting on the sofa, I get the perfect view of the doorway. And who’s standing in it, fidgeting nervously on her feet.

“Imogen,” Carina greets and turns to me, raising her eyebrows with a knowing smirk plastered on her face. “What a coincidence. Imogen is here, Ben.”

“I can see,” I reply, not at all amused by her attempt at being funny. “Are you going to keep blocking her entrance?”

Carina, remembering her manners, steps aside. “Sorry.”

“Coincidence?”

“Um, yeah. I was just saying I felt bad leaving him alone. You wouldn’t mind staying with him for a bit, would you?”

“Actually—”

“Perfect. There’s some food on the counter in the kitchen. If you hurry, it will still be hot.”

“Um, okay,” Imogen responds.

“Catch up soon,” Carina orders, then closes the door behind her, nearly knocking the basket from Imogen’s hands.

She slowly moves her gaze from the door to me. “I’m sorry to intrude. I was supposed to give this to Dad to give to

you, but he's away for a few days with work."

"You aren't intruding. Come in and take a seat."

"How are you feeling?" she asks, stepping into the room.

"Been better. The tightness around the stitches still needs a bit of getting used to," I answer. "How are you?"

"I'm not the one who got stabbed," she jokes, taking a seat. "But I'm good."

"Evan mentioned you had a new job. How is that going?"

"It's the reason I'm here actually," she replies, lowering the basket on the seat between us.

My eyes widen at the gaming products in there. Those products must have cost a fortune. There's a headset and two controllers that I know for a fact are limited edition because I couldn't get on the list for the pre-order. It had been like the malarkey of getting Taylor Swift tickets. They sell for six to seven hundred each. There's also a limited-edition mini speaker, a roll of LED lights, and a couple of games and accessories.

"Please tell me you didn't buy me all of that. It's way too much."

"Actually, my boss gave them to me to give to you. And he kindly gave me this," she declares, pulling out *Zombie Apocalypse: Ground Zero*.

"Holy shit! How did you manage to get that this early? I'm still waiting for my purchase code."

She smiles, and it lights up her entire face. "I was explaining to Laura, a colleague I work with, why I took a day off last week. I don't even remember how your favourite game came up but it did. That same day, my boss came in with the game, and I guess when he found out who you were, he wanted to do more. I received the gift basket at the end of the day."

"Thank you, but no one needed to do this for me."

“I know, but a lot of people are grateful for what you did. Cyrus planned to kill others and they found pictures on his phone of other people. Dad said they were people who were just in the same building as Cole. He even had pictures of you, which is when he sped up his timeline.”

“I think it got sped up the minute Emily and her friends went looking for Gabby. I think it knocked him off his path.”

“Maybe.”

I nearly leave it there, but something compels me to be honest, knowing she'd never judge me. “Everyone keeps painting me as a hero, but I feel like a fraud. I did nothing. I was useless once that knife got pushed into me. I should have sensed him. I should have known something was off when I didn't see the red light below the camera.”

She shifts closer. “Ben, you aren't a fraud. From what Cole was telling Dad in the waiting area, he got hit first.”

“He did. Before I got the chance to do anything, he took me off guard and closed the door hard on my face. We fought for a minute before I got hit again and fell unconscious.”

“You couldn't have been down for long because Cole said when he became conscious, Cyrus went for him with a knife and you dove in the way. If he had killed Cole, then it would have been over. It might not feel great, but taking that knife saved all of you.”

I pinch the bridge of my nose. “I guess. But I still feel like a fraud.”

“How about I put this game in and you can feel like a zombie killer instead?”

I laugh at how easily she makes me feel at ease. Talking about that night is hard. Everyone has their own perception of that night, whilst I have another. It's like the letter 'm' written on a piece of paper. Four of you will see something different. One will see an 'm', the others an 'E', a 'w', and a '3'. And all I can focus on is my perception of that night. It feels good not to feel pressured into feeling a certain way. “Only if you play with me.”

She clucks her tongue. “Dude, if you wasn’t going to offer, I was taking it with me. You aren’t the only one waiting for a pre-order code.”

“You don’t have anywhere else to be?” I ask, knowing her boyfriend isn’t particularly a fan of mine.

The guy gives off a creepy vibe. He shows the world one face, but I’ve seen him with Imogen when he doesn’t have an audience and it’s like he wants to control her, not be her partner.

She lowers her gaze slightly. “Not tonight. But I am going to take a bowl of that food because it smells amazing. If that’s okay?”

“No, go ahead. My sister made enough for ten families.”

“Do you want anything whilst I’m up?”

“A beer?”

She arches a brow. “No chance. I know you’re still on painkillers.”

“It was worth a shot,” I tease.

“How about a water and another bowl of food?”

I lean back, grinning. “Sounds good.”

“Do you want it heating up?”

“If she left a saucepan clean, you can do. It tastes better heated up on the stove than it does in the microwave. But I’m good with it being warm.”

“Gotcha. It won’t take me long so don’t try getting up to put the game in.”

“Are you sure this was a spur of the moment visit?”
Because I swear she’s been speaking to Mum.

“Your mum brought some food around to Mum and Dad’s. When Dad told her he was planning to come up and visit, she gave him a list of things to look out for. I don’t think he was going to keep the beer from you, but Mum gave him a

look that said, don't you dare buy him any whilst he's getting better."

I chuckle, which pulls at the flesh around my stitches. I wince, placing my hand over my side where the bandage lies under my T-shirt.

Imogen's face falls, her cheeks paling. "Would you like any medication?" she whispers, pain in her tone.

I should have taken them by now but they send me sleepy. So I lie, not wanting her to leave. "No. I'm not due any yet."

"Alright, I won't be long," she offers, picking up my tray.

I watch her arse swing side to side as she makes her way into my kitchen.

There was a time when I wouldn't let myself look at her. It was before her eighteenth birthday. Although legal, it still felt wrong to want her. I always liked her, but not in a way that deserved a prison sentence. She had always been my boss's kid daughter and I never looked at her in that way.

Then she turned seventeen and she captivated me. I found ways to be around her, talk to her, and touch her. It was small things, and by the time I realised why I liked being around, her dad had noticed. He warned me she liked me and to not feed her crush. I could tell he was concerned about it, which he confirmed when he told me she was too young for me. She needed someone her own age, so he made me promise to stay away. So I did. I respected Evan and Imogen too much to argue about it. And whilst she acted on her feelings, I didn't. Because I knew Evan was right. She was far too young to know what she wanted back then, and I didn't want to be a man who took advantage.

A part of me always wondered if Evan knew I liked her too by that point, and it was me as a person who he didn't want for her.

I owed him too much to betray him.

Yet there are times when it's been hard not to break my promise.

CHAPTER FIVE

Imogen

Hunched forward on the sofa with my ankles crossed and knees down, I squint at the screen. My glasses are in the car downstairs, but I can't pull myself away from the game. I thought it would be awkward between us but it's not. This is the most time we've spent together in years, and it feels good to laugh with him again. I never thought we would get back here.

A man with a melting face comes at my character on the screen, and I scream at Ben, "To your left. To your left."

He turns his character, who is wearing all leather, and swings the axe to get the dead guy coming at me with teeth and claws.

I glance to the side, ready to high-five him, and catch him grimacing once again. "Alright, enough," I order, ending the game.

"Hey, what are you doing?" he asks.

"That's the tenth time I've seen you wince. You're clearly in pain and you look tired."

"I'm fine," he promises, brushing his fingers through his sandy blonde hair. I gulp at the move, wondering if his hair feels as soft as it looks. "We can clear the other building."

"The only thing I'm cleaning is our bowls. You are taking your meds. Just tell me where they are."

He sighs, relaxing back on the sofa. "They're in the kitchen cupboard, next to the fridge-freezer."

I place the controller on the seat between us and get to my feet. I make my way into the kitchen, heading straight for the nearest cupboard to the fridge. Seeing only mugs, I move on to the next one, on the other side, hitting the jackpot. There are a few with new dates on so I grab the boxes before moving to grab a bottle of water out of the fridge.

I head back inside the living room, placing them down next to him. “I didn’t know which ones you would want.”

He picks up the first packet, taking two, and one out of another. “Thank you,” he responds.

I fiddle with the hem of my blouse. “Why didn’t you tell me you were in pain?”

When he gazes at me, I can’t decide whether to look away or to never look away. So much is hidden behind those intense eyes. So much I want to question, and for him to answer. But I don’t. Instead, I wait for him to respond.

He breaks eye contact for a split second, and my body jolts slightly. My shoulders lose their stiffness like he let me out of his grasp.

“Because I didn’t want you to leave,” he admits, his voice hoarse as he takes another tablet from the third packet.

My eyebrows pinch together at his answer. “Why would I leave?”

“They make me tired within thirty minutes of taking them.”

My eyes widen a fraction at his declaration. “You needed them when I first asked earlier, didn’t you?”

He runs a hand softly across the back of his neck, and I lick my dry lips at the sight of his arm bulging. “Yes.”

“Ben, you can’t do that to yourself,” I lightly scold, but then clear my throat, not wanting to make him feel worse than he already does. “I mean, if you wanted my company that badly, I would have agreed to come back just to play the game. You didn’t need to be in pain.”

He chuckles. “I’ll remember that.”

“Do you need me to take you to bed or anything?” I close my eyes briefly when I hear how dirty that sounded.

He grins. “Are you offering to take me?”

“Yes. No. I mean, if you need help, I’m not going to let you struggle.”

He laughs at my unease. “Immy, I’m good. But thank you for offering.”

“I’m going to put these in the dishwasher,” I offer.

“No, you’ve already put the others away. I can do that.”

I arch an eyebrow. “How? You aren’t supposed to lift anything for another week yet. It will only take me a few minutes. And it’s the least I can do, since you let me eat two bowls.”

I pile it all onto one tray and lift it up. As I hit the doorway, Ben responds. “I love how unapologetic you are about loving food. Some girls will barely eat one plate, too embarrassed to eat in front of someone.”

His words catch me off guard since Zach only ever made negative comments about how much food I consume. If he knew what the other females could eat in my family, I dread to think what he would say. Hayden is the skinniest by far yet can eat any person under the table. Except maybe her dad. I don’t even think her dad has a stomach.

“Did I say something wrong?”

I turn to address him, clearing my throat. “No. You’re just one of the very few people outside of my family who has never made me feel awful for my love of food.”

His jaw clenches. “Never let anyone make you feel bad for it,” he orders in a gentler tone. “Plus, I think it’s the first thing my mum fell in love with about you. It would break her heart if you didn’t eat her food.”

I laugh at his apt declaration. It is the first thing his mum loved about me. She invited us to her restaurant, and I got so overwhelmed by all the aromas, I wanted to try everything. Any time something new would come out, I would bounce in my chair, softly demanding to try that one too. She loved it.

“I would never want to disappoint your mum,” I admit with a smile.

Stepping into the kitchen, I place the tray down on the counter, only hitting the edge. Before the bowls and cutlery

can fall to the floor, I block them with my body, causing the sauce to spill onto my white blouse.

“Shit!”

“Everything okay?”

“Um, yeah, just a minute,” I call back. I quickly load the dishwasher, putting on a cycle before leaving the kitchen.

Ben’s eyes widen. “Shit, that’s going to stain if you don’t quickly wet it.”

I pull the wet material away from my body. “It’s fine.”

“It’s not. Go grab a T-shirt from my wardrobe. Mum left some stain remover in the cupboard above the washing machine. If you rub some of that on it and soak it when you get home, it should be okay.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yes.”

“Thank you.”

I make my way down the hall, noticing the personal touches someone has made. On the wall running along the short hallway are pictures. Some are group photos with his family, and some are from the office. All are memories of milestones or events, and I can’t help but stop at the one of me with the men who work for my dad. I’m the only female in it and I’m knelt down with two Rottweilers on either side of me. They were my dad’s best friend’s dogs—Harris.

The bathroom is at the end of the hall and the door to Ben’s bedroom is to the right of it. I step inside, mesmerised by the décor. To the right is a corner wardrobe and drawers. The entire wall behind them has mouldings, giving the dark charcoal grey walls character. His upholstered bed frame is in a lighter shade of grey. He has a dark bedsheet on, but the throw at the bottom is white, crossing over the corner of the bed.

He has a desk in the far-left corner that runs along the wall before stopping at the window. Everything is simple and tidy yet looks elegant and beautiful.

Not wanting to come across as creepy, I quickly move to the wardrobe, pulling open the door. I unbutton my blouse before sliding it off. Not wanting to risk getting the sauce on anything else, I fold it up so it's covered and place it on his drawers. I reach for one of his black T-shirts, tugging it over my head. I'm immediately surrounded by his scent, which is a mix of spice and earthy woods. There's also a hint of lavender softener.

I grab my blouse off the drawers and make my way back to the living room. Ben is nowhere to be seen, so I head into the kitchen, panicking a little. He shouldn't be on his feet.

"What are you doing up?"

He holds up a tube and a tub. "Grabbing these."

"Ben, I could have done that. You shouldn't be on your feet."

"I needed to get up anyway. I didn't realise how late it had gotten so I'm going to hit the sack."

"Are you sure?" I ask, searching for any clue that he is lying to make me feel better.

"Positive," he assures me, taking my blouse from me. "You have to leave this to soak for twenty minutes before you put it into the wash. As a son who grew up being fed dishes with sauces, it's a lifesaver. You have no idea how many shirts I went through when I moved out before my mum finally shared her wisdom."

I watch him scrub the gel onto the shirt as I reply. "She didn't give it to you in preparation?"

He laughs as he sprinkles some powder on top of the stain. "No. She did everything in her power to get me to move back home. I'll never admit it to her, but I nearly broke after my favourite Tee got ruined."

I laugh because that describes Maria perfectly. She's a cunning woman who loves her children. "When did she break?"

“I invited her to dinner and I was doing it all wrong. The minute I splashed sauce on my shirt and went to throw it in the bin, she got up, yelling at me in Italian. By the end of the night, I had a list of home life hacks, recipes, and she had purchased every cleaning product I would ever need.”

“Wait a second... does that mean you didn’t cook at the office Christmas party?”

“Oh no, I did. Mum just needed to see that she needed to let go. And I needed to learn you will always need your mother.”

He hands me my shirt. “Thank you,” I reply. “I wish I came to that revelation when I moved out. I only moved next door but I missed my parents terribly. Mum had to get me to adjust to the new living arrangements by not visiting me at home. I couldn’t even visit her at their home. We had to meet up in a new setting. So I guess it was reversed for me. I was the one who needed to let go.”

“What did your mum need to learn?”

I laugh because I know it’s going to sound ridiculous. “That she couldn’t call me up for a vote anymore. It was no longer two against two. It was two against one, since I didn’t live there anymore. Luckily, whenever there’s something my dad and brother don’t want to watch, me and Mum will arrange to watch it together. I guess we’re both lucky to have parents who love us.”

His gaze softens, and I swear his eyes drift down to my lips. “Yeah.”

I clear my throat. “Well, um, I’d better go. I have some work I need to do before tomorrow.”

I walk back to the living room, collecting my bag from the sofa. “Will you tell your boss I said thank you for the gifts?”

“I will.”

As we reach the door, he pulls it open. “You should try to talk him into giving you a copy of the game so we can pair up.”

“Ha! I don’t think that will happen, but if it’s true that we get early access, I will for sure be picking that one out.”

He laughs. “Thank you for coming.”

I step into the hallway. “You’re welcome. I’m glad to see you are doing better.”

We say our goodbyes before I head over to the lift. There are two flats on either side of the hall. The stairs are to the back of the building and the lift is at the front. Not wanting to walk down a dozen set of stairs, I opt for the lift.

As the doors close, I give him one final wave, conscious that he’s still watching me. It’s not until the doors close that I take a breath.

I never expected to be here this long. Being around him for that long has stirred up feelings I thought I had burnt years ago. It has never been easy to be around him, but tonight reminded me of why I liked him so much to begin with. He’s interesting, funny, and we’re into similar things. He’s comforting, like a baby’s blanket you carry around long after you should have stopped.

The doors open, and it doesn’t take me long to let myself outside. I head over to where my car is parked, but stop short when I see the last person I expected to see.

“Zach, what are you doing here?”

“I knew you were fucking lying to me.”

My brows pinch together. “What are you talking about?”

“It was him, wasn’t it? He’s the reason you broke up with me.”

My eyes widen at the accusation. I thought I had set the record straight where Ben is concerned. “Zach, you were at my office. You saw the gift basket they gave me to give to him. That’s why I’m here.”

“For five hours? Yeah right. You’re even wearing his shirt.”

“Zach, you are misreading the situation. It isn’t what you think.”

“Like I believe you. I thought I meant more to you than this. I would never have cheated on you, much less looked at another woman. How could you? Have you forgotten what he did to you? Did you forget what I did to help you through it? This is a low blow, Imogen, even for you.”

His eyes swarm with tears, breaking my heart. “Zach, it really isn’t what you think it is. I promise.”

“You’ll regret this, Imogen. You really will. I never believed your bullshit excuse and now I have my answers.”

He turns to leave. “Zach, wait! Let’s talk about this.”

He pulls open his car door. “No. I’ve been wanting to talk to you for days and you’ve ignored me. Stay away from me, you lying, cheating whore.”

“Zach, I haven’t cheated,” I yell.

“You know what really hurts? I still love you. I would take you back tomorrow. That’s how much of a hold you have over me. But this... this is cruel. You could have at least waited until the bed sheets were cold.”

I jerk at his words as he closes his door. I have never cheated on anyone, much less Zach. Even during the times I knew it had to end between us, I never wanted to hurt him. We had been friends first, and that meant more to me than anything. He brought me out of a dark place, something not even my family could have done. He made me feel worthy of love, and treated me like a woman.

Where it went wrong, I don’t know.

But the Zach I’ve encountered the past few weeks...

He’s a stranger to me.

CHAPTER SIX

Imogen

George dramatically closes the door to my office with his foot. In one hand is a bag filled with food, and the other holds two drinks secured in a cup holder. The smell coming out of the bag is to die for. Larry is a legend for hiring real cooks for the cafeteria instead of a cafeteria assistant where the food is microwaved and tastes like cardboard.

Here at Castle and Games, we have a variety of the best foods. Anything that's left over at the end of the day is taken down to our local homeless charity. They serve the food on the night to those sleeping on the streets. How we have so many homeless is beyond me and not something I like to get into. I get so mad and don't know when to stop.

"If we ever had a zombie apocalypse, Daniel would be the first to go," George growls, placing the food down on my desk. I barely move my papers in time.

"Yeah, I can totally see him trying to yell the zombies away and getting bitten."

"No, I'd kill him and say my finger slipped because I thought he was a zombie," he amends.

I splutter out a laugh as I reach into the bag. "What has he done now?"

"He has this maddening filing system. It's chaotically organised, when it could be made so much easier and simpler for people. He wouldn't have such a stick up his arse if he changed it because then others wouldn't constantly be going to him to get the files they need."

"I heard Laura say they tried once and he blew a gasket."

"Don't get me wrong, he's good at his job, but he makes it so damn difficult for others to do theirs. I've lost count of how many times he's yelled at me today."

I smile as I pull a plastic knife and fork out of the bag.
“You should get a yell jar.”

He arches a brow at me. “He would probably bury my body in the stacks. No one would ever look for me there. They’d be too scared to get on his wrong side.”

“I’d love to know why he turned down my position. It’s amazing. I would have thought being an assistant to the man who is to thank for this company would be right up his alley.”

“You mean you don’t already know?”

I eye the tall man who has wormed his way into my heart. He’s like another brother and best friend rolled into one.
“There’s an actual story behind the decision?”

He shrugs. “Not really a story.”

I lean forward, forgetting my meatballs for a moment.
“Tell me.”

“Well, I heard one of the women bitching in the staff room about it. Apparently, Larry has been trying to win him over to his side for years.”

“Woah, that’s a compliment. Larry is kind of picky.”

George shrugs. “Well, Daniel is known to have said, ‘why would I run one office when I can run them all’,” he announces, using his best impersonation of Daniel—which, I have to say, is pretty good.

“That sounds like him,” I declare, shovelling a forkful of food into my mouth.

“So, who was the hottie who came to visit you? I got some seriously weird vibes from the both of you.”

I move the food around in the container at the mention of Zach. I’ve failed to get him to talk to me. I don’t know why it bothers me so much that he won’t. I wanted to separate. But living with him thinking I cheated unsettles me. I may have done some shitty things by not telling him how I truly felt, but I didn’t do it to hurt him. Sometimes the truth can hurt someone more. And I guess a part of me was scared he would

try harder to win my affection, when all I can ever feel for him is love as a friend.

“He’s my ex,” I answer, not expanding.

I should have known George wouldn’t stop there.

“I take it you broke up with him,” he guesses. “Or did he cheat and that’s why I was picking up the hostile atmosphere?”

“No one cheated, but he thinks I have.”

“Don’t leave me at that. We have an hour. Tell me everything. I won’t leave until you do, which means Daniel will be in here scolding you for monopolising my time.”

I snort because he isn’t wrong. “It’s a mess. Just before my eighteenth birthday, I was let down by a guy I was head over heels in love with. He didn’t feel the same. Zach was my friend at the time,” I begin, then go into detail about how we first kind of got together.

“So he kind of asked you out at a vulnerable time?”

“Sort of. But after a few months, when the embarrassment died off, I realised I was being foolish in thinking we could actually be together.”

“So what changed?”

“Every guy I tried to go out with after ended in disaster. There was always something, and Zach was there for each breakup. He held me when I cried. He made sure my hair remained vomit-free every time I got drunk to forget how much men suck,” I admit. “And I know this is going to make me sound like an awful human being, but when I saw the guy I had liked first with another girl, I felt alone. The guy I wanted didn’t want me. But then there was Zach. He wanted me. And like most girls, I wanted to be wanted. So we got together properly. It was fine until it wasn’t. He changed.”

“Don’t they all,” he preaches, holding up his fork. “So he changed...”

“One thing you should know about me, is my family will always come first. He hated that. And every time he gave me

an ultimatum that he knew he wouldn't win, it made me like him less and less."

"And let me guess, the more you disliked him, the less you found him attractive?" I nod, since he guessed it in one. "I've been there. My last boyfriend was like that, then he turned me into the villain when he didn't get his way."

"It sucks, doesn't it?"

"Fuck yeah," he agrees. "So why was he here?"

"Because he can't wrap his head around the fact that I wanted to leave him."

His eyes widen as a gasp leaves his lips. "Prick!"

"I know."

"I swear, if I had known all of this, I wouldn't have let him in."

"You shouldn't have anyway," I point out. "You're lucky Larry didn't find out. You would have been fired."

He shrugs. "I'm new. I can make mistakes."

There's a light knock on the door, and I look up, spotting Laura in the thin window. "Come in."

She pushes open the door, smiling at me. "Hey, I'm sorry to bother you on your lunch break but we're missing a demo version of Sanctuary. Chen said you were the last person to sign out disc three."

"Oh yeah, crap," I hiss, then groan. "Sorry for my language."

She laughs softly. "Hey, if you don't swear at least four times in a shift, then you aren't really working."

"I'm already on nine," George announces as I search the desk for the disc.

Laura's brows lower. "I'm surprised it's not more. I gave in my written notice on the day I had to work with Daniel."

"What day did you put into the betting pool?" he asks, distracting me from my search.

“Pool?” I ask.

Laura smirks. “We’ve all got bets on how long George will last working with Daniel. He’s managed to beat the last recruit, but he still has six more days to beat the woman at the top. I think she only made it so long because she had seven kids at home.”

Curious, I ask, “What did you bet?”

“I’ve got him down to leave by the New Year. But I’m kind of wishing I put longer,” she admits sheepishly. “Did you want to make a bet?”

I think about it for a moment and turn to George. “Would you be offended?”

“God no. Marissa has promised me baked goods if she wins.”

I snort, but turn to Laura. “Does it need to be a date he leaves?”

“Um, there are no rules about what you put down.”

“Then put me down as Daniel leaving because I have a feeling George will break him first.”

Her eyes widen. “Shit! Why didn’t I think of that?”

“I’m going to take that as a compliment.”

“You should. It’s very rare I say that about someone other than my family. They’re enough to drive a priest out of church.”

It’s his turn to widen his eyes. “They are that much?”

I tilt my head, wondering how I can explain this without making them sound like crazy ward escapees. “They are... worldly.”

“I can’t wait to meet them,” he gushes, bouncing in his chair. “Please tell me I get to meet them.”

“I’ll have to get you to sign a medical waiver,” I joke. “Not many can handle them.”

“Who are they?” Laura asks.

“The Carters.”

She gulps. “Not a relation to Max Carter, I hope.”

“He’s my uncle,” I reveal, watching the colour drain from her cheeks. “Are you okay?”

“He coached my nephew’s football team. For a night. It was, um... I still have scars,” she whispers.

Shit!

“He’s a very distant uncle,” I lie. “Honestly, he’s harmless.”

“Let me tell you, I’m not a runner. Exercise and I don’t mix. If I can avoid taking the stairs, I will. But he had me running around the field like my life depended on it. I thought he was going to attack me, and everyone was too scared to get involved.”

I grimace. “By any chance, did you have food?”

“Yes. I had a double whopper burger. Though, by the time he tackled me to the floor, it was just a bun.”

“He’s really sensitive about food.”

“I’ll say.”

“I really need to meet your family,” George states in awe.

Laura shakes her head, the colour returning to her cheeks. “Do you have the disc? I need to go check on my reports. I left them running.”

I glance around once more at my desk. The issue I’m having is that the work is piled up everywhere and I can’t remember where I put it last. “Can I bring it to you by the end of the day? I’ll look through this once lunch is over.”

“Of course. I’ll let you finish your meal.”

Once the door clicks behind her, I turn to George, feeling his stare on me. “What?”

“You need to tell me more about your family. You’ve been holding back.”

At his command, I answer, telling him all the stories about what we've gotten up to over the years. By the time lunch is over, I've invited him to our next family getaway.

*** **

By the end of my shift, I'm a sweaty mess. The disc Laura had been looking for is nowhere to be found. I've emptied my desk. I've flipped through books one page at a time and turned the entire room upside down. My desk, which usually sits fairly centre in the room, is now pushed to the side—just in case it had fallen underneath. But Sanctuary is gone, and my only resort now is to go and start asking people if they have it. The second I do that, word will get around the office like a game of Chinese whispers and they will know it was me who lost it.

Tears of frustration threaten to fall. I love this job. I love it more than I expected to. And I've done one of the two things they asked me not to. Lost the damn disc.

I brush my hair out of my face, getting a whiff of the odour I've collected from sweating so damn much.

"I'm going to get fired," I whimper.

The handle to my office door pushes down, and my heart races in a panic as I move to the door. Before I can lock it, George steps inside, his eyes wide when I dive for the door, closing it behind him.

"Um, it was just your family with crazy tendencies, right?"

I pull at my hair. "George, I'm in so much trouble."

He glances around at the mess. "Holy fuck. Who pissed you off enough that you had to trash your office?"

"Shush, people will hear you," I demand.

He eyes me like I'm missing a few brain cells. "But you weren't worried they might hear you trash your office?"

“Oh God. The office is the least of my problems.”

He steps back when I go to reach for him. “Should I call a doctor? Do doctors even do office calls? Do they even do *house* calls anymore?”

“George, will you listen for a minute,” I snap. “I’m in trouble and I need your help.”

Seeing the seriousness of the situation, he steps closer. “What’s going on?”

“The disc. The damn disc is gone. I can’t find it anywhere,” I stress.

“Maybe Laura has it. She was looking for it,” he points out.

“I’ve been looking all afternoon for it. I can’t find it anywhere.”

“Did you check in the files? I always—”

“George, I’ve looked everywhere. I even moved furniture. It’s not fucking here,” I cry, pulling at my hair. “I’m going to get fired.”

“Yeah, girl, you are,” he states, not making me feel better.

I press my palms together in a plea. “You have to help me!”

“Well, did you check in with anyone else to see if they grabbed it off your desk? You don’t lock the door so everyone waltzes on in.”

“I hate getting up every two minutes to open it. I only lock it when I’m leaving the room.”

“So someone with the masters lock could have come in and got it?”

Hope flares in my chest as I reach for his hands. This time, he doesn’t flinch or move away. “You are a genius. But how do I find out who without incriminating myself in the process?”

“Ah, true. If someone took it to get you fired, they won’t own up to having it.”

I drop down in the chair, feeling hopeless all over again. “What am I going to do?”

“Well, everyone has left for the day. Why don’t we nab the master key from Daniel’s desk and do a quick search?”

“Where should we check first?”

“Well, we know Meaty Eyes wanted your job. We should start with the obvious.”

Meaty Eyes is Neil, who works in cataloguing. His job is boring and could quite honestly be passed down to any other colleague. But I think Larry felt sorry for him since they are related somehow.

“Will you help me?”

“Girl, if you get fired, who will I share my lunch with? Of course, I will.”

I high-five him as I get to my feet. “You are awesome. You know that, right?”

“Of course, I do. I’m me.”

Two hours later, all we’ve managed to find is a hidden drawer of sweets, some gross porn magazines, and a hidden picture one colleague had of another. After righting my office, we both head back out to the elevators. The cleaners are now on the floor, giving us no space to keep looking. It’s too risky.

“I hate to say this, but I don’t think it’s here.”

“I definitely didn’t take it home,” I respond. “I always double check my bag before leaving and when I get home.”

“Maybe someone put it back in the control room when you were on a bathroom break.”

“Maybe,” I murmur, but I don’t believe it’s that. It seems too easy.

“Or someone stole it from your office. Do you have a record of who has been in there since you last had it?”

“I don’t need one. Aside from you, only Larry, Laura, and Marissa have been in my office. And I was there.”

“And the ex,” he points out.

My breath catches in my throat. Zach wouldn’t. No. He couldn’t.

Yes, Imogen, he would.

“Shit,” I hiss, reaching for a door to lean against.

“Hey, I was just putting that out there.”

I meet his gaze, my chest tightening. “I’m going to lose my job,” I choke out.

He pats my arm like comforting someone is foreign to him. “Let’s not get ahead of ourselves.”

“We both know how this will end. Larry has poured his sweat and blood into that game and I’ve gone and ruined it.”

“No, you haven’t. Someone else has. We have one more thing to look at before we go jumping to conclusions.”

“We’ve searched every office.”

“But not the database that has a list of who used their key card on your door. You never know, our earlier assumption could still be right.”

“But only Larry can check that,” I point out.

“Not just Larry. Daniel has access too. On my first day, I asked what the locked file was and he said it was door access data and only he would ever need to use it. In the morning, come to the reception and say someone has taken the wrong folder from your desk this morning and ask if there’s any way he can access who it was.”

“You think that will work?”

“Feed his ego and tell him Larry said he was the one to ask. I’ll peek over to see the code, and later on, we’ll go through it.”

“That seems too risky. There’s no need for you to lose your job too if we get caught.”

He waves me off. “I feel like Veronica Mars. I live for this shit.”

“Are you sure?”

He places an arm around my shoulders as the elevator doors open. “Positive. I’ve got your back, Black Widow.”

I smile at the use of my gaming name. “Right back at ya, Master Spok.”

Now all I can do is hope we find the disc before they find out it’s missing.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Imogen

I'm going to be in deep shit. I wouldn't be surprised if Larry files a police report and gets me arrested for the missing game. He can legally pursue criminal charges since it's in our contract to keep data confidential. Although I haven't personally taken the game, it was still in my possession and I am liable for it.

It's Friday, and my attempts at keeping the missing disc a secret are coming to an end. There is no way I can use the excuse I'm still looking through it for any possible amendments because now the order has come from Larry himself. They want it back in the secure vault.

Monday morning, I'm going to have to tell him everything because time is running out. If this game gets into the wrong hands, it will ruin the launch. Even with it only being a demo, it's dangerous for the company. Others will steal the idea and rush to complete it or even connect the idea to a current game.

George meets me at the lift, sucking on his favourite ice coffee. "Girl, what are we going to do?"

"I don't know," I whisper, so others don't overhear.

"I mean, we could make a copy," he offers.

"We can't. Each demo disc has its own code. They'll know right away which one was missing."

"There's only one person left to ask."

He means Zach. "He wouldn't do this. I promise. I know him."

"I never pegged you as stupid," he remarks as we step inside the lift.

"Huh?"

“No one truly knows anyone. It’s impossible. My aunt’s way of describing it is kind of out there, but it’s what makes the most sense. We all have that voice in our head that is talking to us.”

My eyes bug out. “I’m beginning to worry about your sanity.”

He rolls his eyes, not offended by my remark. “Okay, let me give you an example. Earlier, when Daniel was talking to you, and you looked apologetic and sympathetic, what was running through your mind?”

“If I could get away with cutting his tongue out and taping his mouth shut.”

“Okay, psycho,” he grumbles as he steps away from me. “But that’s my point. No one else will ever know who you truly are because they’ll never know what your inner thoughts are. I can’t tell you how many conversations I’ve had where my mind is saying something entirely different to what my actions and words are. I could be comforting someone, whereas inside, I’m growling at them to get over it.”

“Have you been doing that with me?” I ask, eyeing him warily.

“You, I actually like. Others... not so much.”

“Good, because I would hate not talking to you.”

He laughs. “My point is, you don’t really know him. He could be showing you one face whilst hiding another.”

“Okay, now you put it that way, it does make sense. It’s why we broke up. He wasn’t who I thought he was.”

“And you didn’t feel anything for him.”

“Not in a romantic way.”

“Call him out.”

“I won’t know if he’s lying.”

“Then ask someone to go with you who will.”

As we step off the lift, I turn to him, hope bubbling up into my chest. “You’re a genius. I know just the person.”

“Have fun,” he orders.

I grin, happiness filling me. I’ve been in such a weird funk this week and it’s consumed me. “See you Monday.”

“I’ll bring doughnuts.”

“I’ll bring the coffee.”

With that, I text the only person who can help me. She’s a talking, walking lie detector. She’s always called people out on their bullshit, and ninety-nine percent of the time she’s right to.

*** **

As I wait at the bar, I begin to regret the location. The place is packed. The Ginn Inn is a local place that my family and the Hayes family drink at. It never used to be that way. There was a time Jimmy wouldn’t let us in at the same time, and if he did, a large deposit had to be paid at the beginning of the night.

I notice two Hayes’ in the corner—Reid, and I forget the other guy’s name—savouring their pints. It still baffles me how we aren’t at war with them anymore. I also kind of miss the entertainment. Thankfully, they still have their moments.

And fortunately for me, there isn’t a Carter here. If they found out what I think Zach may have done, they would be out for blood. Zach wouldn’t make it through the night. And I don’t have any concrete evidence it was him.

A guy who has been eyeing me since I arrived gets up from his chair. His mates clap him on the back, and I inwardly groan. I’ve tried to avoid eye contact at all costs, but clearly, he’s mistaken that for someone who is interested.

And I’m not.

He's cute, but I'm not in the mood to flirt. He has dark blonde hair, a skinny frame, and clearly works with his hands if the work boots are anything to go by.

He takes the stool to the left of me.

"Hey, gorgeous," he greets.

I take a sip of my drink to avoid speaking to him and nod instead.

"Are you seeing anyone?"

And he's one of those. If this was a girl, she would have taken the nod as an answer and saved her dignity. A male, on the other hand, will keep going until you have to walk away.

So I do what I always do. I paste on a smile.

"You mean like hallucinations?" I ask, tilting my head. "Sometimes. It varies with stress levels. Do you see them too?"

His bushy eyebrows rise. "I didn't mean—"

I tap his chest, groaning. "Oh, you mean am I seeing a therapist?" I continue, letting out a small laugh. "Once a week now. But once she hears about the new voice in my head, she will want to get to know them so it will probably be three times a week. She'll be happy to know a new toy came up to me."

His cheeks drain of colour as he looks over my shoulder. "Um, my friend is waving me over. I have to go."

Hayden's laughter echoes around me as a hand lands on my back. "That was mean, and I like it."

"I can't believe it still works. You would have thought after all this time, word would get around. It's not like I'm a stranger here."

"Hey, you can't blame yourself for others' stupidity. That's what I tell myself, anyway," she explains.

"I would have played a little longer but I'm not in the mood."

She takes the stool the guy just moved out of. “Is Zach still ignoring you?”

I nod. “Yes. I don’t know why I’m so bothered about it. This is what I wanted.”

“Yeah, but you didn’t want it to be on bad terms. He’s poisoning what’s left of your friendship. And honestly, I’m kind of glad it’s over between the two of you.”

I arch a brow. “So you don’t get sentenced for manslaughter?”

“That too, but mostly because I hate the way he speaks to you sometimes, and that you let him get away with it.”

“I don’t know why I let him. If he had been anyone else, I would have outright told him to fuck off.”

“I think it’s because you were never yourself around him. You were always trying to impress him, and I think that kind of thinking makes a person change who they are. You’ve been trying to be who you think he needs and not actually who you are. It’s like when someone impersonates another’s laugh or copies a person’s mannerisms.”

“That’s kind of deep,” I muse.

“I have my moments. It’s probably why Zach risked his life over and over again. Because I’m telling you, I would have cut his dick off and fed it to him by now,” she swears. “But I also hated the way he treated you. Clay treats me like he’s the luckiest guy in the world to have me—which, by the way, he is. Zach treated you like you were the luckiest girl to have him.”

I sigh. That’s the vibe I had been getting. It didn’t hit me until last Christmas, when he acted like I should be grateful that he wanted me with him.

“That feels accurate.”

“But it’s not why you messaged me to meet you.”

I sigh, knowing I need to tell her to get her help. I will just feel bad if it isn’t him who’s sabotaged me. Hayden can be a force to be reckoned with, and a devil when she feels like it.

“Ever so perceptive.”

She sniffs dramatically. “Always.”

“Castle and Games are launching a new game. It’s something that has never been done before. Not at that level of genius anyway.”

Her eyes widen. “Coming from you, that sounds like a major compliment. Did you want me to announce it on my podcast or something?”

“No,” I rasp, swallowing past the lump in my throat. “I had the demo disc on my desk. It’s gone, and we’ve searched high and low for it. No one who had access to my office has taken it.”

She rubs her hands together. “Ooh, let me find out who it was.”

“You don’t understand. There’s only one other person who it may have been. I don’t want to think he would do this to me, but we’ve searched the entire floor. The bags of employees and scheduled visitors are scanned on their way out. He wasn’t a scheduled visitor, and somehow, he avoided security to even get to the floor.”

“That fucking bastard,” she hisses, pulling out her phone.

“What are you doing?” I cry. “You don’t even know who it is.”

“Yes, I do. It’s Zach,” she snaps.

“Why are you on your phone?” I panic.

“I’m ordering lilies for his parents. He’s dead.”

I roll my eyes, the tension in my shoulders loosening. “We don’t know it’s him yet. It’s why I called you here. I want you to come with me to question him. You’ll know if he’s lying.”

“It will be a waste of petrol and my time. I already know he did it. He’s a sly fuck.”

“Hayden, he’s Zach. He wouldn’t do this to me.”

She takes my hands in hers, and the pity that shines back at me is something she has never done before. “Remember Jay?”

“Yes,” I answer, wondering why she’s bringing up my ex.

“Did you ever wonder how that photo got on Facebook?”

She’s talking about the picture that broke us up. It was of him sitting on a sofa at a club with a half-naked girl on his lap. His eyes were closed, but she was smiling at the camera.

“Jay posted it,” I remind her.

She snorts. “And Zach happened to be in the area at the time you saw it?”

I gulp, feeling like a fool. “I need you to say it.”

“I spoke to Jay, ready to get revenge, but he was just as shocked about that picture as everyone else was. The only person who wasn’t, was Zach. I couldn’t find the girl in the picture to confirm it, but I know people, Immy. Zach planned that.”

“God, I’m such a fool,” I groan, then watch her, hurt by her actions. “Why didn’t you tell me? Did you think I wouldn’t believe you?”

Her eyes squint. “Why wouldn’t you believe me? I’m family.”

I nudge her shoulder. “Why didn’t you tell me?”

“Um, I did. The night you got shit-faced after the break up. Remember, you were sick for two days.”

I think back to that night and barely recall anything. But then I remember her handing me a shot, saying... “You said something about Jay not doing that, but it’s a blur.”

She rolls her eyes. “I didn’t want to give Zach any more ammunition. I knew he wouldn’t be able to take you away from us, but I’ve seen it happen many times. Men like control, and I didn’t want to risk him using it as a way for you to see us differently.”

“That would never happen,” I argue.

“I know! But I didn’t want to put you in the middle. I knew eventually he would show his true colours and he did.”

I place my hands over my flaming cheeks. “We need to find out if it was him. If this gets into the wrong hands, they could file police charges against me.”

“Then let’s go. Do you have your car? Clay dropped me off.”

“Yeah, come on.”

*** **

We turn up to the house Zach’s parent’s bought him. The lights are on, and there are a few cars on his drive.

I gulp. “Shit, he has guests.”

“Then let’s get this done,” Hayden orders as I pull in behind a red Fiesta.

I unclip my belt, turning to her. “How do you want to do this?”

“Ask him outright. If he’s lying, I’ll know right away. I bet he’s even expecting you. It’s probably why he took it.”

I push open my door, Hayden following suit. I don’t bother locking it since I don’t plan to be here long.

There’s some light chatter inside. From the sound of it, there are four other people inside. I only recognise one: his best friend—Ash. The guy wants to be Prime Minister someday, but I don’t think he has the balls to do it. He struggles to make a point with Zach, and more often than not, he will do what Zach wants to do because he can’t stand his ground.

I lightly knock on the door, which causes Hayden to snort. She reaches over, banging the side of her fist against the door.

Moments later, Zach pulls open the door, his eyebrows hunched down and a snarl on his lips.

When he notices me, his eyebrows rise and a smugness reaches his lips that seals my fears. He did it. Already, without asking, I know he did. He's been waiting for me to come here.

"I have nothing to say to you," he greets.

"Funny, because I have a lot to say. A disc went missing from my desk and I want to know if you know anything about it."

"Not a clue."

I turn to Hayden, who is glaring at Zach. "Hayden."

"He's lying."

Meeting Zach's gaze, whilst my heart aches at his betrayal, I level my voice. "I want it back."

"I have no idea what you're talking about," he lies.

"Yes, you do. You have it. What I want to know is, why would you do that to me? I never wanted to hurt you, Zach, but you've intentionally done this to hurt me. They could file charges."

"That sounds like a *you* problem," he tells me. "We aren't a couple anymore. You made that abundantly clear. So I don't feel inclined to help you anymore."

I ball my hands up into fists. "I need it back, Zach. I came here hoping it wasn't you, because I thought I knew you. But I don't know you at all."

"Like I said, I can't help you."

"This is pointless," I remark, taking Hayden's hand.

She stops me from leaving. Her death stare, void of any emotion, is still glaring up at Zach. "Do you like your university, Zach?"

He narrows his gaze back. "If you want me to recommend you, you are shit out of luck. They don't take riff-raff like you."

"No, they take scum like you it seems," she replies, not the least bit offended. "But I should remind you how strict

they are. I'm sure they would love to know about one of their students snorting cocaine."

He quickly pulls the door closed, so only his body is in view. "They'll never believe you and you don't have proof. I'll deny it."

Hayden laughs. "Whilst you were gloating to Imogen, I already took a photo."

He shrugs. "Again, I'll deny it. You don't see me in there snorting it," he smugly remarks.

"No, but the powder under your nose will be more than enough," she tells him. "That disc had better turn up at Imogen's before she has to go to work on Monday morning, otherwise this will be going on a poster around the school and I'll email it to every faculty member and student."

"You wouldn't fucking dare," he growls.

"Daring me cemented your fate. Don't call my bluff. The last guy to try now works as a litter picker down at McDonalds."

"You will let her do this? I don't know anything about that disc," he yells.

I shake my head, feeling like such a fool for giving him so much of my life. "Like she said, I want it back, Zach. What you choose to do next is up to you."

"You bitch!"

"Are you twelve? Shut the fuck up," Hayden snaps. "Come on, Immy. We've got a poster template to prepare."

"Don't you dare do this," he yells as he follows us down the drive to my car.

I get in as he moves around to my side. "You started this, Zach. I'm doing what I can to end this."

He slams his hand against the roof of the car. "You will regret this. You will fucking regret this!"

I put the car into reverse, ignoring his presence as he follows. When I pull off with him screaming abuse, Hayden

clears her throat.

“Are you okay?” she asks softly.

“Yeah,” I croak out. “I really didn’t want it to be him.”

“We’ll get it back,” she promises.

I have a gut feeling I’m never going to see that disc again. Zach isn’t a guy who backs down. I bet he even thinks the university will never side with us.

But he clearly doesn’t know my family.

We take revenge seriously and they won’t hold back.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Imogen

Walking into work on Monday morning, dread hits the pit of my stomach. I couldn't sleep last night. Every single noise I heard, I thought it might be Zach returning the game. By half seven this morning, I realised he wasn't coming. He didn't heed our warning.

And now I'm about to lose my job. A job I didn't realise was my dream job until I got it. I love it here. I love how friendly most of the staff are. I love how much they take care of each other. And I love the entire process of my job.

I hate that I've let them down in the worst possible way.

George is waiting by the lift when I go through security. I can't even muster up a smile, which makes his fall.

"Oh shit! You don't have it, do you?"

I shake my head. "No."

"Who has it then?" he asks, as he pushes the call button to the lift with his free hand.

"Oh, Zach definitely has it," I disclose. "My cousin even threatened him, which worries me more."

"You don't want her to hurt him?" he asks as we step into the lift.

"No, I'm not worried about that. She doesn't say something she doesn't mean. What worries me is that he didn't do what she told him to do. He's either forgotten who she is or he doesn't believe her. She messaged me this morning so she knows he didn't bring it back."

"Christ, what are you going to do?"

"Tell the truth and hope they take mercy on me," I reveal.

He bumps his shoulder with mine. "It will be fine. We can be unemployed together."

“Why are you going to be unemployed?”

“Uh, I’m the one who let him onto the floor.”

When the door dings and begins to slide open, I know I don’t have much time. “George, I’m not going to mention you. I will tell them no one was on reception.”

“Laura saw him and me.”

“You could have been in the bathroom,” I point out as we reach our floor. The door opens and we step out into the overall reception area. “I won’t bring you up, even if they ask who let him onto the floor. You are not losing your job over someone else’s mistake.”

“I feel bad. I got hives over the weekend because I know if I never led him to your office, he wouldn’t have had the chance to take it.”

“And I could have told him to leave. None of us knew what he was going to do. I didn’t believe he could do something like this.”

He wraps his free arm around my shoulder. “You are too good of a person, Imogen Smith.”

“Shush, people will hear you.”

“Imogen, I want to see you in my office,” Larry orders. “Now.”

I feel the blood drain from my face. “Yes, sir.”

I hand my coffee cup to George. “Good luck,” he whispers.

Straightening my blazer, I begin to make my way to Larry’s office. Colleagues stop what they’re doing to stare at my approach.

I gulp.

They know.

They all know.

I tap my knuckles on the frame of the door. Larry looks up briefly, his attention on the papers in front of him. “Take a

seat, Miss Smith.”

I do, but my nerves are so rattled, I almost stumble into the chair. My vision begins to blur, my pulse racing when he doesn't speak. I shift in my seat, wondering if this is the reaction he was hoping for.

When he meets my gaze, void of any emotion, I know it's going to be bad. “Do you know why I've called you in here this morning?”

I gulp, rubbing the palms of my hands down my thighs. *God, it's hot in here.*

“I might have a clue.”

“Laura informed me you haven't returned the demo disc.”

“About that—”

He puts his hand up, stopping me. “Do I need to remind you about the clause in your contract?”

“No, sir,” I rasp, feeling my throat tighten.

I should have kept the coffee.

“Then you understand that the company can file criminal charges against you. Please don't make us do that, Miss Smith. If you have the disc, it needs to be returned. We will know if it's a copy.”

“Mr Carpenter, I can explain,” I begin.

He sweeps his hand out, giving me the floor. “Please, explain to me how a multi-billion-pound game was removed from this floor.”

“Last week, an estranged friend came to visit me here at work, unannounced. He somehow managed to bypass security and find my office. I never expected him to come here, and I didn't expect him to steal the disc from my desk.”

His veins bulge at his temples, his forehead and neck going red. “You're telling me an unknown citizen is in possession of Sanctuary?”

“I’ve been trying to get it back,” I blurt out. “I would never jeopardise your company or the success of this game. I didn’t even know he had it until after I’d searched high and low for it. I never thought he would do something like this. I’ve asked for it to be returned but he’s refusing to admit he has it. I’m working on it. I swear. I’m so sorry, Mr Carpenter. I’m truly sorry.”

“That’s no use to me now, is it,” he growls, banging his fist on the table. “Your negligence could cost this company billions. Do you have any idea what you have done?”

“I take full responsibility. I understand what this means for your company and for me, but I won’t stop until I get it back. I know it won’t make up for anything that has happened, but I want to make it right for you.” I hold back tears, knowing this will be the end of my career. No one will want to hire me now. I’m too much of a liability.

He rips his glasses off, pinching the bridge of his nose. “Imogen, I have no choice but to go to the police. Until the disc is back in our possession, we have to take every precaution. We also may need to bring forward the release.”

My tears begin to burn as I sit forward. “I will get the disc back to you. I know this doesn’t help the situation, but I am truly sorry. And don’t move the release. Zach won’t know what to do with the game. This was to punish me, not you.”

“Laura has packed up your office,” he announces. “Please hand over your key card and badge.”

I stand, the tears now slipping down my cheeks as I pull the lanyard over my neck. I unclip my key card from my bag, and place them down on his desk.

“Thank you for giving me the opportunity to work with you and everyone here. I’m truly sorry for the damage I’ve caused and for breaking your trust. Whatever happens from here on out, I still enjoyed my time here. I never wanted to let you down, and you’ll never know how sorry I am. Once I get it back, I will email Laura to hand it to her personally.”

He opens his mouth like he wants to speak, but I think my betrayal stops him from saying what he was going to.
“Goodbye, Miss Smith.”

I nod, swiping the tear that falls. As I make my way out, I slowly close the door behind me, then head next door to my office. Or what was my office. I guess it will be someone else’s now.

Laura is closing a box up as I enter. She looks up, and multiple emotions run across her expression. Sadness. Pity. Betrayal.

“Is it true? Did you steal the game?”

“No. My ex-boyfriend who visited me did as revenge for breaking up with him. He knew what the game meant to me, and I guess he saw an opportunity when he was here. I’m trying to get it back, but he’s making it difficult.”

“Did you tell Mr Carpenter that?”

“Yes, but it doesn’t change anything. I take full responsibility. I should never have let him stay.”

“I’m sad to see you go. I loved working with you. But this game means everything to this company.”

“No, I get it. I’ve told Mr Carpenter this, but I will tell you as well. When I get it back—‘cause I will—I’ll email you to meet me outside. I’ll feel more comfortable handing it back to someone trusted.”

“You really think you will get it back?”

“I’ll be going straight to his as soon as I leave here,” I assure her as I lift up the box.

“Word of advice?” she calls out.

“If you think it will help, yes.”

“Get the police to recover the disc. Larry will have no choice but to press charges. The board members will insist on it. If you want to avoid a criminal record, they need to recover it from the home of the person who stole it.”

I hesitate because I would have gone into his home to get it. Then I wouldn't have been able to prove that I didn't take it. "Thank you for helping me avoid another mistake."

"Take care, Imogen."

As I get to the door, I stop. "Laura, if you boot up my computer, there is a file named Sanctuary. I was working on some things that I hope Castle and Games will still move forward with. Despite everything, I want the very best for this company and everyone here. Please make sure they are used. If you have questions, you can call me and I'll talk you through it."

"You would do that?"

"Yes," I answer truthfully.

She nods, and I use that as my cue to leave. The watchful gazes of my colleagues begin, and I feel like I'm doing the walk of shame. When I reach the reception area, George glances up.

"Do not speak to that traitor unless you want to be fired too," Daniel warns.

I give George a soft smile as he mouths 'call me'. I step into the lift and turn, keeping my head up as the doors close.

Only one person can help me now. There is no way I can wait around for the police to come and arrest me.

*** **

Pulling into the visitor space outside my dad's offices, I take a breath. I pull down the sun visor to check my appearance and groan. Not only is the tip of my nose bright red, but under my eyes are still puffy.

Getting fired sucks. Getting fired for trusting the wrong person sucks more.

It won't take the police long to come and arrest me. I need to get ahead of this before it damages my image completely.

Stepping out, I lock the car up and keep my head down as I make my way to the front entrance. I step inside, bypassing the desk used as reception. Four desks line each side of the room, and right at the end are two offices. One belongs to my dad and the other Harris. My dad happens to be placing a folder on the first desk. At my arrival, he glances up.

“Immy?”

“Dad,” I choke out, breaking into tears.

I rush up to him, and he immediately wraps his arms around me. “What’s happened? Why aren’t you at work?”

I pull back, trying to get it together enough to explain. I cling to his black T-shirt. “Dad, I’m in trouble. Big trouble.”

“Immy, what’s going on?” Ben asks, startling me.

I pull back further, seeing him gripping the doorframe to Dad’s office. Embarrassment swamps me as I realise everyone is staring.

Dad places his hand on my lower back. “Why don’t you come to the office?”

“Maybe I should come back later,” I whisper.

“Come on,” he orders, and we walk up the makeshift aisle to his office. Ben moves back and immediately takes a seat on the sofa.

“Why are you up and about?” I ask.

He shrugs. “I had to collect my paperwork.”

“And no one else could have dropped them off or collected them for you?”

He arches a brow. “Are you going to avoid telling us what has you so upset?”

Dad steers me to the sofa, and I drop down next to Ben, aware of how close we are. Dad pulls the desk chair around to the front of us, and I feel like a kid again. This is how me and Joshua sat when we were in trouble.

“You said you were in trouble. What kind of trouble?”

“I got fired, and the police will be arresting me any day now. I could go to prison.” I don’t think I will, but anything is possible.

“What? Why?” Dad asks.

Ben clears his throat. “Please tell me you didn’t steal that gift basket of goodies?”

“What? No! Of course I didn’t. My boss asked me to give them to you,” I remark, offended he would think that. “Zach turned up at the office last week. He wasn’t supposed to be allowed on the floor, but he managed to get on it.”

“What did he do?” Dad bites out. “Is this because you broke up with him?”

“He stole a demo disc. He hasn’t admitted it, but I know he did it.”

“Why on earth would he do that to you? You have always been good to him. Too good if you ask me.”

I warily glance at Ben. “It’s a long story, Dad,” I respond, not wanting him to know the truth. “Hayden and I confronted him on Friday. He was supposed to bring it to me by this morning and didn’t.”

“So, he did admit he had it?” Ben asks.

“No, but Hayden can smell a liar a mile off. Even if she hadn’t been there, I could tell he had it. He was gloating.”

Dad grins at that. He’s always wanted Hayden to come work for him but this job isn’t exciting enough for her. “Then why the police?”

“My contract states that if I steal data, coding, or anything from the premises, I will be prosecuted by the law. I never personally stole it, but I can’t prove that. I can’t prove anything.”

There’s a light tap on the door, and Jerry sticks his head around the frame. “Boss, there are two uniforms here to see you.”

I inhale sharply. “Oh my god.”

Dad doesn't break a sweat. "Send them in."

CHAPTER NINE

Ben

Imogen's hands shake in her lap as Jerry announces the police are here. I run my gaze over her face, seeing her sheer panic and terror.

She also avoided the question her dad asked about why Zach would do this to her. And from the quick glance she sent me, I have a feeling I'm somehow the reason. Evan may have missed the side glance and hesitation, but I didn't. Later, when I get her alone for a minute, I will question her further about it.

Her odd behaviour when she came to visit me and I asked if she had somewhere else to be, begins to make sense. She avoided eye contact when she answered, and the tone she used seemed off. But even without her actions giving her away, I knew something was up. She and Zach spent a lot of time together. What I don't understand is why she would want to hide that her and Zach broke up.

I also didn't miss the relief I felt when Evan mentioned they broke up. She has always been too good for him.

It's no secret that I don't like Zach, and he has never liked me. He made that abundantly clear when he told me to stay away from her years ago. I didn't listen, but I did have to watch as he treated her like a possession.

"It's going to be okay," Evan reassures her. "I will get this sorted."

She nods, rubbing her palms down her trousers. She straightens in her seat as her leg begins to bounce.

Waiting for Evan to face the door, I reach over, rubbing my pinkie finger along hers. Her head swivels to meet my gaze, and so many emotions shine back at me. It's like a beacon on a dark, cloudy night. Fear, nerves, and something I can't decipher.

“It will be okay,” I whisper, as two policemen step into the room.

I recognise Jackson and Gray straight away. They worked with us on a fraud investigation a while ago.

Both are immediately drawn to Imogen. They share a look that gives everything away. They aren't here to take her in, but they are here to talk to Evan about her.

“Imogen,” Gray greets, and Jackson gives her a nod.

“I guess you are here because she has a warrant out for her arrest?” I guess.

Jackson nods. “It came through thirty minutes ago. It hasn't been processed yet but it's only a matter of time. We came to give you a warning as a courtesy.”

Imogen clears her throat. “Are you allowed to do that?”

Gray chuckles. “Not really, but anyone who has worked with Evan before would have done the same. Once a police officer, always a police officer.”

“You've got yourself in quite the pickle,” Jackson declares, losing the smile.

Imogen holds her hands up. “I swear, I didn't steal it. My ex stole it for revenge, and he was meant to bring it back by this morning. I went home before coming here and it's definitely not there. I don't think he plans to give it back.”

Gray arches a brow. “Your ex has done this?”

She nods. “Yes, but I can't prove it. I take full responsibility for my part. I knew we weren't allowed personal visitors on the floor, but he was already at my office door. I didn't want to cause a scene, and I wasn't planning on him being there that long since he showed up unannounced at the end of the day.”

“Was he alone in the office?” Gray asks.

“For a split second. He forgot his phone and I had my hands full. I didn't see what he did in there, but I had no

reason to believe he would steal it,” she admits. “Am I going to be in trouble?”

“Not if we can prove he has it,” Gray replies solemnly. “You are lucky he didn’t return it. Proving he had it before you would have been hard to do in court.”

“How can I prove it? I know the law. I know you can’t get a search warrant without cause, and if Dad or someone else goes in there, any evidence will be dismissed.”

“Then we will have to get him to admit it,” I announce, and her gaze falls on me.

“How? If he was going to admit it, he would have done so when we went there on Friday.”

“I’ll set you up with a hidden camera and recorder. It’s old school but effective. Rule twenty-seven states a recording can be submitted to a tribunal. It’s up to them if they think it can be submitted into court,” I answer.

“And it will give us cause to search the premises,” Gray adds. “If it’s there.”

She chews on her lower lip, thinking for a minute. “He has a vent in his room. I think the previous owners wanted it to pass inspection because it’s just a vent cover, covering a small cubby hole. I noticed a piece of paper sticking out of it once, so I shined a light inside. He had a few things inside that he clearly wants hidden.”

The flesh between Jackson’s eyebrows creases. “Why would he hide it to that extreme?”

“I’m part Carter. He will be expecting them to storm his house. He would have hidden it where they wouldn’t think to look,” she replies with a shrug.

She isn’t wrong. The Carters don’t believe in boundaries unless it’s their own.

Gray rubs a hand over his scruff. “I would get that recording and then come down to the station of your own free will. It will help you if this goes to court.”

She glances at her dad. “We’ll have to do it today then. He doesn’t have class,” she explains.

“I’ll get it set up,” Evan offers before turning to the guys. “Thank you for coming here. I appreciate the heads up.”

“We’re just glad the woman on the desk knew who you were. We came here knowing you would be the best person to help her,” Jackson observes.

“I’m coming with you,” I declare.

“You need to go home,” Imogen orders. “You shouldn’t even be out. I’ll drop the paperwork off later if you need it that badly.”

“I’m coming.”

She huffs out a breath. “Dad, are you going to allow this?”

Evan shrugs, unaffected by her outburst. “He isn’t going to be getting in a ring with someone. I don’t see why it would hurt. He’s a grown man. He will let you know if it gets too much. Plus, he’s good with the equipment.”

“Zach might not even admit to anything. It doesn’t need a team,” she cries.

“We’ll get going and let you sort out your plan,” Jackson interrupts.

We give him a chin lift in response before turning our attention to Imogen. “He didn’t admit it because of Hayden. I guarantee it.”

She pushes her weight back onto the sofa, lowering her head. “I hate that this is happening. He was meant to be my friend before anything else.”

Evan places his hand on her knee. “I know this must be painful for you. He meant a lot to you. But you need to think of yourself right now. He had no problem doing this to you, so it’s in your best interest to push aside who he was to you. My daughter isn’t going to get into trouble for something she didn’t do.”

“I know,” she rasps, swiping under her eye. “It just hurts that it had to end like this.”

“Then let’s make sure it doesn’t go any further.”

She sits up, nodding. “Okay. Okay. I can do this.”

“That’s my girl,” Evan cheers softly. “And let’s wait to tell your mum.”

Imogen rolls her eyes at that. “I’m in trouble. I don’t have a death wish.”

*** **

I park behind Evan, a few houses up from Zach’s house. As Imogen crosses over the road to Zach’s house, Evan jogs up to my car. We set up the feed to the laptop in my car since it’s already connected. We’ll be able to hear her, but she won’t be able to hear us.

Evan closes the door. “She’s nervous. She doesn’t think this will work.”

“It will. He’s too confident and smug for it not to.”

He shifts in his seat so his back is to the door. “Why aren’t you surprised by his behaviour?”

“I guess I’ve always seen past his façade. I have three sisters. I had to be able to pick out the arseholes because my dad isn’t here to do it.”

“Why didn’t you tell me you had your concerns?”

Because I’m scared you will find out what your daughter means to me.

“Because I didn’t believe he was like it with Imogen. He put on a front when he was around her.”

“I could kill him,” he growls. “I can’t believe he’s done this to her. I knew they were heading down different paths but I thought he cared enough about her to stay civil.”

The static image gets clearer, gaining both of our attention. Imogen lifts up her hand to knock. "I can do this. I can do this," she chants on a whisper.

"You've got this, baby girl," Evan states.

The door is pulled open moments later, and she's immediately greeted by a hostile Zach. "I've got nothing to say to you."

You can tell by the camera that she takes a step back. "Well, I've got a lot to say to you," she replies.

"You went to my school," he cries. "I just received a call from my advisor. They want me in for a disciplinary hearing. Are you happy now? Is this what you wanted? To hurt me more than you already have?"

"You knew what would happen," she argues. "You started this, Zach. I'm just here to end it before it goes any further. I never wanted to hurt you, Zach, and I'm sorry that is how you are feeling. But being together wasn't working anymore."

"Because you used me," he yells, his face reddening. "You think I'm going to let this go?"

"This doesn't need to go any further," she tells him, calming her voice. From the shake of the camera, she's anything but calm.

"Any further? I could lose my fucking place at university. You know what being there means to me."

"And you knew what my job meant to me, and what your actions would cause," she snaps.

"You cheated on me," he yells. "You expected me to roll over and take it. I'm better than that."

"She would never cheat, even on a loser like him," Evan growls.

"I didn't cheat on you, but nothing I say will make you change your mind about that. I'm not here to hash that out with you. I'm here to get the game. They are filing charges against me, Zach. And I know the boy who meant a lot to me

is still in there somewhere. You can't really want to end years of friendship like this. I don't believe that."

"I didn't want it to end, full stop. It was you. But you gave up on us," he growls.

"I need you to return the game," she demands.

"No. Maybe if we weren't separated, I would have. You've made your choice and now you have to live with it."

"So to get the game back, I have to get back with you?" she states, and I can hear the pain she's feeling by the way she says it.

"You could call the university and tell them the picture was edited as a cruel prank," he demands. "You could start there. And maybe I will give you the game back."

"Well, he's admitted to taking it," I note.

"It's not enough. He could argue it's about any game. She needs him to mention stealing it."

I hadn't thought of that. "Shit!"

"Did you use your phone as an excuse to steal the game?"

He laughs. "Worked too."

"Why, Zach? Why would you do that? I thought you wanted to remain friends."

"I never planned to take it. But when your friend came into your office with the gift basket, I saw an opportunity. You wasted my time, Imogen. Now I'm taking it back."

"How is this taking it back? What did you want to achieve by stealing that game? Was it to get me fired?" She claps her hands. "Congratulations, you've done that. I got fired because of you. I'm facing criminal charges because of you. Is that what you wanted?"

"I wanted to hurt you like you hurt me," he bellows.

"I never meant to hurt you, Zach. It's why I broke up with you. You changed. Your wants changed. I needed to end it before it went any further. But you hurt me intentionally. You

stole company property with the knowledge of what it would do to me. You read the contract. You knew the ramifications it would cause. You didn't do just one thing to me. You've ruined my life. I have no job, I will never be hired by a respectable company again, and I'm facing criminal charges."

"You did this. I was always there for you when some guy broke your heart. I changed my life to fit you in it and it was never enough. Fuck, I offered my home to you so you could move out of that shit hole. It wasn't enough for you. Nothing ever was. And now things aren't going your way, it's my fault? You want me to do something else for you, but I'm done helping you. *You* aren't who I thought you were. Now, you get to live with the consequences. Because you'll never find anyone like me again. No one else will put up with your family. No other guy will love you when you're fat. No one will ever treat you better than I did."

"You know what, fuck you!"

"Don't like it when you are hit with the truth, do you?"

She steps closer. "Maybe if the truth was being thrown at me, you might finally hit your target. But it seems you not only lie to others, but to yourself too. You think there isn't a person better than you? You're wrong. I've seen it, Zach. No one who truly loves and cares for a person would do what you've done to me. The ultimatums were one thing, but you belittled me at every turn. You'll be hard pressed to find someone else who will put up with you. I did it because we were friends. Or I thought we were. Now, I think you've always had a hidden agenda. I think this is who you really are, and I'm glad it's over."

"We'll see."

"Yeah, I guess we will," she whispers. "I'll make sure to say hi to your mum when I go and fill her in on what has happened."

He begins to shout expletives at her but the mic isn't clear enough to make out what as she walks away.

“I don’t think she’s in a fit state to go to the police station,” I mention as I take in her tear-streaked face.

Evan sighs. “I’m going to take her home. Did you want to come over for dinner?”

“No, I’ll take this to the station and let them know she will be coming in tomorrow morning.”

“Thank you for coming,” he declares.

“Any time.”

As he gets out the car, my gaze is on Imogen. She ducks her head, and her thick auburn hair covers her face.

I glance at the house, wishing I was in a fit state to square up to him. No guy who reacts like this after a break up deserves to be called a man. A woman doesn’t need to give a reason, but Imogen gave him one anyway. She told him how she was feeling, and he’s reacted poorly.

I just hope we can fix this before it gets further out of hand.

CHAPTER TEN

Imogen

Mum lowers a box of tissues on my lap, along with a bowl of popcorn. She hasn't left my side since Dad broke the news about the predicament I've put myself in.

My life with Zach has flashed before me, and it feels like I'm grieving a loss. I remember the day we went to a theme park and he rode the merry-go-round with me because I was too scared to go on the big rides. We laughed at being the only grown-ups on the kid rides without kids.

I remember when we got my car stuck in the mud on our way to a cabin we had rented. By the time we got the car out, he was covered in mud.

I remember all the times we laughed and had fun.

I refuse to believe this is who he has always been. Because it would mean all those memories become tainted by who he is now.

"How are you holding up?" Mum asks, flipping her curls behind her shoulder.

I twirl a piece of popcorn between my fingers. "He was my best friend, Mum."

"I know. Sometimes people do shitty things in the heat of the moment. I'm sure he will come around eventually. I'm not saying you have to forgive him because what he has done is awful. But I know what he means to you. I know how much you care even if he doesn't right now."

"I never meant to hurt him," I sniffle. "I shouldn't even be bothered about that after what he has done, but there's still a part of me that sees my friend. And what hurts the most is he's the person who I normally call when I have a shit day. I hate that I care, and I hate that a part of me doesn't."

"What do you want in a relationship?" she asks.

“Um, I’m not sure how this will help,” I comment.

“Trust me,” she pleads, taking my hand. “Answer.”

“I want someone who understands me. I want them to be okay that I like living with the basics. I want them to love my family as much as I do. I need someone who doesn’t keep score. I want someone to love me for me, and with all my flaws.”

“And why did you break up with him?” she asks.

My forehead creases. “You already know why.”

“Tell me again.”

“Because he didn’t understand me. He never wanted to be a part of my whole life, just the parts that involved me alone. He never understood that I was happy with my old laptop, or why I wouldn’t upgrade my phone. He never cheered me on. Instead, he gave me a list of things I did wrong. I never understood why he loved me because he would constantly tell me what my flaws were. My birthday was just the tip of the iceberg. He has known me long enough to know my birthday is always spent with you guys. I know you lot wouldn’t hold it against me, but it’s my favourite tradition. You and Dad have always made our birthdays special.”

“Because it is special. Not only because it’s the day I became a mum, but it’s the day my life changed forever. You know I lost my parents young. I don’t remember much of them anymore, but I wanted to make sure that if anything ever happened to me or your father, you would always have those memories.”

“He didn’t understand that. He didn’t want to. I tried, Mum. I really tried. I cared for him so much. I loved him like I do family and friends but I was never *in* love with him. And it was unfair of me to stay with him for so long. I guess I’m blaming myself for all of it. I feel like he was right when he said it was my fault.”

“I will never understand why you tried with him again and it’s not my place to. But I know my daughter. She wouldn’t be with someone if something wasn’t there to begin with. You

wouldn't intentionally hurt someone unless they hurt you first. This isn't your fault, my darling girl. Maybe if he did all the things you needed from him, it would have blossomed into more. It didn't."

"I hate that I care," I choke out.

"Because you are a good person. Despite everything that has happened, you still lost someone you cared for."

"I should have broken it off sooner."

"Maybe. Maybe not. You can break up with someone without it ending up like a war. He started this, and now he has to live with his actions. He has lost you as a friend, my girl, and to me, that is the worst tragedy."

I lean my head on her shoulder. "I love you, Mum."

"I love you too," she tells me, kissing the top of my head. "Are you sure you don't want me to stay over? We could have a girl's night. It's been a while since we had one."

"We had one a few weeks ago," I tease. "I'm good, Mum. Just talking to you has made me feel better."

"Call me if you need anything," she orders.

"I will."

She gently lays a kiss at my temple. "I mean it. You call me. You can feel whatever you need to feel and there will be no judgement from me."

I reach over, pulling her in for a hug. "Thank you for being the best mum ever."

She runs a hand down my cheek. "You make it easy," she admits as she gets to her feet. "Try and get some sleep. And don't be surprised if Hope turns up in the morning. I heard from your uncle Mason that she's trying to talk him into letting her borrow the blowtorch to burn Zach's house down."

I gasp. "You aren't joking?"

"No. Mason found it funny until he realised she was being serious. Now Denny wants to lock her in their house."

“I’ll message her later,” I promise as I reach for the throw blanket.

“Don’t stay up late watching movies,” she warns as she reaches the door.

“I won’t.”

“Love you,” she calls.

“Love you more,” I yell as she closes the door behind her.

Once she leaves, I let out a breath. She’s always been my biggest supporter. Both my parents have. And for her to tell me I can feel whatever I want to feel, it just proves my point. Everyone else will tell me to forget him. They’ll ask why I care after what he’s done. But they didn’t know him the way I did. They didn’t witness the fun we had together. They weren’t there for every late-night phone call. It might not have been perfect all the time, but he still meant something to me.

There is also the fact everyone is treating me like a victim, which I have no right to claim. In a way, I am mostly to blame for what has happened.

I’m also struggling to understand what he is to me now.

Is he my old best friend? Is he my ex? Is he someone I cared for, for a short time? Or is he my greatest mistake?

Needing to rest my mind, I hit play on the movie. As Netflix does its ding, there’s a knock on the door.

I chuckle. It’s probably my dad coming to check in on me again. Normally he doesn’t knock though—he just lets himself in.

Throwing the blanket off, I get up and make my way over to the door. As I pull it open, my brain registers who it is and I panic. I wrap my long cardigan around my body, but I know he’s seen the rubber duck pyjama set when his lip twitches.

Why is Ben here?

“Nice pyjamas.”

Feeling defensive, I straighten. “They’re comfortable, I’ll have you know.”

He smirks. “They look like they’re dancing when the fabric moves.”

I inwardly groan. I have a dozen sets of beautiful pyjamas I could be wearing, but none of them fit the vibe of curling up and watching a movie.

“Stop judging my PJs,” I scold, unable to keep a straight face as laughter slips free. “I thought we already discussed you being at home resting.”

“Then why are you making me stand outside in the cold?” he asks, arching a brow.

Crap! “Come in,” I offer, holding the door open wider. “Do you want a drink?”

He glances over at the coffee table. “Is that hot chocolate?”

“With extra marshmallows,” I answer.

“I’ll have one of those if it’s not too much trouble.”

“Nope. I have a machine that whips it up in seconds. Do you want cream?”

“Please,” he replies with a grin.

Sigh. When he grins, it’s like the world begins to spin clockwise.

“Take a seat,” I order gently as I move into the kitchen. I’m kind of glad I let Dad knock a part of the wall out. Now I get to watch as Ben takes a seat on the sofa, his gaze slowly taking in the room.

I glance at what he is seeing. Pictures of my friends and family are hung up on the wall. I have a collection of different miniature bottles of alcohol decorating a shelf in the corner. But it’s the human-sized pink dog bed that makes me cringe.

I don’t have a dog.

It’s for me.

The room is pretty basic. I have a three-seater sofa in the middle of the room. A long, thin side table runs down the back

of it. It has knick-knacks in the centre of two lamps that are placed on either end. There's an electric stove fire because I couldn't have a real one, and a television is hanging over the fireplace. I have a massive swivel chair in the corner that only ever gets used when it rains. It's the perfect place to sit and watch as the rains falls outside. I have a cabinet that runs along the far wall that has comics, vinyls, and photo albums. One cupboard is dedicated to board games—the ones that aren't banned in our family. The rest are just filled with stuff that doesn't have a home: wires that I have no idea what device they belong to, chargers and random crap.

After finishing his drink, I carry it into the living room, handing it over. "How come you are here?"

"I came to see if you were okay and to let you know I've given the police the recording."

I drop down next to him. "Are they going to use it?"

"Yes. I think they're getting a warrant, but you will still need to go down in the morning to give a statement. You will also need to be prepared for the blowback. He is wealthy."

"His family is wealthy," I correct.

"Still, his family is wealthy. A majority of the time, people with money change. They think the rules don't apply to them, or the law. They get a god complex."

"His parents aren't like that. They spoil him, but they won't tolerate this. Honestly, I think if I wasn't so scared of upsetting them, I would have gone to them first. They would have got it back for me. They're really sweet people and have always been kind to me."

"I still think you should be careful. He seems pretty angry."

I rub at the throw hanging over the sofa cushion, lowering my gaze. "It's my fault he's angry."

"Why? Did you steal something from him?"

"No, of course not," I answer.

"Then why are you blaming yourself?"

“Because I got with him for the wrong reasons. I started the relationship knowing he had feelings for me but I didn’t feel the same way. Not really.” I sigh, taking interest in the tassel on the blanket. “He has a right to be angry. He might have done something shitty, but I’ve been way worse.”

He laughs, taking me by surprise. I slap his arm. “Hey, I’m being serious here.”

“I know,” he splutters, which makes him laugh harder.

“Ben,” I snap.

He calms, but he’s still smiling like a fool. “That boy has been after you for as long as I’ve known you. He’s done everything in his power to get you to be his girlfriend, and he has used your moments of weakness as a way in. He knew exactly what he was doing, just like he knew deep down that you would never love him like he did you.”

He can’t know that... “Ben, you’re mistaken.”

“The night of your dad’s birthday, I didn’t understand it until after you...”

I glance away, embarrassment flooding my cheeks. “Made a complete fool out of myself? You don’t need to bring that up.”

“Do you remember me telling you there was a kid out the front causing trouble?”

“Vaguely,” I admit, shrugging.

“Well, it was Zach. I didn’t know who he was until he came into the office with you when you were revising for your A-levels. Maddox and Liam were scaring him off, but he was out there ranting about how he needed to stop his friend from doing something stupid.”

The embarrassment is still flooding me. I had hoped he would forget that night ever happened. But now that he’s brought it up, I have to say what I know out loud. “He overheard me telling Hayden about my plans for that night.”

“I think his plan all along was to get you to be with him. Honestly, after the first time I met him, he seemed like

someone who would talk you into a scheme to be with him just to make someone else jealous.”

He means him. He’s the only guy I wanted to make jealous. I wanted him to see I could be mature enough to be with a guy. I might have given in that night with Zach, but it didn’t last long. It felt deceptive and unfair to use him like that. Which is what I told him when I called it off.

“If it was, then why do I still feel like a shitty human being? I’d been wanting to break it off with him for over a year, but I could never find the right time. My love for him as a friend got in the way or something happened that stopped me.”

He clears his throat, taking a sip of his hot chocolate. “Why did you want to break it off?”

“Um, you have...” I reach over, wiping away the cream stuck on his upper lip. “You had cream on your lip.”

I slowly pull back, my heart racing. The last time I was that close to him, he rejected me. And it still stings.

He doesn’t break eye contact as he flicks the remaining bit off his lip. “Thank you.”

I need to change the subject.

Fast.

Before I embarrass myself even further and try to kiss him again.

My brain and vagina are *not* on the same page.

“As for our relationship, it just didn’t blossom into what I had hoped it would. He changed. Or I changed. He didn’t understand me and I don’t think he wanted to,” I confess. “Things haven’t been right between us for a while, and it’s not because I didn’t love him the way he loved me. I never imagined we would end up like this.”

“The police will find the disc. I don’t think you’ll be held accountable, but you may need to testify to him being there.”

My phone dings with a message alert. “Sorry, let me check this. It’s probably my mum or dad,” I explain, but the message is from George. “It’s from George.”

“Who is George?”

“A guy who works at Castle and Games. We started together. He also helped me search for the game,” I reply as I click on the message. It’s not a clear picture, but I can make it out. “Oh my god.”

“What?”

I hold my phone out. “This is Zach walking onto the floor. This is him walking out.” I zoom into the picture that shows a case tucked into the back of his trousers. “That’s the disc.”

“Can you forward that to me? I can send it to Jackson,” he orders gently. “What did your friend say?”

I click off the picture to look at the message. “Laura said you can’t get the disc back. It has to be the authorities. She’s going to show Larry in the morning when he’s back from his meeting. But, girl, this is crazy. We should totally set fire to dogsh—” I click off the message, my cheeks heating. “Yeah, you don’t need to know the rest.”

Ben laughs. “I wouldn’t advise doing that.”

“Wasn’t planning to,” I rush out. “Here, I don’t have your number.”

He takes the phone, tapping away until his phone beeps with a message. “I’ve saved my number in case you want to run anything by me.”

I take it off him, our fingers brushing against each other. I hold my breath as I lay the phone on the blanket between us. “Thanks.”

As soon as he breaks eye contact, I let out a breath. He slaps his hand gently on his thigh. “I should get going. I have to be up early for a check-up at the hospital.”

“Why? Is something wrong? Did you overdo it?”

He chuckles as he slowly gets to his feet. “No. They just want to make sure everything is healing nicely. I’m already clear for infection. The knife wasn’t exactly clean, but they got antibiotics into me in time.”

“Okay, I hope it all goes well,” I voice.

“Same with you. I’m sorry I can’t be there,” he frets.

“I’ll be fine. It’s not like they’ll send me to prison there and then.”

“Let me know how it goes,” he responds.

“If I don’t, I’m sure my dad will,” I announce, then remember what I need to do. “Do you think it will be okay for me to go mid-morning? I promised Mrs Langley’s granddaughter, Layla, I would make her grandmother breakfast.”

“Yeah. Just don’t leave it any later,” he warns. “Thank you for the hot chocolate.”

A soft smile pulls at my lips. “You’re welcome,” I reply.

As we call our goodbyes, I watch him make his way down the path. It’s only when I see his car door open that I close the door, not wanting to be caught ogling him.

I rest my back against the cool wood and close my eyes.

He still has that hold over me. His eyes pull me in, his lips paralyse me, and his scent has my heart racing. I’ve always imagined what it would be like to be kissed by him. I’ve dreamt up so many scenarios. Would it heighten this spark I feel for him and set us alight?

Or would it burn out and disappear for good?

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Imogen

Early the next morning, a fog blankets the street outside my home. The air has a sting of ice to it, and being wrapped up like a burrito does nothing to hold it at bay.

As I pass my car that my dad brought back last night, I rub my hands together. Fortunately, Mrs Langley's home is always warm. She can be a grumpy old lady but only to those she dislikes. Other times, she says what she thinks. Or she says something without thinking first. The jury is still out. She reminds me a lot of my own grandmother. Sadly, she passed away a decade ago. It took all of us by surprise because to us, she had been fitter than a twenty-year-old. Mrs Langley gives me a piece of her back.

Unfortunately, she recently had a hip replacement and isn't handling being immobile well.

Using my key, I let myself in. "It's me, Imogen," I call out. "Are you awake?"

"Of course, I'm bloody awake," she snaps. "How could I not be with him snoring into that mask all night?"

Holding back a yawn, I enter her room. She's sat on the edge of her bed, her floral, ankle-length nightgown keeping her modesty. She hates the thing, but it's the warmest one she owns at the moment. "For the last time, the walls aren't thin enough for you to hear Mr Crapman's snoring. And for the love of God, have some respect for a dying man."

"Can't die quick enough if you ask me," she remarks, scoffing. "And what kind of name is Crapman?"

"A crap one?" I tease.

She chuckles. "Why do you look tired?" she demands as I help her into her chair.

"I didn't get much sleep last night."

“Anything to do with that hunk of a man sneaking out of your home last night?”

“He was not sneaking. He’s a friend. And why were you snooping out the window? Were you moving around again when they’ve told you not to?”

“I wasn’t snooping. I was merely glancing out of my window—there’s no crime in that. And before you yell, Penelope—my night aid—sat me in the chair and helped me into bed before she left.”

“Well then, that saves me giving you a lecture,” I jest. “Now, what do you fancy for breakfast?”

“A bowl of cereal will suffice.”

“On a cold day like this? Never! You want something to warm you up.”

“Coffee will do that,” she remarks as I push her to the table.

I remove my coat, gloves and scarf and place them on the back of the chair. “You know you aren’t allowed caffeine. I can make you one of your favourite teas. So, what would you like?”

“Scrambled egg and toast will do. The tablets still unsettle my stomach.”

“Scrambled eggs it is,” I declare as I move over to the kitchen. Thankfully, it’s attached to the dining room so I can still keep an eye on her.

“Does the hot guy coming out of your home mean you finally got rid of that pompous arse? Because if it doesn’t, it really should.”

“He works for my dad. He was helping me.”

“Why would you need someone involved in protection helping you?”

I sigh, because I know I won’t be able to leave until I tell her. “I got fired from my job.”

“Why on earth would they fire the best thing that’s probably ever happened to them?” she yells.

“Calm down. We don’t want your blood pressure to rise.”

“Fuck my blood pressure. Why did you get fired, young lady?”

“Zach and I broke up a few weeks ago—”

“As happy as I am to hear that delightful news, I want to know why you were fired. You loved it there and said you really enjoyed it. What happened?” she demands. “And for your information, if I could jump up and down and do a few twerks, I would. I’m glad you made the right decision and got rid of him.”

A smile touches my lips. This is her way of comforting me. “If you would let me finish, I was going to tell you.”

“Well... get on with it then.”

I throw the eggs into a pan and drop the bread in the toaster. “Zach and I broke up on my birthday. I could have done it better, but he had annoyed me by keeping my phone from me. It was my mum and it was an emergency.”

“The Night Stalker Killer? Layla and I were in the hospital when the news reached us. I did see your father’s company named in the paper the next day.”

“Yes. The guy you saw last night was the one who got hurt.”

“I’m glad to see he is doing better,” she whispers.

“Me too,” I admit.

“So you broke it off with him because he kept you from going to the hot one?”

I laugh as I begin to dish up her food. “No, I didn’t even know what the emergency was until after I broke it off with Zach and answered the phone. At first, he didn’t want to accept it. He kept messaging me and calling, but I ignored him.” I carry the plate to the table before going back to boil

the kettle. “I never wanted it to end the way it did. I could have handled it better.”

“But the boy kept pushing until you snapped. It’s why I never liked him. He always acted like it was his way or no way, and if you didn’t do what he wanted the second he asked, he kicked up a stink like a two-year-old throwing a tantrum,” she intones. “What I want to know is how he has something to do with you being fired.”

“He came to my work unannounced. Civilians aren’t allowed on the floor without an appointment. The new receptionist made an error by bringing him to my office, but the blame is mine because I didn’t tell Zach to leave. I thought we were going to try and be friends, but then the next day, I noticed the disc to the new game we’re launching was missing. We searched the entire floor and scoured every room for it. But it turns out Zach stole it. I’m facing criminal charges if I can’t prove it was him. All I can do is wait and hope the police get a warrant to search his house. I have to leave right after I’m done here to give a statement.”

“That sorry mistake for a specimen. Wait until I tell my Layla’s husband. He’ll wring Zach’s bloody neck.”

“Mrs Langley,” I choke out, unable to hide my laughter.

“Not that you’ll need him. You have that mouthy one in your family. What’s her name again? Harden?”

“Hayden, and she’s just spirited.”

“She could give a man a limp dick for life with that mouth of hers.”

“I’ll be fine. It’s being dealt with.”

“Well, you showed him by bedding that hunk of meat. Rub that in his face a few times.”

“Nothing is going on between Ben and I,” I point out. “I just want this to be resolved.”

“Then go resolve it. Layla won’t be long, and the dishes aren’t going anywhere.”

“I thought we could enjoy a cuppa together,” I announce as I bring in her tea.

“Well, pour it in one of those to-go mugs you love. I saw one sticking out of your bag. You aren’t doing yourself any favours by sitting around here with an old hag like me.”

“You aren’t a hag. And you aren’t old,” I start.

She waves me off. “Be gone, my girl. I’m happy to sit here in my chair until Layla comes. I’ll see what movies are on the Net.”

“Netflix,” I correct.

“Net still not catching on?”

“It will never catch on,” I tease, pouring my tea into my travel mug. Once I’m done, I grab the orange juice, knowing she’ll need it for her meds. “Are you sure you don’t mind me leaving early?”

“Of course not. But I’ll expect to hear the outcome for the abandonment.”

I walk over to her chair, reaching down to press a kiss to her cheek. After, I place the glass down next to her food. “I’ll pop by as soon as I can to fill you in. We still have our chess game to finish.”

“On your way out, wake that old goat up. Teach him a lesson for keeping this old bird awake all night, and not for the right reasons.”

“I’ll get right on that,” I reply as I grab my things. “Do not attempt to clear the table. I’ll message Layla on my way out to let her know.”

“Don’t you worry about me.”

I quickly grab her medication from the side, placing the dosage next to the glass of juice. “I’ll always worry about you. Call me if Layla runs late and I’ll come straight back.”

“You deal with that wretched boy first,” she warns.

“Behave,” I call out as I reach the door.

She mutters something under her breath as I let myself out. The cold air hits me in the face as I scramble to put my coat back on.

I didn't get much sleep last night, too busy overanalysing today and stressing myself out. I'm not as patient as my dad. He's always been happy to wait things out, my mum the same. Whereas I can't do that. I need things resolved. I can't go to bed angry. I can't leave something unfinished. I can't wait until tomorrow, *when things will look brighter*.

And today, I need the police to have something.

I glance at my watch, seeing it's eight-forty-nine. As I make my way to my car, I hope it's not too early to get answers.

*** **

I finished giving my statement about an hour ago, but the policewoman who took it told me to wait as a PC Marsden wants to have a word with me before I leave. I don't even know a PC Marsden.

"God, you sound like Olaf," I groan to myself. "*I don't even know a Samantha.*"

"Loved that scene," a voice announces.

I turn in the chair to see who it is. "Please forget that you heard me say that. It's Jackson, right?"

"You should probably call me PC Marsden whilst we're in the station," he warns as he takes a seat. "And your secret is safe with me."

"Good, because I would hate to tell all your work friends you watch Disney movies in your spare time."

"Who do you think I watch them with?"

I grin. "It's so funny to picture. Men in uniform laughing at a child's movie."

“Hey, they have hidden innuendos for a reason.”

“True,” I decide. “The policewoman said you wanted to have a word with me?”

“Yes, and I should warn you, your dad’s on his way. I called him to see if you could wait here a little longer until I could speak to you, but he seemed surprised to learn you were already here.”

I bite my lower lip as I glance at my watch. I’ve been here hours and it’s now past noon. I was going to text Dad not to come, but this place doesn’t give you any signal. “I was meant to message him to tell him not to cancel his day, but the signal in here is spotty.”

“Sorry for dropping you in it.”

“It’s fine. It wasn’t a secret or anything. I just preferred to get it out of the way,” I admit. “What news did you want to share?”

“The disc has been recovered and Gray is on his way over to Castle and Games to have them identify it,” he reveals. “It was exactly where you said it would be.”

“So, it’s over? They can get the game back?”

“For you, it will be a matter of standing up in court to testify against Zach. If there is anyone else who can verify him being in the office at the time it was stolen, it would help move this case along.”

Hope blossoms in my chest. I never wanted it to come to this, but last night gave me so much time to really think. I gave Zach the opportunity to return the game, but he had been so sure it would be me facing charges that he never stopped to think about it backfiring. If he had, the game would have been destroyed.

“I’ve already given the lady the names and their position in the company. Is it weird that I feel like I’m taking the easy way out? I knew the rules—I never should have let him stay.”

“Victims can answer the door to a thief—are you saying it’s their fault when they get robbed?”

I narrow my gaze on him. “When you put it so bluntly, no.”

“His actions are his own and now he’ll face the consequences. Don’t take that on. The way I see it is, would you have knowingly let him take the game?”

“Hell no. I wouldn’t have even let Daniel, the receptionist, take it from the office, and he works there.”

“Then there’s my point.”

“What will happen to Zach now?”

“He will be charged today. He is making his own way over here shortly. We’ll compile all the evidence and hand it over to the courts. They will decide what will happen next.”

I lean back against the plastic chair. “I’m just glad they have the game back,” I breathe out.

He grimaces. “They won’t be able to request it until the case is closed, I’m afraid. They understand that and are just relieved the game isn’t being distributed or leaked.”

“Me too,” I agree.

“Come on, I’ll walk you out. You’ll be able to fill your dad in outside.”

I grab my coat off the chair, pulling it on. As warm as it is in here, I know how cold it will be when we get outside. He leads me out of the room, and as we pass by some offices, I see Beau step out of a room next to the reception.

His eyes widen at the sight of me. “I thought you were the good one?”

I hold my hands up, sniffing. “I am. I’ve done nothing wrong this time.”

Jackson side-eyes me. “This time?”

“We got wrongly accused of attacking a man who screwed his fiancée over,” I answer, smiling sweetly as I point to Beau.

Beau arches a brow. “You did attack him. How is that being wrongly accused?”

I tilt my head, wondering why he's playing with his life like this. "I'm sorry, it sounds like you are sticking up for him."

He shakes his head, his jaw clenching. "You'd think I'd learn not to talk around you lot. You all have this way of twisting it around."

I smile sweetly. "Such a clever boy."

Jackson ducks his head and snickers. Beau isn't even offended. "So you aren't being arrested? I don't need to call your family?"

"No, not being arrested."

"And you haven't gone after a gang and nearly gotten yourself killed?"

I arch an eyebrow. "No."

"Injured a civilian with a banned paintball gun?" he continues.

"You say civilians like we aren't one of them," I protest. "We aren't bloody aliens."

"When your picture hangs on the bulletin board at a police station, you lose that title."

"My picture is on a bulletin board?" I ask, bloody stoked about it. The others will get a kick out of this.

"Wait, you're actually related to the Carters? I thought you were joking," Jackson announces.

"My aunt is married to Mason Carter. We were all raised together so they're all basically my cousins," I explain, watching as something shifts in the way he's looking at me.

He's either shit scared, contemplating whether my story about Zach is the truth and wondering if I framed him, or he thinks I'm a badass. It's tough to tell right now.

"Wait, your picture isn't on the board. I would remember seeing that," he declares.

I duck my head, smiling at the subtle compliment.
“Thanks. I think.”

“Can someone tell me what you’ve done to be here?”

“Her ex stole a vital piece of data from her place of employment to make it look like she did it. They filed criminal charges as it was in her possession, but she informed us about the ex. We’ve recovered the disc and so legal charges will be filed against him instead.”

“You cannot get Hayden involved. I know you two are as thick as thieves, but she can’t afford to get into any more trouble. And leave Hope out of it. She’ll call Charlotte, who will call Lily, and Lily will call Faith. She can’t be worried about this. She’s stressing enough about the honeymoon / stag and hen party,” Beau utters, only taking a breath once he’s done.

I arch a brow. “I still think it’s weird that you’re going on the honeymoon before the actual wedding and using it to get out of having the stag and hen party here. What if she changes her mind?”

“She won’t,” he affirms.

“But what if she does?”

“She won’t,” he grits out.

I chuckle. I love making him sweat. “Alright, don’t get testy. I know you’re in your uniform and need to look all badass in front of your work mates, but tone it down. I mean, I thought you would be in a lighter mood since you watch Frozen in your downtime.”

Beau glares at Jackson. “Why on earth would you reveal that to a Carter?”

I cough into my fist. “Technically a Smith.”

“I didn’t tell her who. You just did,” Jackson teases.

“I’m going,” Beau declares as he walks off.

“You’d think he’d be more used to us by now.”

“I’ve never seen him so rattled,” Jackson admits.

“Really? He always seems like that around the fam,” I tell him.

He laughs as he pushes open the door to the reception.
“Hey, any—”

He’s cut off when Zach storms toward the station, his voice loud as he screams, “You!”

CHAPTER TWELVE

Imogen

I step back, bumping into Jackson, who steadies me by grabbing my hips. I should have known there was a chance I'd bump into Zach again. Yet deep down, I know nothing would have prepared me for the lethal glare he's aiming my way. It's like our years of friendship meant nothing to him. All I see is hatred and anger when he looks at me.

Nowhere is the friend I lost.

I've never been weak minded. Things don't bother me until they're forced upon me. If he had been anyone else, I would have given him the same sass I give everyone else who pisses me off. I have no idea why I allow him to have this hold over me.

My mind immediately runs over the conversation I had with Hayden.

You were never yourself around him.

That sentence has been plaguing my mind since she pointed it out. I tried to find reasons as to why she was wrong, but she isn't. I wasn't myself. I watched what I ate and what I watched. I never spoke back to him. And I don't think he is mostly to blame for it. I am too. I had it in my mind that no one wanted me as I am, and I let him mould me into the person I thought men wanted me to be. But we were both wrong.

I can speak up to be heard without being called dramatic. I can eat what I want, and it can be more than a male, without being called fat or a pig. I can drink a beer instead of a glass of wine without being called inelegant. I've let years of feeling like I'm not pretty enough, not skinny enough, or good enough, dictate who I should be. When all along, I only needed to be who I am.

"Where are you parked?" Jackson asks, his words harsh as they pull me out of my haze.

I point to the far corner. “Over there.”

“Okay, ignore him,” he warns.

“Are you happy?” Zach yells, trying to push against his dad’s hand to get to me. “Is this what you wanted, Imogen?”

“I didn’t want any of this,” I whisper as we draw closer to each other. The rage in his eyes has the hairs on the nape of my neck standing on end.

His lips twist as he comes to a stop not far from me. His dad is the only person keeping him from getting to me. “You planted that game in there to frame me, and I’m going to tell them that. I’m going to tell them it runs in your family.”

My heart races because it was only five minutes ago I was worried about them thinking I framed him. It wouldn’t be the first time one of us has planted evidence on someone who deserved it. But not this time.

I push back against the hand trying to keep me walking and stop in front of Zach and his parents. “Please stop doing this,” I plead. “Did our friendship mean nothing to you?”

“It meant everything to me before you cheated on me,” he roars, causing his mum to inhale sharply.

“For the love of God, I never cheated on you,” I scream. “I broke up with you because you were beginning to act like a control freak and I’d had enough. You never met me half way with anything. If you didn’t get your way, you would go days without talking to me just to punish me. It didn’t work. All it did was drain me. You constantly tried to put a wedge between me and my family, knowing what they mean to me. You think you are better than everyone else but you aren’t.” I shake my head, seeing I’m not reaching him. I’m not reaching the boy who was once my favourite person. “We all bleed the same and we’ll all eventually die. When I look at the world, I see billions of people living a life I’m not a part of. I’m fascinated by it. But when you look at the world, you just see you and what you need. We are two very different people, Zach. I was just the first one to see it. Or maybe you did before me, which is why you constantly tried to squash who I am.”

“Maybe we should all calm ourselves down,” Lindy announces, holding her hands up. “There’s clearly been a misunderstanding, and we can all work together to fix it.”

I meet his mother’s gaze. Her greyish hair is pinned back in a low bun, enhancing her cheekbones. For a woman in her sixties, she’s beautiful. She’s also kind, loving, and dotes on her son to the point I think it caused more damage. She and Colin were just getting used to the fact they would never conceive, but then in her early forties, she got pregnant with Zach. They see him as their miracle baby, and no one can fault them for that.

Still... I meet her gaze, knowing she will be upset with what I need to say. “Lindy, your son came to my work under the pretence he wanted to make things right between us. While there, he stole company property, knowing the legal consequences I would face. He knew because he was the one who made the contract make sense before I had to sign it.”

“But you loved each other. You were going to move in together,” she whispers, clutching her husband’s arm.

“This is bullshit,” Zach snaps. “Mum, don’t listen to her.”

I shake my head sadly as I notice my dad approaching. “No, we weren’t. And honestly, even before he stopped me from taking a call that was a family emergency, it wasn’t going to happen,” I reveal, briefly closing my eyes. “Your son was my best friend. I loved him as a friend. But he never even respected me. He wanted me to be someone I wasn’t, and for years I let him, and that’s on me.”

“I... I don’t know what to say,” she breathes. “This can’t be true.”

“Because it’s not,” Zach snaps. “She’s making shit up.”

I meet the eyes of the boy who once meant a lot to me. “You constantly belittled me. You did it in a way that others thought it was a compliment. You never once asked what I liked or disliked because you already had answers of your own for me. You were constantly trying to control every aspect of my life. You would tell me what to eat. And I like food, Zach.

Love it. But you were constantly telling people I didn't like it or I wasn't hungry. You spoke for me when I can speak for myself. It's my fault it went on for so long. I let you have that control over me because I desperately wanted it to work between us. I really did. And I think deep down, you knew this was over a long time ago, but you kept me in your grip to get what you wanted. You had me so wrapped up in what you've done for me that I never stopped to think about what I did for you. I didn't see what you were doing. Every time I went to break up with you, you did or said something to change my mind."

"Son, please tell me this isn't true," his mother pleads.

"She's fucking lying. I've always treated her kindly. It's her who has treated me like crap. I did something nice for her birthday and she threw it in my face. That's what really happened. She was ungrateful."

I shake my head, disappointed in his response. I hoped my words would reach him. I turn to his mum, tears pooling in my eyes. "I've done the same thing for my birthday for as long as I can remember. I told him what that day meant to me and to my family, but he went behind my back, knowing my mum would never say no. I didn't appreciate him doing that, but what made me snap was when he kept my phone from me. There had been an emergency, and because he wanted my attention on him, he kept my phone from me."

"Zach, why on earth would you treat her like this?" his mum asks, clearly unsettled by my declaration.

"We taught you better than this, son," his dad remarks, disappointment in his tone.

Dad places his arm around my waist, though, thankfully, doesn't intervene.

Zach's cheeks redden to the point they match the colour of the car behind him. "You are going to believe a smackhead's daughter over your own son?"

I suck in a breath at his insult. "My mum and dad don't take drugs," I snap, as my dad's hand on my hip tenses. Hell,

Mum didn't even take a strong painkiller when she dislocated her knee. "Where do you get off saying this? I've been trying to stay civil, but you are constantly pushing me, Zach. Stop this nonsense."

"Come on, I think this is enough," Jackson warns.

"Yes, it really is," Dad bites out.

Zach throws his head back, laughing dryly. The sound sends a shiver down my spine. "Your step-in mum isn't actually your mum. Didn't know that, did you? Your real mum was a slut who got around. You were born an addict because of her and she didn't even stick around to see if you survived."

"Zach," his mum breathes, appalled.

My throat tightens. "What are you talking about?"

"I suggest you walk away," Dad threatens.

"I just couldn't figure out if you were her real dad or not, though," Zach taunts.

"Son, stop!" his dad warns. "That's enough."

"No, it's not," Zach remarks harshly.

I glance at Dad, seeing unfiltered anger staring back at Zach, and I know... I know in my heart Zach is telling the truth. "Dad, please tell me this is a lie."

Heartache shines down at me, and I step away from him. The man who has been my hero, my protector. "Imogen," he begins.

"Is he right? Are you not my dad?"

"Of course I'm your dad."

I swallow past the lump in my throat. "Are you biologically my dad?"

"Yes," he breathes out.

"Well that answers that," Zach remarks smugly.

"Shut up!" we yell.

Dad's words hold a ring of truth. So that leaves Mum. The weight of his answer weighs down on me. "And Mum?" I choke out. "Is she biologically my mum?"

He flinches at the question. "Yes," he replies quietly.

"You are lying," I murmur, unable to mask the pain as I take another step back. "You are lying."

"Imogen, wait!" he orders, but I'm already moving, racing to my car.

"Imogen," Jackson calls, but I ignore his plea.

And Zach's taunting laughter.

My mum isn't my mum.

The world around me comes crashing down like a tsunami hitting land.

If she's not my mum... Who is she?

*** **

I had no idea where I was going until I pulled into the car park of my dad's work. Tears stream down my cheeks as I stare ahead at nothing. My grief has nowhere to go, and it's building up to the point I can't breathe.

I've been driving without a destination since I left the police station. When my car began to alert me that my petrol was running low, I ended up here—my dad's place of work. I haven't made a move to go inside, but something inside me is telling me I should be here.

Fog enshrouds the darkened car park, and grey clouds cover the moon like a blanket. The only light in the open space is the light hanging above the back-exit door of my dad's offices.

"My mum isn't my mum," I whisper, lowering my gaze.

I don't know who I am, and I have a feeling something inside that building will tell me.

I grab my phone, which I switched off earlier, and the keys to the office, which I keep in my bag, then make my way out of the car.

The wind whips around my face, slashing my hair across my cheeks as I make my way up to the door. Unlike this morning, the cold doesn't bother me. I don't feel it. I don't feel anything.

I close the door behind me and blindly make my way to my dad's office, which is the first door down the hall. My cold fingers close around the handle and I push down. His office used to bring me warmth. It was like Sunday nights, when you sat in front of the fire, watching some drama show on the television with a snack your parents made. It was like Christmas morning and waking up with your entire family. That's how this place felt to me. Now, as I step into his office, all I feel is dread. It weighs heavily in the pit of my stomach—just like the secrets I know are hidden here. I give myself a second before gathering myself to do what I need to do. And that's to get answers. Answers I know my dad won't share. Not truthfully.

And with that thought, I search every filing cabinet, every folder, every drawer, and even the safe. When I come up empty, I go back through it all again, hoping it slipped past me.

I'm not sure how long I keep looking, but when my eyes begin to burn from exhaustion, I know it's been a while.

I collapse to the floor underneath the window, staring at his desk. Tears of anger, frustration, and helplessness fall down my cheeks.

It has to be here.

My gaze focuses on the bottom drawer as flashes of images sift through my mind. I had been around ten or eleven. A friend's parent had just dropped me off as we had just got back from a school trip. Mum had been sick and couldn't get me. One of the other parents arranged to drop me off with Dad since they lived close to his work. I remember sitting on his

lap as he placed a file in the bottom drawer. And I remember thinking the drawer looked bigger on the outside.

I get to my knees, crawling closer to the desk to pull the drawer open. My small keychain light flickers, showing signs of the battery running out.

“Shit!”

I flip the lamp light on and bring it down to sit on the floor before going back to the task at hand. Files of different colours fill the compartment, so I remove them and place them down on the floor next to the lamp. I stare at the empty drawer, definitely seeing the size difference from the outside. I tap my knuckles against the hollow bottom, then a small, worn-out piece by the face of the drawer catches my attention. I reach up, snatching the letter opener from the desk. It fits perfectly inside the worn-out piece of wood, which easily pops up out of place.

I gently lower the piece of wood to the floor, like I’m scared someone will hear the secrets being opened like Pandora’s Box.

A thick file fills the entire drawer. There are a few tapes inside, but it’s the file that grabs my attention. It’s thick, and has ‘White’ written on the label, along with a bunch of other names. On that list is ‘Wright’, which is my mum’s maiden name.

I open it up, and a bunch of stuff jumps out at me. There’s a reference number to an old case dating back to before I was born. I flip through the pages, seeing it’s about a gang who ran drugs. It’s not until I flip to the end of that section that I see a statement from my dad. I hold my breath at the last part.

I remember sitting at the makeshift bar. A few girls were hovering, along with a few of the men. He lists a bunch of names I’m not familiar with, but I continue on. I was about to make my exit when everything became a blur. I woke up naked, with Vicky Wright naked next to me. It was clear to me that we had sex—without my knowledge or consent.

Who is Vicky Wright?

I move to the next section, which includes a paternity letter stating Evan Smith is the father of Imogen Wright.

Tears gather in my eyes. None of this makes sense.

I turn the page, seeing a victim statement signed by my mum. I can barely catch my breath as I read her words. I can feel the fear and pain coming from the page. She had been attacked in her flat, where her niece slept in the next room. The words after have been blacked out, and I don't understand why. Or why my aunt Denny never mentioned this.

I keep reading the statements, until I get to a report made by Melanie, my mum's friend and old neighbour. It's a child abduction report, and it's my name on the paper. Or at least, I'm assuming I was once Imogen Wright.

I keep going until the very last page. I was kidnapped, taken by the man named on the label to this section.

It's not until I reach the last section that things begin to fall into place. This tells me all about Vicky Wright. How her parents were killed young, and that she and her sister—Kennedy Wright—were put into foster care.

The file moves through her life, revealing every little thing the woman did. She had a police record pages long: theft, possession of drugs with intent to sell, and prostitution. It shows who she got involved with, and details every bad decision she ever made.

And then the social care report comes in. She gave birth to a premature baby who was born an addict. It reveals her reluctance to stay and care for the baby, which led to the charges of abandonment that she never got the chance to be charged with because she died a month or so later.

I read my mother's statement and the legal papers to get guardianship.

The baby in this story is me.

I'm Imogen Wright.

My mother is a drug addict who lied, stole, and whored her way through life. She abandoned her sick daughter before

a doctor could even look her over.

My mother isn't my mother.

She is my aunt.

And I'm a product of assault and darkness.

"I knew you would be here," Hayden announces, making me jump. My head smacks against the desk and I hiss out a breath.

I see her standing in the doorway, unaffected by my reaction. "What are you doing here?"

"Everyone is out looking for you. I figured if I wanted answers about my life, what better place to look than a place where your dad uncovers secrets for a living."

"My mum isn't my mum."

"Of course, she's your mum," she tells me as she kneels down beside me.

"You don't understand," I choke out, nearly tearing the page in my hand.

"Imogen..."

I blink, snapping out of my grief for a moment. "Wait, you knew I was here looking for answers. You didn't seem surprised when I said my mum isn't my mum," I state, betrayal hitting me like high-force winds. "You knew!"

She closes her eyes for a moment, revealing the truth. "Imogen..."

I get to my feet, stepping away from her. "You knew. Does everyone know?"

"I don't know," she admits. "But your mum and dad are looking for you."

I shake my head as I reach for the spare keys and throw them at her. "You can lock up on your way out," I snap as I head for the door.

"Imogen, wait," she calls out, following behind me.

“No, Hayden. I need space. Leave me alone,” I bark, pushing open the door and stepping out into the cold.

“Just wait a minute. Please. You can—”

I stop when I reach my car. “I said stop, Hayden. Just stop. You knew and didn’t tell me.”

“It wasn’t my place to,” she replies.

“It’s never bothered you before,” I snap. “This isn’t something you keep a secret.”

“It wasn’t my place,” she pleads. “Go home to your mum and dad. Hear them out.”

I get in my car, ignoring her. I can’t go home. Not right now. I need to think. To process.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Ben

One hand lies over my stomach, the other above my head as I stare at the ceiling. The painkillers the doctors prescribed spoiled me with sleep, and now I'm no longer taking them, I'm being punished. I can't settle my mind enough to drift off to sleep.

It doesn't help that all I can think about is Imogen. She had to go to the police station this morning, and I have no idea how it went. I nearly messaged her dad, but decided against it. Even though I was there for the recording, it felt weird to chase it up with him. And I couldn't find the courage to message Imogen. I've made a point for years to keep a barrier between us, but any time I'm around her, it threatens to fall. And I made promises... promises I want to keep. When Micky—a lad interning at the company—went to ask Imogen out, Evan called the situation out. He didn't mind his daughter dating but he didn't want anyone who worked for him to date her due to conflicts. I don't think he liked Micky too much either, but he never admitted it. He also made it clear that his daughter was off limits, and he didn't let us get back to work until we agreed.

It was a year later when he pulled me aside and told me she had a crush. He told me to keep my distance so it would fade. And I did.

I respected him too much to go behind his back.

Yet she holds a power over me that makes me want to break all of my rules.

To get her off my mind, I've wanted to call April, a chick I've been off and on with for a couple of months. I couldn't though. I'm not that guy. And it feels sordid now, like I'm taking advantage of her. We both agreed not to be exclusive, but the last time she was around—which was before I went to work with Cole and Emily—I had a feeling she wanted to change our non-exclusivity. That's when I put some distance

between us. She tried to visit me in the hospital, but I didn't want to give her false hope. As much as I enjoy her company, that's all it was for me.

Relentless banging echoes down the hallway from my front door. I groan as I swing my legs out of bed. My sisters have a habit of getting drunk on a night out and ending up here for either a lift home or a couch to sleep on.

As I reach the bedroom door, a thought occurs to me.

It's Tuesday. They'll be working or doing coursework.

Fuck!

I rush down the hall to the door as a thousand thoughts rush through my mind at once. Did the restaurant get burgled? Has one of them had an accident? So many scenarios race through my mind, faster than my legs are carrying me to the door.

My stitches pull but I push through it. I throw the door open, expecting a hysterical sister to charge at me. Instead, it's Imogen. Seeing the tears streaming down her cheeks, I pull her inside, closing the door behind her.

"What happened? Did Zach do something? Did he hurt you?"

I flick on the hallway light to find her trembling. She inhales sharply. "He revealed a secret my parents have been keeping from me."

Her legs give out, and I quickly catch her, pulling her into my arms. "Alexa, turn living room lamps on," I call out, and the front room glows in a warm light. I sit her down on the sofa and grab the throw blanket Mum bought for me during my first week of recovery. I wrap it around her shoulders before moving over to the mini bar and pouring a little bit of vodka in a glass.

I hand it over to her and keep the bottle close as I take a seat next to her. "What can I do to help?"

"They lied to me my entire life," she rasps, her voice scratchy and raw.

“Do you want to talk about it?”

Betrayal shines in her eyes, taking me off guard. “God, does everyone know?”

Her accusation confuses me. “You’ve lost me,” I admit.

“Did you know my mum isn’t biologically my mum?”

“No! Wait, your mum isn’t your mum? What? How? I don’t understand,” I stammer. “You need to start from the beginning.”

“I went to the police station like I was supposed to. On my way out, Zach was arriving. We got into a little argument outside, and then the next thing I know, he’s accusing my mum of being a drug addict.”

I roll my eyes. “Your mum would never touch drugs.”

She snorts. “Wait for it.”

“Go on.”

Her expression crumbles as she begins to bawl. “He told me my mum isn’t biologically my mum. I thought it was another sick game he was playing, but one look at my dad told me all I needed to know.”

I place my hand on her shoulder blade, rubbing soothingly. “You can’t seriously believe a word Zach has to say right now. You’re the spitting image of your mum.”

She side-eyes me. “Oh, I know. Both of them.”

“Explain,” I order gently.

“I went to Dad’s office to get answers. I found a stack of hidden files. Every page is burnt into my brain, and I can’t unsee them. I know everything. My biological mum was a whore who sold herself, slept around, took drugs, and left me to die in the hospital. My mum, she’s actually my aunt, and I was left with her from birth,” she chokes out. “That’s not even all of it. When I was still a baby, I was kidnapped and taken to a crack house because that woman put me down as collateral. Like I’m a fucking house or a car.”

“There has to be a mistake,” I stress, my heart breaking for her, but then a memory surfaces. “Holy fucking shit!”

“What?”

“When I was in the hospital, your mum and dad visited me. I was blaming myself over something that didn’t happen. Emily, the woman I was protecting, has a little girl. Long story short, I tried to get Cole to bring Emily and their daughter back home and to apologise. If he had listened to me, Poppy might not have survived that night,” I utter before getting to the point. “Your mum told me she knew someone once who was looking after a baby. When the baby was kidnapped, the babysitter and the parents blamed themselves. It was you, Immy. It has to be. I could see the pain in her eyes and hear it in her tone.”

“Yes, that was me. I read the statements,” she chokes out. “All these years, I’ve been proud of who my mum is. She has always been my hero, the person I look up to. She’s my favourite person in the entire world,” she breathes, her voice breaking. “When all my friends moaned about how unfair their mum was, I felt sorry for them. Because your mum is the most important person in your life. She’s the one who paves your way until you can do it on your own. She’s the person who will always be on the sidelines cheering you on and will always be in your corner when things go wrong.”

“That doesn’t change now.”

“But don’t you see? I didn’t come from her. I didn’t get her smile or her looks. I didn’t get her strength or her heart. I came from a woman who would rather inject smack than see if her daughter survived.”

I grip her cheeks, the pain in her voice undoing me. I’ve never heard pain like it. At least, not since my mum announced our dad had died. “That woman isn’t your mother, Immy. Kennedy is. And you are the very best of your parents, and I bet they would agree. She may not have given birth to you, but she’s your mother in every sense of the word. She chose you, Imogen. She chose to be your mum.” I wipe her

tears away, taking a breath. “Does this change how you feel about her? Are you going to stop calling her mum?”

“No. Because she’ll always be my mum, no matter what a piece of paper says.”

Okay, I wasn’t expecting that. “Then what’s with all the tears?”

Her chin wobbles. “Because how can she stand to look at me? I must remind her of her sister and all the things she did. Mum got beaten badly as a warning, and in my dad’s statement, he tells them how she was going to give me up to protect me. She got hurt because of me and where I came from.”

She downs her vodka so I pour her another glass. “And she’d do it all again because she loves you.”

“How can they love me? How?” she chokes out. “For Mum, I’m a constant reminder of what her sister put her through. And for my dad, I’m a constant reminder of what happened to him and what he went through. My brother was conceived out of love. I was conceived out of darkness during a heinous act. How can they stand to look at me? How? I’m hurting them by just being here.”

I pull her into my arms, holding her close as she bawls into my shoulder. “I don’t think that is how they see you, Imogen. Anyone who has been witness to your relationship can see how much they love you. I think once you move aside everything you’ve found out, you’ll see how special their love for you is. It surpasses the bond between parent and child. You have to see that. You’ve said yourself that your friends’ relationships with their parents were nothing like how yours was. That’s because of the connection you all share. It’s rare to be best friends with your parents,” I announce softly. “I love my mum and I would die for her. I would do just about anything to make her happy, and she loves me just as much. But we aren’t like you and your parents. Not even close. I’m not saying it’s a bad thing, just that it’s not the same.”

“I want it to stop hurting,” she cries. “I want to get all the pages I read out of my mind.”

“It’s going to be okay, Imogen. I promise.”

She pulls back and tilts her head up to say something, but nothing comes out. I get lost in her hazel eyes, and for a second, I forget the reason she came here. Her lips tempt me, and it takes me a moment to realise I’m slowly drifting towards her, and the back of my fingers are running along her jaw.

Pulling back, I distract myself by pouring her another drink.

She glances down at her drink before looking away. “I should get going.” She hesitates. “They are probably still out looking for me.”

“Stay,” I blurt out. “You’ve had a few drinks and you’re in no condition to drive. Stay. You can take the bed and I’ll sleep out here.”

She arches a brow. “I’m not the one recovering from a stab wound.”

“I’ll probably get more sleep out here anyway,” I lie.

She bites on her lower lip, her gaze moving to the door. “I don’t know,” she frets.

“I can drive you home if you prefer,” I offer. I don’t want her to feel forced to stay. “It’s not a problem.”

She places her glass down on the coffee table before crossing her arms over her chest. “I’m not ready to go home and I don’t think I’ll be able to sleep,” she confesses.

I grab the remotes from the side table and turn on the television. I hand her a controller. “Then let’s kick some arse on the game you scored for me.”

Her nose crinkles. “You aren’t tired?”

“I couldn’t sleep tonight so this saves me from staring up at the ceiling for hours.” I grab the other controller before continuing. “And when you’re ready to go home, I’ll drive you back. Whenever you’re ready.”

“Thank you, Ben,” she whispers, as she faces the television.

I watch her as the game loads. Even with downturned lips and tears streaking her cheeks, she still manages to brighten up the room. She surprises me by leaning her head on my shoulder.

“Be prepared to lose ‘cause I play at my best when I’m upset or angry,” she declares.

I chuckle and lean back to get comfy, since I have a feeling we’ll be doing this for a while. It beats tossing and turning all night.

“Then I should warn you, I concentrate better when I’m tired.”

“Game on,” she warns as she sets up in the game.

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A faint ringing echoes in the back of my mind, pulling me from a dream. With one hand covering a yawn and the other rubbing sleep from my eyes, I begin to stir awake. I stretch the stiffness in my back until I hear a satisfying crack that feels good.

A weight on my shoulder grabs my attention, and I open my eyes to find frizzy auburn hair belonging to Imogen. And she has a lot of hair.

The back of my hand gently brushes across her cheek as I sweep her hair aside. She’s so fucking beautiful. Her bow-shaped lips are gently parted, and the warmth of her breath is a wisp of air against my cheek. Her eyelids flutter open like a butterfly spreading its wings for the first time. A soft mewl slips past her lips before her gaze fixes on me in a soft squint.

From the softness in her eyes when she sees it’s me, and the burn of her touch where her hand lies on my chest, I know I want to kiss her.

I also know the moment I do, she will be mine forever. I'll never want to let her go, and that scares me the most.

"Ben?" she rasps, her voice filled with sleep.

And my resolve to do the right thing breaks at her calling my name. I glide my hand across her jaw, until my fingers reach into her hair and my thumb rests against her earlobe.

The second my mouth meets her warm, soft lips, everything I have been hiding, all I have been holding back, pours out into the kiss. Her fingers run through my hair, tugging slightly and setting every nerve ending off.

She kisses me back just as hard, and before I know it, she's straddling my lap, her hair falling around us.

My phone goes off, breaking the spell she had me under. I rest my forehead against hers. "I should get that," I rasp.

She slowly climbs off my lap, getting to her feet as I reach for the phone. One arm covers her stomach as she presses two fingers to her lips with the other.

"Hello?" I answer, not breaking eye contact with Imogen, so I don't see who the caller is.

"Ben, I know you're still recovering but I need your help. Imogen never came home last night after she got some unsettling news. We're worried. We've been out all night looking for her but haven't been successful. I know it's a lot to ask, but I need everyone out looking for her," a distressed Evan greets.

Hearing her dad's voice, she shakes her head, mouthing, 'I'm not here.'

"She's here. She'll be on her way home in a minute."

Her glare has me breaking eye contact.

"She's there?" he asks, before I hear her mum. "What? You've found Imogen? Is she okay?"

"Yeah. She turned up late last night and fell asleep on the sofa," I lie, not about to admit we fell asleep holding each other.

“And she’s there? With you? Is there something I should know?”

“Only that she’s okay, and she didn’t know where else to go,” I admit, ignoring her snort. “It was late and she was clearly upset so I didn’t want her driving in that condition.”

“Can you tell her to come home? We’re worried and we have some explaining to do.”

“Will do,” I reply.

“Thanks for taking care of her,” he tells me before ending the call.

I lower my phone to the seat next to me, scrubbing a hand down my face.

“You told them where I am,” she accuses.

I meet her gaze. “Did you want me to lie to them?”

Her eyebrows rise and she throws her hands up. “Uh, yeah! I’m not ready to go home.”

“The longer you leave it—”

“Really? The harder it will be?”

“Yes, and you know it will be. You aren’t going to feel any better hiding away from them. You won’t get answers being here,” I point out. “Plus, you know they’ll only turn up here if you don’t go home.”

She snatches her coat off the arm of the sofa. “God, I forgot how annoying it is when someone is right and you’re wrong.”

I grin as I get to my feet. “It’s a gift. I’m always right,” I tease.

“Don’t make me knee you in the balls,” she warns.

I place my hands on her shoulders, seeing the anxiety on her face. “It’s going to be okay.”

She exhales, her shoulders dropping. “I hope you’re right.”

“I just told you, it’s a gift I have.”

Her eyes narrow for a split second. “Goodbye. Thanks for the company and the couch.”

“You’re welcome.”

She stops as she gets to the door, turning back to face me. “You kissed me.”

“I did,” I confirm, my heart beating wildly.

She goes to leave, and it’s like her movements and brain aren’t in sync. She opens the door just as she goes to take a step outside, and smacks the door into her face.

I rush to her side, checking her for injuries. A red mark circles the centre of her forehead. “Shit! That’s going to bruise.”

“I’m taking my dignity and leaving now,” she grouches.

“Are you okay?”

“I’m fine. My pride, however, is probably tattooed into your door,” she admits. “Bye, Ben. Thank you again.”

Before I can stop her, she closes the door behind her, leaving me staring at the door.

I let her stay the night.

I kissed her.

“Fuck!”

I’m seriously fucked.

Because I want to do it again.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Imogen

My stomach rolls the closer I get to home. Every time I think about what I'm going to say, I want to vomit. The entire situation would be unbelievable if I hadn't seen the truth for myself. This isn't something that happens every day. Not like this anyway. I have no idea how to address what I know with them. They kept something from me, something they can't take back. I understand why after reading those files, but that doesn't make it any better. How I was told didn't help either. It should have been them and not Zach. He did it with harmful intent and he showed no remorse. That isn't the Zach I know—or thought I knew.

Did I really mess with his head that much that he's resorted to such cruel behaviour? I like to think I treated him well. We may have started off for the wrong reasons, but in my eyes, we built a real relationship for the right reasons. So much of our past plays on a loop in my head. I think of what Mum said, and what Ben said, and it makes me wonder why I never saw it before. Why did I not see this coming when I can normally pick a prick out of a crowd? How did I not see this side of him when I've known him for so long? What he's done has hurt me more than I care to admit. He doesn't deserve those feelings from me. Not now.

Zach is erased from my thoughts as I pull up outside. My parents are standing outside their door, watching me park. Mum looks pale and tired. The tip of her nose is bright red and her eyes are puffy. Dad doesn't look much better. Neither of them look like they've slept, and I feel awful that I'm the reason.

I slowly get out of the car, and Mum only hesitates for a second before she's throwing the fleece blanket off her shoulders and racing down the path towards me.

Before I can utter a word, she has her arms around me, her chest heaving as she sobs out, "I've been so worried." She

pulls back, brushing my hair from my face. “I love you, Imogen, and nothing will ever change that.”

Tears fall as I hug her back. “Why didn’t you tell me?”

“Why don’t we take this inside?” Dad offers.

Mum wraps her arm around me and together we walk up the path and inside the house. Joshua looks up from his Switch. “Great, you’re back. I was hoping I would get your house,” he greets.

“Joshua,” Dad snaps.

“Just saying,” Josh groans. “She would have done the same.”

I really would have.

Mum sits down on the sofa, guiding me to the end seat so Dad can sit in the armchair next to me. “We have some explaining to do,” Dad begins.

“I read the files hidden in your office,” I admit. He glances down, but I see the pain before he can hide it. “I’m not sure there’s much more you could tell me.”

Mum whimpers. “Imogen, you are my daughter and you always have been. I knew you were mine from the minute I first held you. Biology doesn’t change that.”

“You both should have told me so I didn’t have to find out that way,” I whisper, yet I can’t ignore the relief I feel at her saying that to me. I think that has been my biggest fear.

“We know. And we’re sorry. But this doesn’t change anything,” Dad comforts.

I meet his gaze. “This changes everything,” I tell him, my voice breaking. “It’s altered everything I thought I knew about myself. It’s changed everything I knew about my family. How can you bear to look at me every day and not be reminded of what she did? Do you not worry every time I go out drinking that I’ll end up an alcoholic? Every tantrum I had as a teen, did you not hear her voice? How can you love me when I came from someone so cruel and selfish?”

Mum sniffles at my words before taking my hands. “Because you aren’t her. You are your own person, Imogen, and a pretty fantastic one. I may not have birthed you, but I am your mother. I gave you warm contact as a baby. I stayed up to feed you every two hours. I held you when you were fussy or crying. I sang to you. I read to you. I’ve watched you grow through every chapter of your life. When I look at you, I see my daughter; my sweet, sweet daughter who I love fiercely. I see the little girl I was blessed to have.”

“But she did unspeakable things. She sold herself, lied, and stole. She was a drug addict and a drunk. It would have been easier if I was never here.”

“God no,” she mewls painfully. “If you had never been here, I would never have become a mum. I would never have met your father or had your brother. She may have done some terrible things, including how you were conceived, but having you was the best thing she ever did.”

“Why didn’t you tell me?”

“Because it wouldn’t have changed anything for us but it would have for you. You would have had questions, and as you now know, the answers aren’t pretty. She may have birthed you, but you came from us. We raised you. We never wanted to hide it from you, but after extensive research, we knew it might cause problems for you to learn it during your adolescent stage.”

“I’m not going to lie to you. When I read those files, I felt dirty. I was ashamed and couldn’t understand how you could raise me and love me. I questioned if it was all an act and wondered if you loved Josh more than you did me.”

“Of course, she does. I’m the favourite,” Josh interrupts, claiming the same thing he always has.

“I love you both equally,” Mum bites out, glaring at Josh. “But also differently. I love you because you are my daughter. Our bond is stronger because I watched you fight to survive. You were the reason I became a mum, and you were the first person I loved unconditionally since my parents died. I love our girl’s nights in and out. I love that we got to bond over

various things that I don't get to share with Josh. And I love Joshua because he is my baby, my last, and my son. You both bring me joy and happiness."

"I'm not sure how I feel about any of this. I don't know how to feel. It's confusing. I'm hurt, angry, and sad, and they're all clashing together, making it impossible to compartmentalise everything. I hate that you kept it from me. I hate that I'm not biologically your daughter—"

"And I'm not your mum," Mum whispers, lowering her head.

"Babe, that's not what she's saying," Dad assures her.

"This is what I'm struggling to grasp. I'm not upset about that because you are my mother. You always will be. I'm struggling to come to terms with the fact I'm not yours," I declare brokenly. "I'm proud to call you my mum. I'm finding it hard to understand how you can want me to be your daughter. It sickens me to know who birthed me. And I feel lost. Disconnected."

"I wanted you the minute I laid eyes on you. I'm proud of who you are, and I always will be," Mum promises.

"Would it help if we found you someone professional to talk to, who could maybe help you through the process?" Dad offers.

I pinch the bridge of my nose, the lack of sleep catching up to me. "Maybe. I don't know."

"We are really sorry you had to find out this way. We never meant to hurt you."

"I see that now," I answer my dad before glancing over at my brother, who is still glued to his game. "Are you okay with this, Josh?"

"You actually want my input?" he asks.

"Yes," I respond slowly, wondering if I should have kept my mouth shut.

"It doesn't change anything for me. You are still my sister and they are still our parents. We are still going to bicker and

fight the same. Your birth mother might have been a terrible person, but personality isn't a gene you pass on. It's taught or mimicked. You might be a pain in the arse at times but you aren't a bad person," he responds, taking me back to the point I have no words. "Does it change things for you? Will I be your half-brother now?"

"No," I rasp, my eyes wide at his declaration.

"Then there's nothing more to say," he announces before turning to Mum. "Can I go back to my room now?"

"Yes, honey," she tells him.

Once he's gone, Mum shakes her head. "He put on a front just now but he's been worried sick all night. He, um, he got a little unsettled by the news."

Dad clears his throat. "He was worried you were never going to come back."

Another tear falls. "I didn't mean to worry you all. I just needed to process everything. It wasn't done to punish any of you."

"We know," Mum whispers. "We're just glad you are back."

"How did Zach find out?" I ask.

"We aren't sure, but if I were to guess, he went snooping in the office. Only some of it reached the papers and it wasn't enough to put what he did together," Dad explains.

"Do you have any questions?" Mum asks. "About Vicky?"

"Was she always like that?" I ask.

Mum glances at Dad, who nods for her to continue. "She deserves to know everything."

Mum exhales softly. "I wish I could tell you she wasn't. But I don't want there being any more lies between us. Vicky and I always had a shaky relationship. She often accused my parents of loving me more or yelled about them always telling her off. But then there were times when we would stay up late

talking, doing sister things. All the wrong she caused got clouded in my mind, which may have erased all of the good. If I had known that one day, I would need to answer this question, I would have written all the good times down.”

My throat begins to tighten. I hate how hard this is for Mum. “How did she get into drugs and stuff?”

“She changed when she became a teenager. She wanted to be out with her friends and needed all the designer clothes and makeup. Then she kept missing her curfew and coming back drunk. Vicky and her friends always wanted to be the coolest so they would try to outdrink each other. Then boys happened and she became popular by sleeping around. I remember Mum and Dad reprimanding her because she was stoned. When they died and we got put into a group home, it got worse. Alcohol was never enough. Weed wasn’t enough. She was always chasing the high. It wasn’t easy being her sister. I forgave her and gave her so many chances. Each time she promised me she would do better, a piece of me broke.” She closes her eyes, inhaling. “I gave up on her. I wish I could say I regret it but I can’t, and I’m so very sorry you need to hear that.”

“Hey, she never gave you anything to fight for by the sounds of it.”

She wipes her nose with the sleeve of her top. “She didn’t want to be saved. It just took me a long time to see it. Even long after I left foster care, she would come into my life and turn it upside down. As soon as she got her money, she disappeared again. I was always waiting for the phone call to tell me she was dead. Always.”

“Did she not try to stop when she got pregnant?”

“She was in labour when I found out she was pregnant. She was high as a kite, and I thought she was miscarrying because she was barely showing. I took her to the doctors, where they sewed up her cervix, which gave you a few extra weeks to mature. It should have been longer but the lifestyle she led pushed it forward. She gave birth to you, and by the time I got back from seeing you in the NICU, she was gone.

After getting her to sign the guardianship over to me so I could make the medical decisions for you, I never saw her again.”

“I’m sorry she was an awful person,” I whisper, holding her. “I’m sorry for making you worry all night, and letting you believe it’s because I didn’t think you were my mum.”

She cups my cheek. “You could scream, you aren’t my mother, and it wouldn’t make a difference. I’ll always be your mother and you’ll always be my daughter. I hate that you had to find out the way you did.”

“It must have been hard to keep this from me,” I point out.

“Actually, no. Because aside from the health scare we had when you were seven, it’s never entered my mind. I’ve never looked at you and thought of Vicky. I must sound like an awful person.”

“No, you don’t. I get it. It never entered your mind because it had no reason to. I was your daughter. Where I came from didn’t factor in because I was where I belonged.”

“How did I get so lucky?” she gushes, pulling me into her arms. “I love you so much. You were the best thing that ever happened to me, Imogen.”

“I love you too,” I tell her, hugging her back just as tight.

She pulls back, brushing my hair away from my face. “Is there anything else you want to ask me?”

“Just one more thing, but you’ll probably think it’s stupid,” I admit.

“Never,” she promises.

I clear my throat, glancing down at our joined hands. “Who named me?”

She squeezes my hands gently. “I did. Imogen was my mother’s—your grandmother’s—middle name. It belonged to her mother before her.”

“Thank God. I don’t know how I would have felt if she had named me,” I explain.

“Are you okay?” Dad asks. “I know this is a lot to absorb.”

“Still processing.”

Mum rubs her thumb against my hand. “It’s a lot to process so you can take all the time you need.”

I let out a breath and close my eyes. “I yelled at Hayden,” I announce.

Dad’s cough turns into a wheeze. “She doesn’t hurt family, right?”

“She’ll understand. She’s been known to blow a fuse a few times.”

“A few?” Dad chuckles. “She should have worked in my field or politics.”

“Not helping right now,” I grumble.

Mum clucks her tongue at Dad before turning to me. “She will forgive you, sweetheart. Whatever was said, it can’t be half as bad as what her brothers say.”

“True,” I muse.

“One other thing I wanted to talk to you about,” Dad begins. “With you being out of work, I was wondering if you would consider coming to work for me.”

“Dad...” I stop, wondering how I can let him down gently.

“It doesn’t need to be permanent. Just until you find a new job. We’re worried about you falling behind on bills,” Dad states.

“And we know how much you hate not working,” Mum adds.

“We need the extra help. We have the Christmas toy bank starting soon too,” he explains.

“Okay, okay. But remember, I’m going away with the Carters in January.”

Mum shifts her attention to me. “Are you all still going?”

“Yeah. Lily and Jaxson aren’t coming because of the pregnancy. Aiden and Bailey are busy and need to save for the stag and hen party/ honeymoon.”

“I still think it’s weird they are doing that,” Dad comments.

“They can only get a vet to fill in during those few weeks. Faith was already set against doing it because they haven’t lived there long. It makes sense to me.”

“I wish we could make it,” Mum declares.

“They understand,” I assure her.

“Wait, if you’re still going, is there a spare bed for Ben?” Dad declares. “In the cabin, I mean. We have a client shooting a TV soap up there and the guy who normally stays with her is off.”

I’ve been trying not to think of Ben or the kiss we shared this morning. I have no idea what it meant or if it meant anything at all. Kissing him surpassed what my imagination conjured up. If his phone hadn’t started ringing, and if he hadn’t pulled back, I’m not sure we would have stopped there.

Hearing Ben is going back to work so soon turns my stomach. “I thought he needed to recover? Is it safe for him to be working a high-profile case?”

“It’s not a case,” Dad begins. “Sabrina got attacked in her car not far from set a few months ago. The police didn’t take the threatening letters seriously so she hired us. Connor found out who her attacker was whilst compiling evidence and it will be going to court soon. He’s decided to take up her offer to stay in her service. She still gets hate mail and no longer feels safe. Ben is just going up for the weekend so Connor can come back and tie up a few things.”

“So is he leaving the company?”

“No. He will still take jobs close to where she is so we are doing what we can to support that.”

I grin because Connor is gorgeous. And I’ve seen Sabrina in action. She makes a good villain. And she’s beautiful. They

are definitely hooking up. “Well, yeah. I’ll have to ring Hope to double check, as she’s the one who organised it. But with Lily and Jaxon not coming and Aiden cancelling, I’m sure it will be okay.”

“Just let us know. All the hotels are booked up. Sabrina offered him a room at hers but he’s not ready for that right now.”

“I will,” I reassure him as a yawn slips free. “I’m going home. I need some sleep.”

Mum presses her lips to my cheek. “Go get some rest. But I hope you’ll be back later for dinner.”

I meet her gaze, regretting that I ever got upset. I should have known she would never see me differently. “I will, Mum. I promise.”

“Love you, bug,” Dad tells me as I get to my feet.

I wrap my arms around him. “Love you too, Dad.”

Mum hugs me again, her grip tightening. “I’m so proud of you. Your strength has always amazed me,” she reveals. “I love you so much.”

“She loves me more,” Joshua yells.

“I’m the favourite,” I yell back, tears burning my eyes.

“You two,” Mum snuffles.

“I love you, Mum. I’ll be by later.”

After we share another goodbye, I head next door to my home, feeling lighter than I did arriving.

It still feels like a dream, but I know this feeling won’t last. And if it does, I have people around me to help.

But as I collapse down on my bed, my eyes drifting shut, my mind wanders to the new complications in my life.

Apologising to Hayden.

And Ben kissing me.

I’m not sure I’ll survive either.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Ben

I messed up kissing Imogen this morning—or technically yesterday now, since it's one in the morning. I should never have gone there with her. I made promises to Evan and to myself. It feels wrong but so right. I've known her since she was a teenager. Although I never saw her as anything other than a kid or felt what I do now for her, it still feels wrong somehow. But it's different now. She's not a child. She's a woman, and if I'm honest with myself, she's been a woman to me for years.

Yet, I still made promises.

Promises I broke.

Promises I still want to break.

Which is why I'm here. At her home. I need to tell her so she doesn't get hurt again. That's not what I want. But I have to remember, her dad saved me. He got me out of a tricky situation that no other person wanted to help me with. He could have walked away. He had every right to. But he didn't. Kissing her... I've betrayed him and tarnished everything he ever did for me.

Her lights are on which means she's up. I lightly tap on the door, not wanting to alert her parents who live next door. I hear movement near the door, and a few seconds later, the door is opened.

Her lips part in surprise, but there's also acceptance, like she saw this coming. Her body language shows signs of guarding. Her arm is wrapped around her stomach, and she's let her hair cover her face. It's like she knows and is trying to protect herself. She's wearing a violet silk pyjama set with long grey socks that reach her thighs.

"Hey," she greets, her voice low, unsure. "What are you doing here this late?"

“Sorry. I couldn’t sleep,” I explain, then decide to go in light before getting serious. “I came to see if you were okay. Can I come in?”

She holds the door open, letting me enter, but I don’t miss her gaze going to the path that leads to her dad’s. Their doors aren’t side by side. Imogen’s is a few feet back, giving her doorway a little privacy.

As the door closes behind her, her scent surrounds me. Everything around me becomes a blur because I can feel her. It doesn’t help that she’s all I’ve been able to think about. But she was vulnerable this morning, still reeling from the news, and I took advantage of that.

I turn to face her, and the minute our gazes lock, my hands clench into fists. Her face is free of makeup, and she has never looked more beautiful. And her beauty goes far beneath the surface. It’s in her words, in her laugh, and in her sass.

“I’m okay. As okay as you could expect. Speaking to my parents helped a lot,” she answers. “Hearing their side told me what those papers couldn’t.”

I can’t look away. The words I need to say are on the tip of my tongue, but now I’m standing in front of her, I can’t voice them.

“I’m glad it’s turned out okay,” I impart, rubbing the back of my neck. “Truly.”

“But that’s not why you’re here.”

I slowly shake my head. I had been so certain of what needed to be done, despite the war I had been having with myself all day. But now that I’m here, so close to her, I don’t know if I can.

“No.”

“Ben,” she rasps, like she knows what I want to say. “Don’t do this. It was just a kiss. It doesn’t have to mean something. But don’t ruin what happened. It meant something to me.”

The tips of my fingers press harder into my palm. “I don’t want to hurt you,” I rasp, the words painful to say.

“Then don’t,” she whispers, taking a step closer. “Don’t hurt me.”

The atmosphere in the room is tense, almost suffocating. Because if I go there, if this becomes real between us, it means this is forever. That’s how much power she has over me.

I take another step, licking my lower lip. “I won’t.”

“I know.”

And this is my weakness. Instead of saying the words I should be saying, I take a step, closing the space between us. The palm of my hand brushes her soft jaw until I’m cupping her cheek. The minute my fingers brush through her hair, the second her minty breath wisps across my face, my resolve to do the right thing breaks.

In a frenzy, she closes what’s left of the space between us until our bodies are flush. Our lips clash together before either of us can utter a word, like our bodies have now taken over. Kissing her is like nothing I have ever experienced. It’s hard, fast, and filled with undiluted passion.

A flame explodes inside me as her hands reach for the bottom of my T-shirt. I slide my leather jacket off my shoulders and help aid her in getting my top off. Our lips are separated for a moment, but the minute I’m free of my T-shirt, we’re on each other again. I lift her up by her thighs, her legs going around my waist, her ankles locking at the small of my back. As her lips nibble and whisper against mine, I feel like I’m on fire. A side of me wants to take it slow, whilst the other half has already lost control.

And it’s all because of her.

As I make my way over to her room, she sucks my lip into her mouth and breaks the rest of my restraint. I gently push her against the hallway wall, grinding my dick against her. A soft mewl slips past her lips, her body trembling against me. She holds all the power—so much so, and I don’t think she realises it. She has the power to undo me, and I’m okay with that. I

want to submit and to dominate, which is something I've never felt before. It's addictive.

I kiss her hard and fast as I cup her tit, finding she isn't wearing a bra under the thin top. I can feel her nipple under the flimsy material.

I pull back, my free hand wrapping around her throat. Her lips are red and swollen, her pupils dilated.

"Are you okay with this?" I ask, my words almost demanding.

"I'm not okay with you stopping," she replies, her voice filled with desire.

Fuck!

My fingers press into her neck, my eyes closing for a moment. "I cannot handle your sass right now."

"Why?" she whispers.

"Because it makes me want to fuck you harder and I need to be gentle with you."

Her words are shaky. "I'm not breakable."

I inhale sharply. She has no idea what she just did.

Using my pelvis to hold her to the wall, I yank up her top, discarding it on the floor. I need her. It's a need that runs so deep, it's unlike anything I have felt before. Skin on skin has never felt so erotic. But feeling her tits press against my chest has dirty thoughts running through my mind.

I run my hand down her chest and over her stomach, then I reach between us, sliding my hand into her shorts. Her wetness coats my fingers, and as I slide a finger inside of her, she drops her head back against the wall. Her gasp has my dick pulsing, so I add another finger, curving them up until she's moaning. I grit my teeth as she clenches around my fingers. When she starts to rock against my hand, watching her pleasure is no longer enough.

I need more.

I remove my hand, swallowing her whimper with another kiss. She kisses me back just as hard, and I carry her down the hall, making my way into the first bedroom. I don't bother with the lights since the hallway emits enough that I can still see her. See every inch of her. I lower her onto the bed and her back arches as my fingers grip her shorts. I pull them and her knickers off, and she lies bare in front of me with only a pair of long socks on her feet.

Fucking beautiful.

Her tits are a perfect handful. But her arse will always be the best arse I've ever seen. She has a tattoo of a rose on her hip, and I run my finger across it.

She sits up as I kick off my shoes and begins to undo my belt. Her gaze goes to the stitches on my side, her intake of breath showing the pain she feels. Her fingers brush around the injury as she looks up at me. And my god, those hazel eyes will always undo me.

"Does it hurt?" she rasps, pressing her lips to the flesh surrounding my wound.

"Not anymore," I admit, my voice low, filled with so much emotion.

As soon as I'm free of my jeans, I push her back down on the bed, spreading her thighs open as far as they will go. I have plans for her, and they don't involve a fifteen-minute fuck.

I trail my tongue up the inside of her thigh. Her moan is like a vibration down to my dick. With a gruff groan, I slide my fingers inside her, thrusting them in and out, with the palm of my hand rubbing over her clit. She arches her back, pushing her tits out as I move up her body.

I capture her nipple between my lips, flicking my tongue against the tip. I push another finger inside of her, curving them deep to the point she grinds down on my hand, wanting more. I can feel her getting tighter and tighter. Her breaths are getting faster, harsher, and I know it won't be long before she comes.

I press my palm down on her clit as I thrust my fingers inside her. I go harder, rougher, until she's writhing on her bed. Her walls clench around me as her body trembles from her orgasm. Her moan echoes around the small room. When her body finally stops shaking, and her walls around my fingers begin to relax, I move up the bed, grinning down at her.

“Are you ready for round tw—”

Her hands move to my head, bringing me down for a kiss. I growl low in my throat, kissing her back. As I move between her legs, her legs clamp around my waist.

She's always been fucking gorgeous, but she's stunning with the just fucked look. I brush her hair away from her face, locking gazes with her. I want to see her expression as I enter her. I grab my dick, lining it up at her entrance. Her lips part, her pupils glazing over, and before she has time to overthink any of it, I thrust hard inside of her. Her eyes close, pleasure taking over her expression.

Fuck! She's tight.

I growl, bending my head as I try to gather myself. I knew it was going to be good between us, explosive even, but this... this surpasses that. On so many levels.

She runs her hands up my chest, and I know if she continues to touch me, I'm not going to last much longer. I grab her hands, pinning them above her head. She inhales sharply as I thrust inside her, at the same time sucking her nipple into my mouth.

I slam into her over and over. Our lips clash together, and as the moment takes over, so does she. She rolls us until she's on top. As I grab her luscious hips, she begins to rock against my dick. She rises just enough, and lowers with the perfect amount of pressure. She goes from slow to fast to slow again. I never thought sex could drive a man this insane. She knows exactly what to do to keep me on the edge, but I have other plans.

We both do it seems.

It seems like we're both getting a perfect sleepless night.

I roll until she's beneath me, never once breaking the kiss. A primal need takes over and the rational part of my brain shuts down. I slam my cock inside her, my thrusts carnal, brutal, the sounds she's making driving me insane. My fingers dig into her thigh as I lift up my chest, fucking her deeper. Her walls clench around my cock as her back arches. It's not until she's calling out my name that I ease up a little.

I don't plan on this being the end. The night has just begun.

*** **

I've had great sex before. Fantastic sex even. But no woman has ever made me feel like I've done a four-hour gym session and still want to go back for more. My entire body aches in the best way.

My god, she can fuck. She gave as good as she got, and what we shared was mind-blowing. We had a 3am snack, and I didn't think I'd get hard again after that. She proved me wrong when she got down on her knees and sucked whipped cream off my dick. Even now, as I run my fingers across the creamy flesh on her stomach, I want more.

Fuck, she is beautiful.

She could bring any man to his knees with her beauty. But how she looks now, her lips swollen, a blush to her cheeks with her hair fanned out over the pillow, she could make a man fall in love.

She stirs at my touch, and I lightly brush a wayward piece of hair from her face. Her thick, long lashes flutter open and a content smile lifts the corners of her lips.

"Morning," she greets warmly, her voice filled with sleep.

Without intending to, I lean down, capturing her lips.

She pulls back, her lashes fluttering. "I haven't brushed my teeth."

“I don’t care,” I reveal, running my nose along hers. “You taste good to me.”

I lean down again, swallowing the words she was about to say. I cup her jaw, tilting her head to deepen the kiss. Her lips move against mine with urgency, but also with care. At this moment, nothing else matters. Only her. Always her. The unbridled passion burns like a furnace between us. I wonder if it will always be this electrifying between us or if it will burn out.

She rolls until she’s straddling my waist. We’re in the same position we were in yesterday morning, only this time, she’s only wearing my T-shirt, and I only have boxers on.

I run my hands over the globes of her arse as she grabs my dick in her hand. I’m already hard.

And then I hear it—a key in the door. My fingers dig into her hips as I stare up at her with wide eyes. “Who has a key?” I whisper.

Her lips part as she goes to answer, but then the unannounced guest speaks, and I immediately lose my boner.

“Immy, are you up?” Evan calls.

Her lips clamp shut, her eyes widening as panic takes over. I push her off me without thinking and she lands on the floor with a thud.

“Fuck!” she hisses, narrowing her gaze on me.

“Immy, are you okay?” Evan inquires, his voice closer.

I jump out of bed, grabbing my jeans as I keep my focus on the door. Imogen races to her feet, pushing the door closed when the handle lowers. “Yeah, Dad, I’m fine. Don’t come in. I’m undressed,” she squeals.

“Shit. Sorry, love,” he calls back. “Are you sure everything is okay? Joshua said he heard noises coming from here in the early hours of the morning.”

“Yeah, I’m good. I left the television on,” she promises, closing her eyes. “Is there something else you needed?”

“Your mum wants to know if you’re joining us for breakfast.”

She gives me a quick glance, her emotions unreadable. “Yeah. Give me thirty minutes.”

“Alright. See you at home,” he tells her, but then doesn’t move away from the door. “Before I go, I just wanted to say, I admire you for how you handled the news yesterday. You’ve always been special to us, but yesterday, you showed us just how special you are. Your mum has lived with the knowledge of this secret for your entire life and has been scared you’ll reject her because of it. Thank you for taking care with her emotions. In return, we will take care of yours.”

She swipes at a tear that rolls down her cheek. “Always, Dad. Always.”

“See you in a bit. And bring your appetite. Your mum has been cooking since eight.”

She forces a laugh. “I will do.”

I hear his footsteps move away from the door. Once the front door clicks shut, I exhale.

Her round eyes meet mine, and I bow my head, unable to take the hurt shining back at me.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Imogen

I can feel the rejection coming before he even utters a word. It swirls around me like a black mist, threatening to consume my entire being. I feel seventeen again. I was foolish to think this time would be different—that we were different.

The skies are darkening with the threat of a storm brewing, dousing the room in a grey glow. It's fitting since that is how my mood has gone. The room is still, yet the beat of my heart pulses, echoing in my ears.

My arms wrap around my stomach as I step away from the door. "What was that?"

"What was what?"

He's purposely avoiding the question. I silently dare him to look at me. He fucked me seven ways to Sunday throughout the night, but now he's acting like it was only one-sided.

"Look at me," I demand, and wait for him to meet my gaze before continuing. "You threw me off my bed like your wife just walked in."

He rubs the back of his neck. "I heard your dad and panicked."

"It seemed like more than that to me. Is there a reason you don't want him to know about us?"

"There isn't an us," he blurts out, closing his eyes.

I deserve more than this. "There isn't an us? Then what about last night?"

He begins to pull on his jeans, ignoring my question for a moment. "Last night shouldn't have happened."

"It shouldn't have happened?" I repeat, and now it's me being dumb. *He* kissed me. *He* started this. "If last night wasn't supposed to happen, then why did you come here? Why did you sleep with me?"

He throws his jacket on my bed. “Because you tempt me, Imogen. Fuck! You don’t even realise how much power you have over me,” he cries.

“You have just as much power over me,” I yell. “‘Cause I made a promise to stay away from you when I was seventeen and yet you are always still there.”

He pulls at the strands of his hair. “This can’t happen between us,” he orders. “I mean, it can’t happen again.”

“It’s a little late for that,” I snap.

“Christ, Imogen. Do you think this is easy for me?”

I scan him up and down. “Yeah. I really do.”

“Well it isn’t. It’s not as black and white for me as it is for you.”

“What is that supposed to mean?” I squeak.

“Just that I have more to lose than you do,” he responds.

“Is this about my dad?”

He grabs his jacket, throwing it on. “It doesn’t matter what it’s about. I came here last night to tell you it can’t be more than what it was. I fucked up. But I’m trying to make it right.”

He goes to reach for the door but I stand in front of it, blocking him from leaving. “You can’t do this. You can’t come in here and mess with my feelings like this without giving me a reasonable explanation. If it was just to fuck, admit it. I’ll let you leave and I won’t look back. But if it’s because of something else, then stop being a coward.”

He closes his eyes, masking his emotions. “Imogen, just stop.”

“No, goddamnit. Tell me! I deserve that much from you,” I cry.

He slams his fists on the door, either side of my head, and leans in. His emerald green eyes, fixed on me, narrow slightly. “What do you want me to say? It’s not you, it’s me? ‘Cause it

is me. I told you I didn't want to hurt you and look where we are. I can't think straight when I'm around you."

Then why is he doing this? "You are hurting me. You are hurting me now and I have no idea why. I thought we had a great time last night."

"Imogen, let me leave," he demands.

"No, not until you explain this to me," I cry.

He bangs his fist against the door again, and I startle this time. "Stop making this difficult."

"I'm not the one refusing to talk," I growl.

He exhales heavily, stepping away from the door. "You want me to talk? I'll talk. I don't want anything past what last night was."

My breath exhales in a whoosh, and I step away from the door, the rejection nearly sending me to the floor. I'm so fucking stupid to let him do this to me.

Again.

"Then we'll forget last night ever happened," I rasp.

He leaves without another word, closing the door slowly behind him. I fall to my knees on the carpet, a choked sob slipping past my lips.

I don't know why I care this much for someone who doesn't respect me. I understood it years ago. I didn't want to be with someone if they didn't like me. I didn't want a pity date or a boyfriend who was with me for the wrong reasons. But this time it's different. He came to me. He made me feel things again that I thought I buried a long time ago. And for what? For a handful of orgasms and a sleepless night.

I'm so fucking stupid.

I thought for sure that last night meant something. I could tell he was conflicted about us, but I thought it was because he works for my dad. But it's not.

It's me.

And even knowing what I know now, I don't know if I would change what happened between us. I would have protected my heart a little more.

*** **

After a quick shower, I get dressed to leave for my parents'. If anyone can erase this morning, it's my mum and her cooking.

I have to meet George for lunch, but I want to pop in and see Hayden before that. Then I need to start looking for a job. As easy as it would be to take up my dad's offer, I want to make my own money. Working for him doesn't feel like I'm earning it. And I feel strongly about earning my own money. I lock the door behind me, and as I get to the path that leads to my parents' home, I'm frozen by the sight of Zach standing there.

His clothes are creased, his hair dishevelled. I've never seen him look so unkempt before. He holds his hands up when I go to talk. "Please, just hear me out."

"Nothing you have to say is anything I want to hear, Zach. You need to leave."

He blocks the path to my parents'. His irises are dark, and the white parts of his eyes are bloodshot. "Please, you have to listen to me."

"I don't have to do anything."

"Will you fucking listen!" he snaps heatedly before taking a breath. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to yell."

I take a step back, alert now. "Zach, I think you should go."

"Look, I get that you're upset. But I was too. I did something stupid in the heat of the moment, but does it really need to define our entire relationship?"

“Something stupid,” I breathe. “You could have gotten me arrested. If you had any remorse, you would have returned it, but you didn’t. Instead, you dug the knife in a little deeper by revealing family secrets you had no right to tell me.”

He steps closer, grabbing my hands. I try to break free but he grips them tightly, causing me to squeak. “I did you a favour. I needed you to see that they don’t love you as much as I do. How could they? You aren’t even theirs.”

“Let me go,” I demand, my voice low, quivering.

“If you forgive me, we can start again. I can give you what you want.”

My eyes widen, and for the first time, Zach scares me. “Zach, you need to let go of my hands.”

He does, but only one hand. He runs his fingers across my jaw and leans forward as I struggle to get free. “We can work through this. There’s nothing in our way now. You don’t need to work ‘cause I can support us. My dad is going to fight for my space at university. And my family adore you. We don’t need yours.”

“Zach, let me go. You are delusional. We are over. And any chance you had for a friendship was diminished the minute you stole from the company. Now let go and go home,” I order.

“No. Not until we make this right between us. We can make this right, Imogen. We can. I didn’t mean to hurt you. Please, forgive me. We can start again.”

“Zach, stop.” I break, tears gathering in my eyes.

“I can make it right if you just let me.”

“Stop,” I yell. “There’s nothing you can do that can make any of this right.”

His hand shoots out so fast, I don’t see it coming. My cheek prickles from the sting, his slap knocking me back a step. I inhale sharply, holding my hand to my stinging cheek.

When he reaches for me, I react, swinging my fist back to land a punch to his nose. He hisses as a trickle of blood leaks

from his nostril. “Imogen.”

“Do not come near me,” I warn.

He doesn’t listen, grabbing me by the shoulders. “Please, I didn’t mean to do that. I didn’t. I just can’t bear for us to be apart anymore.”

“Let me go,” I cry.

“Yeah, let her go,” my dad warns, and seconds later, Zach is ripped away from me. My dad throws him to the ground. He turns to check on me, his gaze zeroing in on my cheek. “Did he fucking hit you?”

I rush forward, grabbing him by the arm when he goes for Zach. “Dad, don’t. It will make this worse if you hit him. I’m okay. And he hit me first, so I can say the punch was self-defence.”

Zach gets to his feet, spitting on the grass at his feet. “I came to say I’m sorry.”

“You’ve got a funny way of showing it,” Dad snaps.

Mum gasps, running to my side to examine my cheek. “Darling, are you okay?”

I grab her hand, forcing a smile. “I’m good. Zach was just leaving.”

“Please. I made mistakes. I don’t want to lose you.”

“Well, you have,” I admit. “Please leave, Zach. We’re over. Our friendship is over and I never want to see you again.”

He lowers his head. “You don’t mean that.”

“Yes, I do. Now leave.”

“I love you,” he rasps. “I made a stupid mistake but it can be fixed. We can be fixed.”

“If you don’t leave in the next minute, I’m phoning the police,” Dad threatens.

Zach meets my gaze. “My life means nothing without you. I have nothing. I’ve lost my space at university because

of you. My parents are selling my home. I will have a record. But you can help me get it back. We can do anything if we are back together.”

It’s as honest as he’ll ever get. “I’m sorry your life has turned upside down, Zach. But this isn’t what I wanted. These are the consequences of your actions and now you need to live with them.”

A cold mask slips over his face. The tears in his eyes dry up, and the veins in his temples pulse. “Then I’ll take you down with me.”

“Are you threatening my daughter?” Dad spits out, stepping closer.

Mum and I both move together, grabbing his arms. “Dad, don’t do this. Ignore him.”

“And it will cost you everything,” Zach threatens before shaking his head. “This isn’t over.”

I don’t let go of my dad even as Zach gets into his car. It’s not until he’s pulling away that I let out a breath and let go of my grip.

Dad pulls me against his chest, running his hand down my hair. “I’m sorry I didn’t come out sooner. The television was on loud.”

Before I can tell him it’s okay, Joshua speaks up. “I had the television on.”

I pull back to look at my brother. He’s standing in the doorway in a grey T-shirt and black boxers, his face pale. “Josh, this isn’t your fault.”

“I was trying to drown out the smoothie blender.”

“Josh, honey, it’s not your fault,” Mum soothes.

“Besides, it didn’t get loud until moments before Dad came out. It’s fine,” I assure him.

“It’s not fucking fine. We need to go to the police,” Dad growls.

“Dad,” I whine. “No more police. If he does something else, then yeah, we can go. But right now, I’m tired of going to the police. Can we just forget it?”

Mum takes my hand. “Honey, he hit you. You can’t ignore that.”

“I’m not ignoring it. I just want this to be done. Dragging the police into it brings him back into my life and I don’t want that,” I explain, and then focus on my dad. “I know you love me, but trust me, I won’t let it get that far. I know what to expect and I’ll scream for help. I promise.”

“Okay,” he relents, letting out a breath. “Why was he here anyway?”

“You got the gist of it. He thinks he can make it right between us.”

“He’s fucking crazy,” Dad mutters. “I’ve got a bad feeling about him. I want to respect your wishes and drop it, but this doesn’t feel right.”

“I know. If he comes to me again, I’ll go. I promise. I personally think he was making one last ditch effort to get out of the shit storm he’s put himself in.”

“Still...”

“Please, Dad,” I plead.

“All right. I’ll drop it.”

A car pulls into the space Zach drove out of and I tense for a second. Mum’s brows pinch together. “I think someone already called them.”

I turn, glancing at the police car. “What is Jackson doing here?” I mumble.

He’s alone as he gets out of the car, making his way up. When he takes us in, his hands go to his belt. “Is everything okay here?”

“Yeah. What brings you here this early?” Dad asks.

“I came to give Imogen an update. I wasn’t aware you lived together. On your form you said you lived alone.”

“I live next door,” I explain, pointing to the path. “Mum and Dad live here.”

He tilts his chin up. “Ah, I get it.”

“Will it take long?” Dad asks. “We’ve got a breakfast to eat and it’s already been delayed.”

“Dad,” I scold.

Mum smacks his chest. “Honey, don’t be rude.”

He shrugs. “I’m starving.”

Jackson clears his throat. “It’s okay. I can check in another day.”

“You can come to my office,” Dad tells him. “She’ll be helping out next week.”

“Is what you need to tell me important?” I ask, giving my dad a warning look to shut up.

Jackson chuckles. “No, it can wait. But I’ll pop in and see you next week.”

I smile, grateful to him for being so understanding. “Thank you.”

Dad wraps his arm around my shoulders. “Sorry for wasting your time.”

“It’s no problem. I should have called first,” Jackson tells him. He holds his hand up, waving once. “Enjoy your breakfast.”

As he leaves, Dad steers me into the house. I jab him in the ribs. “That was rude. I thought he was a good guy?”

“He is. I’m just seriously hungry,” Dad replies.

And I know he’s lying.

But I leave it, focusing instead on making the rest of the day better.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Imogen

Today could go either of two ways. Hayden could either slam the door in my face, slap me round the face, or make me grovel before she forgives me. If I ever get inside the building.

Since I'm showing up unannounced, I don't have an appointment. And the security guard takes his job seriously. The fucker won't let me in.

So, I do what any honourable Carter would do. I call in back up. When the food delivery guy shows up, I pretend to be distracted with my phone as he grabs his Just Eat bag. He passes by me, and I wait for the security guard to stop him before making my move. I slip past them, heading for the lift. I hide behind the large plant, my finger continuously pressing the call button like it will make the lift go faster.

Then I hear it, the bloody ding. "Jesus fucking Christ. Announce my arrival why don't you," I grumble as I quickly step inside.

"Hey! Hey!" the stocky security guard bellows.

I press the button to the top floor, my heart racing as the doors begin to close and he descends on me. "Shit, shit, shit!"

I exhale heavily as the doors close. I hear him banging on the metal as I lean against the wall. I could have made this easier if I called Hayden and told her I was here. But I didn't want to give her a chance to turn me away. And she might. Hayden is her father's daughter and can be unpredictable.

"Fuck, this lift is slow," I mutter and turn to the mirror to straighten out my hair. I did good covering up the swelling under my eyes. The lack of sleep on top of crying has not done me any favours. I could load the bags up with food.

The lift dings when it reaches the floor, and I tap my foot as I wait for it to open. I check the hallway both sides before stepping out, making my way over to the receptionist.

She glances up at my arrival. “Good morning,” she greets. “Do you have an appointment?”

I push my gaze away from her hair. It’s gorgeous. It’s honey-coloured and dead straight. I envy her. One second outside and my hair becomes frizzy.

“Hey, I don’t actually. I’m here to see Hayden Carter.”

She flinches at the name, which is weird. “Miss Carter isn’t taking visitors today.”

“She will want to see me,” I disclose. “I’m family.”

“Miss Carter is an only child.”

My eyebrows rise. “Actually, she’s a triplet, but I can see why she wouldn’t want to announce that,” I mutter. “Um, I’m her cousin. And it’s important I see her. It’s about her dad.” I tuck a strand of hair behind my ear, hoping she doesn’t detect the lie.

“Mr Carter is in a mental institution,” she announces, narrowing her gaze on me. “If you are some sort of crazy fan, I’m going to call security. He takes his job seriously.”

“I know. I have his fingerprint bruises on my arm,” I snap. “Look, I’m being serious. I’m her cousin. If you just tell her Imogen is here, she will understand.”

A burly man steps out of the office behind her. “We take our security measures seriously. Joe here will need to pat you down for weapons.”

“Weapons? Seriously?” I ask, my jaw dropping.

“It’s procedure,” she assures me as the big brute walks around the desk.

I point at him. “If you touch me, I will knee you in the balls. I mean it. There’s a reason my boots have pointy toes.”

“Then there’s only one other way,” the receptionist declares, clucking her tongue.

“What do you mean one other way?”

“You need to do seven star jumps with your tongue hanging out. If we hear any weapons jingling, we will secure you in a room until the police arrive,” she explains, getting to her feet.

My eyes widen. “Are you for fucking real?”

“Please don’t use that tone in here,” Joe rumbles, his tone threatening.

I eye him again. I think I could take him. I might get some bumps and bruises, but I’m not letting that fucker touch me.

And why does he look so familiar? I swear I’ve seen him before.

“Hey, you,” the security guy from downstairs yells, and I see him rushing towards me.

I glance at Joe. “I will do anything you want if you tell him to back off.”

He arches a brow as he crosses his arms over his muscular chest.

I guess that’s a no.

So I run past Joe, around the desk, and before any of them can stop me, I throw open the door.

And get tackled from behind.

I go down, and my fucking god. “My boobs,” I cry out. “You fucking asshole. Want me to do that to your fucking balls?”

Laughter reaches my ears and I glance up, blowing the hair out of my face, to find Hayden swinging in a chair, laughing. “You bitch!” I hiss.

“Boss, you can get up. She’s Hayden’s family,” Clay announces, pinching the bridge of his nose. “I told you this would end badly.”

I push up, making sure to catch the dude in the shin. I feel smug when he hisses out in pain. “He’s your boss?” I ask when I get to my feet.

“No, his name is Boss,” Hayden replies.

I glare at the man in question. “Ever touch me again, *Boss*, and I will have your balls on a skewer.”

Joe chuckles as he makes his way into the room, dropping down on the sofa. “She really is related to you.”

Boss doesn’t even acknowledge me or offer an apology. “I’m sorry for disrupting your meeting, sir.”

Clay waves him off. “It’s all good. You can go back downstairs.”

“And trip on your way down,” I mumble under my breath. Then I focus on Joe, and gone is the serious expression. Now he’s smiling. “Holy fuck. You’re Griffin McCallister.”

“Actually, I’m Joe King. Griffin is my character.”

“You’re fucking joking,” I tease.

He’s filming the second series of a television drama right now that has been trending everywhere. Everyone is talking about the hot new actor. Even I had to wipe the drool off my lip when I watched an episode.

“Yeah, my name’s actually Joe Fisher.”

“You look different in person.”

“I get that all the time,” he replies.

I shake myself out of it and turn to Hayden, remembering what happened. “You fucking put them up to that out there, didn’t you?”

She shrugs. “Would you have star jumped?”

I point to my heels. “You know I’d never risk my boots,” I remind her.

“Good point,” she muses. “What brings you here? I thought you weren’t talking to me.”

“Look, I’m sorry. It’s not every day you find out your bio mother is a crack whore and your mum is biologically your aunt. I said things in the heat of the moment. I was in shock and I was hurt. You knew before me.”

“I get it. I wanted to tell you but it wasn’t my place. You know how Lily is. You were saved from living the same life she did, and I didn’t want to mess your head up when it was irrelevant. You have a mum and dad who love you.”

“And you have no siblings and a dad in a mental institution.”

She chuckles. “I am sorry, for what it’s worth. I only found out because I’m a nosey bitch. It wasn’t discussed with me behind your back. And your mum called me last night saying you were okay.”

“I know it wasn’t discussed. Mum explained that she didn’t tell anyone. I am sorry for yelling at you.”

“It’s fine. If you had been anyone else, this would be going a lot differently, but I love you. I don’t like seeing you hurt.”

I eye her curiously. “You aren’t going to hug me, are you?”

She curls her lip up. “Fuck no. But I am going to ask about how you got that red mark on your cheek.”

It’s the one thing my makeup didn’t cover. I even tried to blend it in with some blusher. But I guess it’s going to leave a bruise.

And that’s when I remember we aren’t alone. I glance at Clay, then Joe, grimacing.

Joe grins. “Don’t mind us. This is better than any television drama on right now.”

I arch a brow. “Glad we could entertain you.”

“Get back to the mark on your face,” Hayden orders.

And this is why I love her. She’s loyal as hell and will have your back. Hell, she will have your back even if she doesn’t know you just to get a kick out of the drama.

I was worried about coming here because she’s not known for forgiveness. I should have known this would be different.

But to save her from being arrested, I lie. I lie good enough for her to believe me.

*** **

My lids are growing heavy as I sit across the road from Castle and Games with a takeout cup filled with an espresso. I've passed by this park so many times and it's always brimming to capacity with children. I guess it's the only park in Coldenshire that hasn't been touched by drunken kids or graffiti artists. Today, however, there isn't a child in sight. Which my headache is grateful for.

George makes his way across the road with a white bag in hand, and I smile. "Please tell me there's food inside for me."

He rolls his eyes. "Of course there is," he assures me as he takes a seat on the bench in front of me. "How are you holding up?" His eyes widen suddenly, and he drops a food container on the table. "Is that a bruise forming on your face?"

I gently run my fingers across the mark. "I'm missing work. And yes, it's a long story."

"One, you're weird. No one misses work. And two, I have time for a long story."

"Your lunch is an hour."

"An hour and fifteen because I didn't take my break this morning," he rushes out. "Did you get into a fight?"

I fill him in on this morning, and his face grows red, his fingers clenching around the second container he pulls out.

"Babe, that is so not cool. Maybe you should go stay with your parents. I know you have a good relationship with them. He might come back."

"They live next door," I point out since he doesn't know.

His eyes bug out of their sockets. "Girl, I moved three hours away from my parents," he reveals. "Next door?"

Seriously? Are you not worried they'll hear you doing the hokey-pokey?"

I splutter out a laugh. "No. I'm not. Dad insulated the walls well when the old tenant moved out. He would have done it before to avoid embarrassment but he didn't have the means to put her up somewhere else."

"Are you going to go to the police?"

"No. I'm done with the police," I tell him, digging into the baked potato.

"Oh shit. How did that go? Laura said they retrieved the disc."

"They did," I admit, and don't bother to tell him about the run-in with Zach outside. I'm not sure I want people to know that much about my personal life. "I'm still waiting to be updated. I know he's been charged but that's about it. I'm just glad the company got it back. Despite what Larry thinks of me, I wanted the best for the company."

"You don't need to tell me that. It's been hectic in there. People don't have anyone to unload their work onto, so Larry has been chomping at the bit to get them into gear. I think he's understanding why his previous employees left due to stress."

"I wouldn't mind, but they get paid so much more than I did for doing less work. I don't miss the added workload, but I do miss working. I didn't realise how much I wanted the job until I lost it."

"About that... I've been thinking. We could design our own app game. It's how most kids play them now anyway. We could do one for children and adults."

"I would love to, but we don't have the funding to start up. I was going to run this idea by Larry, but maybe you could. I was thinking of doing a game where people get to travel. We find the cheapest hotels here in the UK at glorious spots, and with each zone they hit, they complete a new level. He could get sponsors from hotels or destinations. There are so many beautiful places in the UK that are hidden from the world. We could open some up with that app."

“My nanna left me some money. A lot of money. We could do this. Come on, think about it. If you go to Castle and Games with this, you wouldn’t profit. You aren’t under contract anymore so any ideas you have belong to you.”

“Maybe,” I muse. “I’d have to think about it.”

“I’ll check in to make sure you do. We could incorporate it into a children’s one for days out, get discount codes for family days out, and have different things they can do whilst they are there.”

I feel hope bubbling in my chest. But hope can be a fickle thing. It can be crushed within a second. “I’ll definitely think it over,” I assure him. “Anyway, I wanted to see if you were serious about coming away on our next family getaway. We are going to some cabins in January. Ciara has us booked in to do a ghost hunt.”

He grins. “Count me in. I have some holiday I need to use so I’ll see if I can get it off.”

“Now, tell me everything I’ve missed. What have you been up to? Did you make a new BFF?”

As he goes into detail about work and life, I begin to finally relax. George always has a way of making you forget everything shitty in your life. And I need his company today more than anything.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Ben

It's my first day back and I'm already running a little late. I've been all over the place since my night with Imogen a few weeks ago. No one has ever made me lose control like she does. I'm no longer poised or ready to argue back when it comes to her. It's like she takes the words from my mouth but not before scrambling them in my head. She twists me up and leaves me an utter mess.

And leaving it how we left it... it only gave me bad karma. Not only did I blow a tyre on my way home, but as I pushed open the door to book it in for repair, my mind had been elsewhere and I didn't see the car speeding past until it took my door off its hinges. It went from shit to worse during the first week.

The second week hasn't been much better. Every free moment I've had time to think, my mind has wandered to Imogen, and the universe has punished me for it. The burn on the inside of my arm proves that. Mum said 'imagine', and I thought she said Imogen, which distracted me, thinking she was in the kitchen.

And then today, I swear I saw her car on my way to pick up my own. Thankfully, it wasn't me driving because I would have definitely crashed.

I step into the office and a warm cheer echoes around the room. "Welcome back!"

I glance around, a wide smile stretching across my face. "You are acting like this is the first time I've come back."

Leeroy walks over and slaps me on the shoulder. "That didn't count. You're back officially."

"Well, it's nice to see your ugly mug again," I greet back.

"Welcome back, bro," Derek declares, holding his fist up.

I knock my fist against his. "Thanks, mate."

“I personally haven’t missed you. You’re too pretty to work here,” Martin teases.

I chuckle. “Admit it, you missed me.”

Harris is next. “It’s good to see you back, kid.”

“On your way out?” I ask.

“Yeah, but I’ll check in with you later,” he promises before leaving through the door behind me.

Evan smirks when he sees me, and my heart jolts. He wouldn’t greet me so warmly if he knew what me and his daughter got up to. “Good to see you back, son,” he expresses, before arching a brow. “Officially.”

“Dad, where did—” Imogen stops at the sight of me, her cheeks paling. “Ben. I didn’t know you were due back so soon.”

I clear my throat, trying to ignore the rapid pace of my heartbeat. “I’ve done my time recuperating.”

She subtly shakes her head, and I watch as a mask of indifference passes over her face. “Dad, where did you want me to put these files?”

“On my desk,” he tells her, his thick eyebrows bunching together. “Are you okay?”

“Yeah, just trying to do what you hired me for,” she remarks, but there’s a slight bite to her tone.

“You’re working here?” I blurt out.

“Yeah,” she retorts. “Is that a problem?”

I send a brief glance to Evan, whose focus is all on his daughter, trying to read her. I know he is. Because I’ve been under his scrutiny before. It’s unnerving.

“No problem,” I rush out.

“Good.”

There’s a swing to her hips as she leaves, and my mind flashes back to that night. I know what she looks like naked, and fuck me, it’s all I can picture now as she walks away.

There is no way I'll be able to detach myself from her whilst working this close to her. Things have changed between us. We crossed a line, and both of us are trapped across it with no way back.

Evan swivels his head in my direction. "Was she acting weird to you? She seemed weird."

"Maybe it's being back here after getting fired her dream job," I lie, and gulp at how easy it came out. "She talked to you non-stop for weeks when she started. You saw how much she enjoyed it."

"Yeah, maybe," he murmurs. "No duty until after the New Year. You can, however, look into the fraudulent cases we've been working on. It's all on your desk."

I'm glad he doesn't hold me back from my work. He's not keeping me caged in the office since he's given me work that can still take me outside. He's just not giving me any work that might involve my combat training.

I lift my chin and move over to my desk. Which happens to be right next to where I know Imogen will be stationed.

As Evan passes to go back to his office, I chance a look at Imogen, who seems to be stuffing files into the cabinet without a care. I don't think she's ever going to forgive me. I'm not sure I want her to. Or deserve it.

When I see her head into the staff room, I wait a few minutes before deciding to follow. If I'm going to stare at papers all day, I need the fuel to do so. But I also want a chance to speak to her without prying eyes.

She's pouring a mug of coffee when I enter, but she feels my presence and begins to leave. I quickly block her path, stopping her from leaving.

"You can't avoid me forever," I tell her, keeping my voice low.

She can't even bear to look me in the eye. And it bothers me more than I care to admit.

"I can do what the fuck I want," she snaps.

“We have to work together,” I point out. “People are going to notice and wonder what is going on between us if we continue with this tension between us.”

She scoffs, narrowing her eyes. “Of course that’s what you would be worried about,” she snaps. “And if you haven’t noticed, there is nothing going on between us.”

I grab her arm gently when she goes to leave. “I’m sorry. So fucking sorry. I never wanted this to happen.”

“What do you want from me, Ben? Forgiveness? Understanding? What? Because I have nothing left to give you.”

I flinch at her words. “I didn’t mean... Jesus. This isn’t how I wanted it to go.”

“Then you should have thought about that before fucking me like a casual Friday night hook up.”

I gently kick the door closed and move in on her. “You weren’t a casual anything,” I growl. “Nothing about you or how I feel about you is casual, Imogen. You think I don’t think about that night? Because I do. I can’t stop thinking about how you felt, how you moaned, or how you look when you come. It’s engraved in here.” I jab two fingers into the side of my head. “I cannot get you out of my goddamn mind.”

“You said it didn’t mean anything.”

I grit my teeth. “I fucking lied. But this can’t happen, Imogen. It can’t. You might not understand it, but let’s make one thing fucking clear. This is not easy for me. Having you here is not fucking easy. Not when all I want to do is rip your jeans down and fuck you over the table.”

Her lips part as a soft breath slips free, and her pupils dilate. “But—”

A gust of air flowing from the door behind me stops her from continuing. When I see Evan, I quickly move to the counter, pressing the machine to pour myself a coffee.

“Everything okay?” he greets.

“Yeah. Ben was just showing me where the pods are,” she replies. “You’ve moved them since the last time I was here.”

“Didn’t even realise,” he comments before clearing his throat. I pass them with my mug, keeping my head down. But not before I hear him continue. “Jackson is here to speak with you. I have to go and make a call in my office.”

I quickly move to my desk, jerking my chin up at Jackson, who’s standing in front of the reception desk. Heels click on the laminate floor as Imogen passes by. Her scent surrounds me, and I have to close my eyes for a moment to ward off the need I have for her.

Fuck! I think I’ll always want her.

“Hey, Jackson,” she greets softly.

“Sorry it’s taken me this long to come and finish our conversation.”

“I don’t think you had a chance to start it with my dad there,” she teases.

He chuckles, resting his forearms on the counter. And that look... He fucking wants her. It’s written all over him, his posture, and the way he eyes her like she’s fresh fucking meat.

I clear my throat. “Shouldn’t you be in uniform to give out information about the case?” I comment.

Imogen glares at me. “Maybe this is his only free time.”

I grunt under my breath, as he answers, “I’m not due in for another thirty minutes, but I didn’t want to leave it another day.”

“So, what’s the update?”

“The Armstrongs have contacted Castle and Games to plead their son’s case.”

That has my attention. Imogen’s lips part as she takes in the news. “What are Castle and Games going to do?”

“Still not sure, but Zach has very good lawyers at his disposal.”

“Ah, wealth has its own laws,” she spits out. “If it had been me, I would have already had my sentencing.”

“We’ve gathered all the evidence, so it will be down to the courts to decide. Personally, I think he’ll get off with a record and maybe community service. I don’t know. Or he’ll take this further and make the courts see reasonable doubt in his crime and put it on you.”

“Of course he will.”

“Just know we are on your side. We’ll do our best to get this sorted for you,” he promises, and I want to gag when he reaches for her hand resting on the desk.

She lets out a breath. “Thank you. Sorry for snapping. I just hate it when the justice system isn’t fair.”

“Hey, I get it. The police feel the same way. We work to build a case to present to the courts and sometimes it means nothing if they don’t see it going anywhere.”

“I’m not blaming you. I know how it goes. I’ve worked here long enough to know what will be entered into evidence and what won’t. It’s like a friend of mine. Her sister got pushed down some stairs and broke her ankle. They found the group of girls who did it, but because they couldn’t prove which one actually pushed her, they all got away scot-free. It’s a joke.”

“I wish there was more I could do,” he declares, before clearing his throat. “Your dad contacted us as he wants to file a restraining order against Zach. Is there something I should know?”

Imogen’s hand immediately snaps up to her cheek, but I don’t see anything there. But that reaction comes from victims of assault. My fingers clench around the cup in my hand. Has Zach hurt her and she hasn’t spoken up? I flag the question in my mind, knowing once this asshole has left, I will go and question Evan about it. Until then, I’m not leaving her alone with this dick. Not when his intentions are so clear for the entire room to see.

“No. Nothing of importance,” she murmurs, but her mind is clearly elsewhere. “Was there something else you needed as I really should get back to work.”

I smirk behind my mug at her disinterest. She clearly hasn’t picked up the signs that he wants her.

“Actually, there is,” he tells her as he leans in closer, his eyes crinkling at the corners. “I was wondering if I could take you out. To dinner. As a date.”

I choke on the hot liquid, scorching my throat. “Like fuck you can,” I snap.

His brows scrunch together as his gaze moves to me, then back to Imogen, who is glaring at me. “Like you have a say,” she snaps, then turns to Jackson. “Friday. At eight?”

“You can’t be serious?” I hiss, then notice a few of the men are watching our interaction.

“Deadly,” she bites out, turning back to Jackson. “If you’re working, we can arrange another time.”

“Um, no. Friday is good. I’ll pick you up.”

“I can meet you—”

He places his hand over hers again, and it takes everything in me not to get up there and rip his hand away. “No. It’s a date. I’ll pick you up.”

She smiles, but it doesn’t quite reach her eyes. “Then I’ll see you Friday.”

Jackson grins wide. “I’ll see you Friday.”

He leaves. As she continues to watch him go, I can’t smother the snort that comes out. She spins around, pinning me down with a glare. “Something you need to say?” she remarks sharply, arching a brow.

My gaze flicks to the door and back as I arch my brow at her. “I’ve got a few things.”

She jabs her finger at me. “*You* can stay out of my business.”

“Please, I was doing you a favour.”

“I don’t need any favours,” she snaps.

“Since you two are clearly not focused on work, you can drop the toys down at the Salvation Army,” Evan orders, his voice firm. “And you can stay to help wrap them.”

“Dad...” she begins but he cuts her off.

“Go. And come back in a better mood,” he demands, his gaze cutting to me. “Same goes for you.”

Fucking hell! If I don’t get it together before the day ends, he’s going to know. And all the hurt I’ve caused would be for nothing. It would mean nothing.

*** **

Imogen is doing her best to keep a distance between us at the church’s community centre. An older lady brought us back to a private room, where a bunch of presents were waiting to be wrapped. Imogen talked her way into helping with the food, but that only lasted until an hour ago. Now, she’s back in the room with me. With so many presents already here, as well as the toy collection Evan gathered from friends and family, we are going to be here all night. It’s already three in the afternoon, and this isn’t how I imagined my first day going.

“Are you going to talk to me?” I demand, putting down a creepy-looking baby doll.

“No!” she replies, then goes back to the box of Lego she’s wrapping.

And doing an awful fucking job.

I step over to where she is, removing the scissors from her hand before she decides to stab me with them.

“Fuck’s sake. Talk to me.”

She throws the tape on the table and pushes me back.
“Will you just fucking stop! You said it didn’t mean anything

to you. I respected that. But then today you say... Fuck, you're messing with my head, Ben. Nothing has changed from then until now. So just fucking stop!"

I step closer, caging her in against the wall. "I want to stay away," I grit out. "I need to. But I can't."

"You need to move," she breathes out, and her eyelids flutter closed when I run my hand along her jaw.

"I can't seem to leave you alone," I rasp, my words pained.

She tilts her head up, her doe eyes meeting mine. "This isn't fair," she whispers.

I lean down, running my nose along her jaw until my lips are at her ear. "Nothing about this is fair," I admit, then my tone turns into a plea. "Please, don't go on a date with him."

She pushes me back, and since I wasn't expecting it, I fall back against the table. "I'm going."

"Wait," I call out as she grabs her bag.

"No, I'm not doing this with you. I'm not some fucking toy. I'm a person. And unless you can commit to whatever this is, I'm done, Ben. You might be able to fuck and detach yourself, but I can't. I'm not that person. So if you want to get laid, go find someone else," she seethes, before leaving the room.

I drop down on the chair, scrubbing my hands down my face. I want her. I've wanted her for a long time. And she's right. She doesn't deserve this. This isn't how I want to treat her or make her feel.

I have to get my head together before it's too late.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

Imogen

Hope rests her arm against the back of the sofa as I enter the living room in the only outfit I have left for a date.

I have no idea where he is taking me and dressing up in a dress to go to a standard pub restaurant might seem overkill, so I decided on a mid-thigh, black leather skirt and a black, skin-tight, long-sleeved V-neck top with my cream blazer. My boots reach two inches below my skirt, and the heel on them is a good five inches. I love them. They make me look like I've got long legs even though I'm only five-foot-three.

"You look smoking hot," Hope praises. "He must be too for you to get those heels out."

"He's good looking," I admit, rounding the sofa to take a seat next to her. "Do you think it's too soon to be going on a date?"

I haven't told her about Ben. I haven't told anyone. Because revealing that secret will bring up the fact he doesn't want me past that. And I'm too embarrassed to admit that out loud. This is about me just coming out of a relationship, one that ended badly.

"I don't think it's too soon. I think you and Zach were only friends deep down. Yeah, you were in a relationship but you weren't a couple. Not really. And I think it's because you were so good as friends," she reveals. "Plus, a normal person waits to date to respect their ex, but he doesn't get that from you. Not after what he's done."

I want to tell her about Ben, about what happened on Monday. Hayden would be brutally honest and probably drive round there. Hope, however, will help me sort through what I'm feeling. And I desperately want to open up to her.

"Yeah, you're right," I reply, as my mind sorts through what I should do.

Tell her.

I open my mouth but her phone beeps with a message. “Shit. I need to get home. Ciara was meant to make Ash dinner because Mum and Dad have gone out for food, but she’s not back home for another hour. Madison said he’s blown the fuses.”

“How has he done that?” I ask as I get to my feet and follow her.

“Making a cheese toastie. He’s got the cable caught in it and it’s melted through to the wire.”

“Shit! Go, go. I’ll let you know how tonight goes.”

She reaches over, kissing my cheek. “Love you and have fun tonight.”

“Will do.”

As I close the door behind her, I lean back against it. Will Ben and I forever be a secret? Is that all our night will be?

A man has never infuriated me more than him. I’ve avoided him at all costs, but it doesn’t mean I haven’t seen his stolen glances or subtle hints when he’s brought files over to me. I just can’t speak to him. He said our night together meant nothing to him, when it meant everything to me. As much as it hurt when he walked away that morning, I could take it for what it was. A great night of incredible sex.

Then he messed with my head by saying he couldn’t stop thinking about me, and I had to wonder what was holding him back, because I never pegged him to be a prick who enjoyed fucking girls around.

Knowing I only have forty minutes left to get ready, and I’m yet to do my hair, I head down the hall to my bedroom.

Movement at the window grabs my attention and a scream dies in my throat. I can’t move or let go of the breath I inhaled.

The person is obscured by the reflection of the lamp and the hood they have pulled over their head.

Knuckles tap against the glass window, and I step back, knocking into the doorframe.

Has Zach come back to hurtle more abuse at me?

“Imogen,” Ben hisses, and my shoulders drop, relaxing for a split second.

Then remember why I’m mad at him.

I rush over to the window and lift it up until it clicks onto the latch. “What are you doing here? You nearly gave me a heart attack.”

“Your dad was out the front talking to Hope.”

Of course that’s what he would be worried about.

“And you thought sneaking to my bedroom window would be less suspicious?”

I step back to clear the space when he begins to climb in. The minute his boots touch the carpet, he turns back to close the window. “I wanted to see you.”

“You could have waited until Monday,” I remark.

His heated gaze locks on me. “I couldn’t wait until Monday.”

“Ben, you need to leave. I’m going out tonight.”

“With Jackson?” he questions, his jaw clenching.

“You already know who I’m going on a date with,” I state. I lift my clenched hand to his abs when he steps into my personal space. “And you already know he’s going to be here soon.”

“He isn’t right for you,” he heatedly responds.

“But the guy who doesn’t know what he wants, is?” I ask, closing my eyes when his hands grab my hips.

His presence threatens my resolve to put space between us.

I’m not a fuck buddy. I want more than that.

“I’ve tried,” he breaks. “Believe me, I’ve fucking tried.”

I tilt my head to meet his gaze. “Then you need to try harder. Because this isn’t fair.”

“I’ve tried to get you out of my head. I’ve tried. But you’ve gotten so far under my skin, you make me question why this can’t happen in the first place,” he breathes. “And believe me, that’s no easy feat.”

“I’m not the one holding back. I won’t give you a hundred percent when you can’t even give me ten.”

“You want me,” he states, tugging at me until I’m flush against his chest.

“You know I do, but I can’t be with you the way you want.”

My lips part as he brushes his along my jaw. “Tell me to leave and I’ll leave,” he commands as he presses his lips against my neck.

“Ben...” I begin, but then he presses his erection into my stomach.

“Tell me,” he demands, tilting my head back and removing the clip holding my hair up.

“I...”

I can’t form the words, not when his lips slam against mine. His kiss swallows the moan that slips free. He swings me up into his arms by my thighs, and the movement causes my skirt to rise up to my waist. My arse is hanging out as he pushes me against the wall next to the door.

I kiss him back, and roughly rake my nails down his jacket.

Fuck! My entire body is burning for him.

His hand reaches between us, his fingers sliding the thin scrap of material aside as he plunges two fingers inside of me. I arch against the doorframe, crying out when he hits the right spot.

“Ben,” I moan, writhing as he fucks me with his fingers.

“You’re fucking soaked for me,” he rasps. “You want me.”

“Yes,” I hiss, and hear the distinct sound of a belt being unbuckled.

The rough material of his jeans slips past my ankles. I want to tell him to stop, but the minute I see the desire shining back at me, the words die in my mouth and I’m kissing him again.

He slips his fingers free, and I feel the tip of his dick at my entrance. He waits for me to pull back, his gaze unwavering as he slams inside of me.

My walls clench around him and a moan slips free. He fucks me against the wall, rattling the picture hanging on the wall not too far away.

“So fucking tight,” he grits out, his hand cupping my tit above my top. “You feel so fucking good.”

“Harder,” I plead as my back slams against the wall.

I cry out, rocking my hips, needing more. Sweat trickles down my spine, the heat between us becoming too much.

Nothing has ever excited me this much. I’ve never felt this driving need during sex either. It’s new to me. All of it.

The chime of the doorbell echoes down the hall, my body freezing when I realise it might be my parents.

“We need to stop,” I breathe, but my body is screaming for more.

“Come for me, sweet girl,” he demands, his thrusts becoming almost punishing.

“I should get the door,” I counter, my orgasm just at the edge of reach.

“No. Not until you come for me,” he declares. “You’re mine. This...” he squeezes my tit hard, “is mine. All of you is mine.”

I explode into a thousand pieces, my cries echoing off the walls.

One thrust. Two. And just when I think I can't take any more, he growls low in his throat, releasing his own orgasm.

He kisses the tip of my nose as he lowers my feet to the floor. I have to reach out to steady myself, my legs weak. He rests his forehead against mine, closing his eyes.

Shame surrounds me, and I lower my head more.

"Get rid of whoever is at the door," he orders, his tone still filled with desire.

"No," I whisper.

"Imogen," he calls.

I blink through the unshed tears, hoping my makeup stays intact if they fall. I straighten my skirt, a sob catching in my throat at the proof of what we did soaking my thong. Knocking at the door echoes down the hall, and moments after, my phone begins to blare. "I'm going, and you had better be gone by the time I answer the door."

He steps back like I've visibly hit him. "You don't mean that."

"You came here to prove you could have me. Congratulations. You had me. But this doesn't change anything."

"It changes everything," he remarks.

I meet his gaze. "Not unless you've changed your mind," I fire back. "I'm not waiting around for you to realise what you're missing. So if you don't mind, I'll be leaving."

"Stop!" he pleads.

"Goodbye, Ben." Before he can argue, I step out of my room, calling out, "I'm coming."

My mum would have let herself in by now, and my dad never knocks. I glance at the clock on the fireplace, seeing I still have twenty minutes until Jackson arrives.

Jackson. Oh God.

I just fucked Ben knowing I'm going out with him. I'm a fucking slut. Guilt swarms me. I might have said yes to prove to Ben that someone wants me, but I do like Jackson. He seems like a great guy.

But this... I never planned for this. And I don't know how I'll be able to sit across from him without this weighing down on me.

I pull open the door, and the man in question is standing there in a shirt and dark jeans. He scans me up and down, raising an eyebrow. "You look beautiful."

I feel anything but beautiful right now.

I clear my throat. "Hey, you look good too."

"For a minute there, I thought you changed your mind."

"I'm sorry. I was still, um, getting ready. I wasn't expecting you until eight."

He chuckles. "Yeah, it happens a lot."

I can still feel Ben's cum inside of me. "Can you come in for five minutes whilst I quickly finish?"

"Of course."

I step out of the way and gesture to the sofa. "I won't be long," I promise as he sweeps the room. "Take a seat."

I head back down the hall, my heart hammering against my chest.

Please don't be here.

I hold my breath as I step into my room. It's clear and the window is open, the wind blowing the curtains. I move over to close it, gazing outside.

I should be relieved he's gone, but the weight in the pit of my stomach only grows heavier.

I quickly grab some fresh knickers from my drawer and head straight to the bathroom. Glancing in the full-length mirror, I take in my appearance. My cheeks are flushed, and my hair looks how I expect it to look after sex. A mess.

Not wanting to keep him waiting, I rush through everything and decide to just put a brush through my hair.

As I make it back into the living room, I can't help but wonder what I'm doing. This isn't fair to Jackson. As great as he is, things with Ben are complicated. I'm no longer lying to myself. Whilst I won't wait for him to make a decision, I also know the minute he finally wants me as more, I'll give in. Because that is how much control he has over me.

"Ready," I announce when he doesn't hear me approach.

He grins. "I hope you're hungry because there's a pub that serves the best meat that I want to take you to."

And that weight grows heavier.

He isn't taking me to some fancy restaurant where I won't eat the food. He's not repulsed by the thought of me wanting food. He also likes my family.

And I just slept with another guy only moments before we were meant to be on a date.

"Starving," I whisper as he waits for me to walk out first.

After checking the door is locked, we head down the path to his car. The hairs on the nape of my neck stand on end, and I scan my surroundings.

Maybe it's Ben still lurking around.

"Are you okay?" Jackson asks, as he too begins to survey the area.

I force the feeling of being watched away and force a smile. "I'm good. Just hate this road when it's dark," I lie.

"It does need a few more streetlights," he muses.

"Yeah," I murmur, as I lower myself into the seat.

He closes the door behind me and I take in a breath, holding it steady for a moment.

Maybe this hasn't started the way it should have.

It doesn't mean we can't turn this around.

CHAPTER TWENTY

Imogen

The empty plates are pushed to the side, and my stomach is full. Jackson wasn't lying when he said this place had the best meats. I had tikka bites as a starter, and my god, I wanted to order more, until Jackson swore the mains were just as good. He wasn't wrong. The steak was so juicy and the flavours exploded on my tongue. I asked what it was seasoned with but the waitress said the chef doesn't give out ingredients.

The pub is like every other pub, except for it doesn't have the standard beiges and browns. It has dark grey seating, light grey tables, and cream walls. The bar is the centre feature with tables scattered around. There are banquette seats running along the walls, which is where we are seated. I took the banquette seat whereas Jackson took the round chair, his back to the room.

Now he's moved to sit next to me, his arm resting on the back of the booth. I admire him. He came from a family who, he tells me, make the family from the drama series *Shameless* look like the perfect family. He grew up in a rough neighbourhood, where gang life was the only choice some kids had. He had been in and out of group homes because his mum was always falling off the wagon. She had nine kids with seven different men, and Jackson is the youngest at twenty-nine. But he made something of himself despite all of that. He went to university, where he studied criminal law alongside subjects like operational and investigative policing. He watched his brother get arrested for a crime he didn't commit and wanted to become a part of the justice system to help people just like him. Not only does he work full-time as a policeman but he helps run an outreach program for troubled teens.

He's perfect in every way, yet my mind is still back at home, thinking about what happened.

Fucking Ben and his mind games.

I don't know what he's playing at. He wants me one minute then disregards me the next. He's hot then he's cold. And he knows just how to play me. And I let him, because he's all I've ever wanted.

And now I have a great guy in front of me, one I could definitely see myself with, but all I can think about is him. The universe really knows how to fuck up life. Or maybe I'm doing that all by myself because I've been here before. Zach had been the great guy, one I could picture being with. And just like now, Ben was all I could think about.

I'm toxic.

I bleed toxic.

And it's all because one man has control over me. Control I never gave him. But he does. And I'm back in the same position again.

I'm questioning my choices.

Again.

I'm messing with another guy.

Again.

And I have no idea how I got here.

I want to tell Jackson before the night is over. Leading him on is out of the question. I should have done it before we left.

As he finishes telling me about a fight that broke out at work, I remember something I thought of earlier but forgot to ask.

"I've been meaning to ask... Are you allowed to be on a date with me, since I'm a victim or suspect? I'm still not sure which one I am."

He grins whilst lowering his drink to the table. "Ethically, no. It's a big no-no in the police academy. It's why I turned up at your work without the uniform. My supervisor said as long as I don't get involved with the case, I'm good. And I can't talk about it to anyone either."

He means me. He can't talk to me about it.

"But you came to my house in uniform," I point out. "And my dad's work, when you warned him about my arrest warrant."

"We were on a lunch break when we went in to see Evan, and as long as you don't tell anyone I was there at your house or that I updated you, we should be good."

"My lips are sealed," I promise, and then I realise something. "Wait, Beau was on Faith's case. Does that mean he will get into trouble?"

"No. At the time, he was in what our supervisors called a grey area. Plus, no one would argue with Beau. He respects the law too much to break it. He's done a lot in the time he's come to work with us and he's kind of a legend for taking on the Carters as family."

I laugh at that. "I wouldn't give him that honour just yet. He might still take Faith and disappear into the sunset to get away from them."

"I've not met Max yet but the entire station is scared of him. Dillon from forensics sees things most people would never recover from, and yet Max has him running from the room ready to vomit. I was on holiday when Max was last brought in, but I heard Dillon walked out of work and took the week off."

"Max is, um... he's spirited."

"Didn't he get arrested for blasting Ellie Goulding's *Burn* during the middle of a Sunday service?"

"In all fairness, he really did think the church would burn down after he walked in," I point out. "He just wanted the appropriate theme tune."

"Isn't he married?"

I clear my throat. "Yeah, but that's another story."

"Can't wait to hear about it," he banters, tucking a strand of hair behind my ear. "I'm glad you came tonight."

I gulp, unable to hold his gaze. “Yeah, me too. I’ve had fun.”

He shifts in his seat and leans into me. I lift my head, my heart hammering as he leans in closer. And just when he’s about to kiss me, I turn my head to the left so he kisses my cheek.

He quickly pulls back, lowering his gaze. “Yeah, that’s what I thought.”

“I’m sorry...”

He smiles, tapping my chin with his knuckles. “It’s fine. I just wanted to make sure.”

“Look, it’s—”

“Don’t give me the, it’s me, not you speech. You’ll break my heart,” he teases. “I had a feeling you weren’t into this as much as I was. I just wanted to make sure.”

My shoulders drop. “I really am sorry. My life is complicated right now.”

“Ben’s the complication, right?”

My eyes widen. “What? Why would you say that?”

“I’m a policeman. It’s my job to read the room, and trust me, I read the jealousy coming off him.”

“God, I feel like such a fool. I’m so sorry, Jackson. I really am,” I begin. “Things are *complicated*, but we aren’t a couple.”

“I got that part too,” he comments. “It’s okay.”

“It’s not,” I breathe out. “You brought me out to this nice pub, treated me with nothing but respect, and I should have been honest with you. You are a great guy, and believe me, it wasn’t my intention to mess you around.”

“I know. But you aren’t to blame. I picked it up back at your dad’s office but took a chance anyway,” he reveals. “I take it your dad is the reason it’s complicated?”

“I have no idea. It’s all a mess. I don’t even know if I’m ready for more. I keep making the same mistakes.”

“If he knows what’s good for him, he’ll make you his.”

“I’m not a possession,” I tease.

“No, but you are a prize worth winning,” he points out.

I sigh, tilting my head. “Stop being sweet.”

His grin widens. “I’m still hoping you’ll give me a chance.”

“Trust me, if this was any other time in my life, this would be going differently,” I assure him.

My email alert dings, and my brows pinch together as I grab my phone off the table. I thought I put it on silent when I got in the car.

I don’t recognise the sender’s email, but I click on the attachment, and inhale sharply.

“Everything okay?”

I can hear my blood pumping. “I have to go. I’m sorry.”

“What? Is everything okay?” he asks, getting up too.

“I have to go,” I repeat, grabbing my bag.

“Let me take you home,” he offers as I drop some money down on the table. “Hey, this is on me.”

“I’m sorry, but I... I have to go.”

He grabs my hand, tugging me back when I go to leave. “Stop for a minute. What is going on?”

“I... I...” I glance away, unable to say the words.

“Let me go and pay the bill and we’ll leave,” he assures me, handing me back my money.

“Let me pay for some,” I whisper.

“I asked you out on a date. Let me.”

I nod and quietly follow him over to the bar. I hear a few grumbled words to the waitress before we leave. As we reach

the car, I glance over the roof to Jackson.

“Thank you for tonight,” I tell him. “And I’m really sorry we’ve had to cut this short.”

“It’s okay,” he assures me.

But I know it’s not.

Nothing about this is okay.

*** **

Hayden glances up from my phone before passing it to Hope. My cheeks heat at what they’re seeing. Ben has me against the wall, my legs wrapped around him. You can’t see his face, but mine is leaning back, lips parted as I grip his hair. Someone had been standing outside my bedroom window tonight and was taking photos of us. The caption reads, ‘Whore, if you don’t want this getting out, I suggest you do as I ask. I’ll be in touch.’

Someone had been watching me.

They took pictures of us.

And I feel sick to my stomach because there’s only one person it could be.

“One, I love being fucking right. And two, who the fuck sent you that picture? I swear, if Ben put someone up to this, I will fucking kill him.”

“You love his mum’s food too much,” I remind her. “And she doesn’t ban you for eating so much.”

“I’ll make it look like an accident,” she grumbles.

Hope slowly passes me the phone. “I don’t think it was Ben,” she states before meeting my gaze. “And I don’t think you do either.”

I shake my head. “No, I think this was Zach. He came to see me last week, begging me to go back to him because he’s lost everything. It turned heated and...”

“He fucking hit you,” Hayden growls. “Are you fucking serious? I fucking asked you outright and you lied to my fucking face.”

Hope snorts. “You knew she was lying so don’t act like this is new,” she remarks, then meets my gaze. “She called me asking if I knew anything.”

“He said it wasn’t over, that he’s not done. I think this is him. This can’t get out.”

Hayden grabs my phone again, tilting her head. “It’s not revealing anything and you can’t really tell who it is fucking you. It looks more like a cover for a romance novel.”

“Hayden, I don’t want anyone to see this. I don’t care how modest it is.”

“Then we mess with him.”

“And push him to release the picture?” I question. “I’m not pissing him off so he retaliates.”

“He’s doing that anyway,” she argues. “He can’t play with fire and not expect to get burned. He needs to learn his lesson because look what we’ve done already and that wasn’t us even trying.”

I glance at Hope, who shrugs. “I’m with Hayden on this one. It’s bad enough he fucking hit you. He can’t expect you to sit around and wait for the next email.”

“Do you know his passwords?” Hayden asks as she grabs her laptop.

“For what? He’s probably changed everything.”

“He might use the same one for the new email address he’s using. Then we can try his iCloud.”

I write them down on a piece of paper and hand them over to her. Hope looks up from her phone. “He’s at the Tavern.”

“I don’t understand what you want me to do with that information,” I admit, but then a thought occurs to me. “I have an idea that could work without revealing that we know it was him who sent the picture.”

“I’m listening,” Hope replies.

I turn to Hayden. “Did you get in?”

“Yes. This fucking guy is so predictable,” she mutters, typing away. “He only has that one email on there, though. It’s the one he sent to you. And I hate to tell you this, but it’s a screenshot, which means he probably has a recording.”

Which is what I was afraid of.

“Log on to his main email account,” I order. “Then subscribe to every weird mailing list you can find.”

Hope watches me take her laptop off the coffee table. “What are you doing?”

“Logging into his Facebook account and liking every weird fetish page I can find,” I reveal.

Hayden’s eyes widen. “Why have I never thought of doing this before? I should have been doing this to my exes. I mean, it’s genius. Most girls go in strong and write a status. They get locked out of his account. But this way, we can play the long game and keep fucking with him.”

“What is your other idea?” Hope asks. “Cause the look in your eye doesn’t scream, ‘let’s mess with his Facebook’.”

“Well, we can’t break into his house when he’s asleep to get his phone because he’ll get us arrested,” I point out. “But if we go to where he is and make a scene, one of you can snag the phone.”

“I’ve just subscribed him to a ‘Is your girlfriend unsatisfied with your sex life’ blog and a ‘do you have erectile problems’ page.” Hayden announces. “Also, he hasn’t updated his iCloud storage in over a year so it’s not in there. A bunch of dick pictures are though. I’ve just emailed the entire file to everyone in his email address book.”

“Did you not just hear her plan?” Hope demands. “It’s crazy, right?”

Hayden snorts. “We’re Carters, that shit is tame.”

“You think it’s lame?” I ask, unable to hide my disappointment.

She closes the laptop, giving me her full attention. “It depends on how it goes.”

“Trust me?”

“Always.”

“I still think this is a bad idea,” Hope points out. “He hit her if you haven’t forgotten.”

“Nope,” Hayden states and turns to Hope, her expression serious. “I didn’t get a chance to get revenge for Charlotte, so believe me, this fucker is going to pay.”

My heart breaks at the mention of what Charlotte went through. No one deserves what she went through, especially Charlotte. She has the kindest soul.

“It’s not the same as what she went through,” I whisper. “Nowhere close.”

“No? If it walks like a duck and quacks like a duck, it’s a fucking duck,” she argues. “Assault is assault, and like fuck am I letting him get away with hitting you. How your dad hasn’t done anything is surprising. It actually makes me want to punch *him* in the nuts.”

“I think he’s filing for a restraining order.”

She snorts. “What, like a piece of paper is going to send him away? I don’t think so. Guys like Zach need to be put down.”

I notice Hope playing with a rip in her jeans, suddenly distracted. Which only means one thing. “What are you hiding?”

She glances up at my question. “What? I’m not hiding anything.”

“Yes, you are. Spill,” Hayden orders.

Her shoulders drop. “I heard Mum yelling at Dad. Dad and Uncle Evan went around to warn Zach away,” she admits, glancing away.

“And?” I press.

“Dad knew Evan couldn’t get into trouble due to his license and work. And you know a Carter never commits a crime without a solid alibi, so Dad punched Zach a few times.”

Hayden grins. “Who was his alibi?”

She lets out a breath. “A patient at the nursing home.”

Hayden grabs her bag off the sofa. “Now come on, we’ve got somewhere to be.”

“No fighting,” I warn as I grab my shoes.

There is no way I’m getting into trouble over that dickhead.

Not again.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

Imogen

The Tavern is a local pub Zach frequents regularly. It's located close to the university, so it's convenient for him and his friends. I've been here a couple of times with him to see some live bands play. But it isn't my scene. It has always been my least favourite place to go with him because they let any dickhead in with an I.D. There's nothing chill about this place. Even the owners are a mess. The place can get busy, but they drink so much of their own stock, I can't see them making much money.

I throw my coat into the back of my car, and Hayden's eyes widen. "Oh, the coat is coming off. She means business."

I snort. "I'm just taking precautions. I can't move freely in that coat."

Hope presses her hands together. "Maybe we should call Landon. Have him meet us here. It won't take him long."

"And let him have all the fun?" Hayden remarks. "Fuck no."

I shrug, because Hayden has a point. "She's kind of right. Plus, since when did we ever let the guys sort our shit out?"

"I just have a bad feeling," she returns, placing her hand over her stomach.

"I have a good feeling about this, if it makes you feel any better."

Hope gives Hayden a pointed look. "No, it really doesn't."

"Sheesh, you were trying to get the blowtorch not too long ago to burn his house down," Hayden argues. "But this is what you have a problem with?"

Hope pouts. "I could have made it look like an accident."

I link my arm through hers as we begin our trek across the carpark. “It’s going to be fine,” I promise. “I’m not going to do anything that will get us arrested.”

“Because you have a plan,” she replies. “You do have a plan, don’t you?”

“Kind of,” I mumble. “Everyone remember what they need to do?”

“I’ll stand by you because I’m the one he’ll be watching the most,” Hayden grumbles, still unhappy about that.

“And I’ll snag his phone,” Hope adds.

“The one with blue nail varnish on the back,” I remind her. I accidentally used his phone once as a table to do my nails. He never bothered to clean it off because he said it reminded him of me. I thought it was sweet. Now I think it’s creepy.

Hope nods her head sharply. “Blue nail varnish. Got it!”

Hayden fluffs out her hair. “Let’s do this, bitches.”

I blow out a breath as Hayden swings the door open, then breeze inside. As predicted, the place is crowded, but I know he’s still here. We parked next to his car.

There’s no band playing tonight, but the music has been turned up. Both of the owners are sat behind the bar, wasted. She’s barely keeping her head up and her husband is asleep, his face squashing a tray of peanuts. There’s a young waitress holding the fort, and she looks ready to scream at the punters waiting for their drink.

“Jesus Christ,” Hayden whispers. “This place is a shit hole.”

I spot Zach sitting in the corner with a group of friends. A gorgeous brunette is sitting on his lap, and she seems comfortable with him, so he’s definitely known her awhile.

“Ohh, that fucker,” Hope growls low in her throat. “Didn’t take him long.”

“As long as it’s not me he’s paying attention to, I don’t care.”

My strides are angry as I make my way over, my girls at my back. I'm going to use everything I have to my advantage. I know what makes people tick. I know what will make them question Zach and his motives. But more so, I know Zach. I know how he will react.

"You fucking prick!" I scream, making him look in my direction. The girl is immediately pushed out of his lap and into the empty chair next to him.

"Imogen," he greets, warily glancing to Hayden's hand. Probably checking for weapons.

"Hey, guys, don't cause a scene in here," his best friend warns. Chad acts like a pompous prick, but that's all it is. An act. He actually takes school seriously and hates conflict. I think the most he's acted out was when he took a drag of a spliff. But he has never liked me. He doesn't like my family. And the feeling is mutual. His dad is a fucking asshole who thought I was a waitress at an event we all attended for the university.

"*You* can stay out of it," I snap, eyeing him up and down. "I guess you know why I'm here?"

He glances at Zach briefly. "Because he broke up with you and you still want him back?"

And just like I predicted, that is what he told his friends. Which makes this next part easier. Tears gather in my eyes.

"Did he tell you it was because I was pregnant?"

"That's a fucking lie," Zach roars, getting to his feet. His chair tips over, falling to the wooden floor. "Get out of here, Imogen. You don't belong here."

I ignore what he thinks is an insult. I'm glad I don't belong here. "He told me I had to get rid of it when the doctors told us I had chlamydia and it might make the baby have health problems."

"She's fucking lying," he snaps, and goes to grab my arm.

“We don’t want to be doing that,” Hayden sings, reaching for his wrist.

I keep going, knowing I can’t drag this out too long. Someone might phone the police. “Oh, and then he stole from my place of employment and pinned it on me so I would be forced to get rid of our bundle of joy from the oven.”

“Don’t listen to her,” Zach bellows. “She’s just trying to trap me. I’ve moved on and she can’t handle it.”

“And when that didn’t work, he hit me,” I cry, wiping away the tears. “I’m no longer going to have a little Bambi.”

His expression contorts into pure fury. “You are so fucking done.”

I sniffle loudly. “And then he sends dick pictures to my little brother,” I wail. “How? How could you do this to me? I stayed with you even after you told me you liked the dildo going up your arse. I still loved you.”

“Dude,” another guy whistles. “That’s messed up.”

“She’s fucking lying. I’ve never sent any guy a dick picture.”

I whimper. “Check your emails, boys. I wouldn’t put it past him,” I announce, then wipe away a tear that slips down my cheek. “There’s a reason the university expelled him. They found out about it after he sent a picture to one of the professor’s sons.”

“I thought it was because they wanted you in a better school,” Chad notes.

“I’ve never sent any guy a dick pick,” Zach roars, and the crowd in the bar quietens down. “And they do think I’ll be more suitable for a better school.”

“No, you just send them to teenagers,” I screech. “You are a fucking asshole, and soon, the entire world will fucking know.”

“Yeah? And you’ll be the star of Porn Hub if you keep going,” he warns, leaning in to get in my face a little.

When I see Hope snag the phone, I step closer so the others don't overhear. "And I'll add to your charges with revenge porn. The police don't take too kindly to that. Or to peeping Toms. Come at me again and I will come back ten times harder." I clear my throat, faking another snuffle. "No, I will not let you share the video of me fisting you. It took me ages to get the stench of shit off my wrist."

He goes for me but Hayden is quicker, pushing him back until he crashes into the table. "Get your friend some serious help. People tend to end up in nut houses when I get involved," Hayden warns.

She takes my hand as I take Hope's. We race out of the pub, my heart racing.

"Imogen," Zach roars, his voice echoing over the car park. I chance a glance back, seeing him staggering out of the bar. "Get back here."

I hold my hands out wide. "Why? So you can bullshit some more?"

"You need to go back inside and tell them you're lying," he warns.

"No. You fucking recorded me, Zach. I thought you couldn't get any lower but then you pulled that shit."

"You fucking deserve it," he bellows. "Fucking *him*. Really? After everything he's done. You let him use you like the slut you are. I fucking knew you were cheating."

"*You deserve it*," I whine. "Listen to yourself, for fuck's sake. And news flash, we aren't together. It's not cheating."

"Get in the car," Hayden whispers, and I feel her hand in my pocket, grabbing my keys.

"Should I call Landon?" Hope asks, keeping her voice low.

"No, we've got this," Hayden promises. "Just get in the car."

Zach throws his arms out. "You fucking broke up with me on our anniversary."

“My birthday,” I scream. “It was my fucking birthday.”

“You got me kicked out of university,” he fires back, smouldering with resentment.

“Actually, I did that,” Hayden reminds him sweetly.

“Then you get me arrested,” he spits, briefly glowering at Hayden.

“You got yourself arrested,” I remark sharply, clenching my hands into fists.

“My parents are selling my house,” he argues.

“Boo hoo,” I snap when he draws closer. “How did I not see how much of a pussy you are?”

“You fucking bitch,” he roars, taking a predatory step towards me.

Everything happens so quickly. I take two steps back, my heart racing, and he takes one forward. His face is contorted in rage, the veins in neck and temples bulging as he goes to grab me.

Hayden pushes him away, but he’s ready for it this time. And with force I didn’t know he had, he pushes her back. My breath hitches as she stumbles, falling to the ground with a thud.

And then I see what caused her to fall and the blood drains from my face. Fury vibrates through me as I step closer. “Are you out of your goddamn mind?” I scream, whirling on him.

“I... I...”

“You broke her goddamn fucking heel, you animal,” I scream and charge towards him.

He turns to run, but it doesn’t stop me. I jump on his back, grabbing his head in a choke hold. “You fucking dickhead.”

“Let me go, you crazy bitch,” he yells, and I notice Hayden slamming my boot closed, her feet now bare.

“Oh shit,” I whisper when I see her glitter painted bat in her hand.

When the fuck did she put that in my car?

“You broke my fucking heel,” she screeches, and I jump off his back as she swings the bat at his knees. He drops to the floor quicker than I do. “They are my favourite fucking pair.”

“Fucking hell,” he roars as the bat lands across his back.

“You think you’re a big man when you’re laying hands on a defenceless woman?” she taunts. “How big do you feel now?”

I wince as she smashes the bat across his arse. He smashes into the tarmac, his mouth open.

“Don’t ever lay your hands on a fucking Carter again.”

He spits dirt and stones from his mouth. “She’s not a Carter.”

She whacks the bat against his stomach. “Yes, she fucking is.” She spits on the ground next to him. “Let’s go.”

I follow, moving over to the driver’s side. “Don’t fuck with me again, Zach.”

“You still love me. You need me,” he remarks from the ground.

“I don’t need anyone,” I fire back.

I slide into the car and peel out of the car park before he has the chance to get up.

Hayden begins to laugh from the passenger side. “That shit was better than starting a brawl.”

“Oh my god, did you see his face when I said about the dick pictures?” I splutter out.

“The dick pictures?” Hope creases. “What about the pregnancy bomb? I nearly forgot why we were there.”

“And the clap,” Hayden hollers, then begins to howl. “We need to go get drunk.”

“What about the picture and video?” I ask, glancing at Hope in the rear-view mirror.

“Um, did you want to keep the video?” she asks, biting her lip.

“No,” I complain. “What made you think I would want it?”

“Good, because I erased everything.”

“Everything? How much stuff did he have of us on there?”

“About twenty photos and a ten-minute video,” she imparts.

“Ten minutes?” Hayden chokes out, before bursting into fits of laughter.

“It was fifteen actually, and hot as fuck,” I argue.

“I only saw about five seconds of it but he looks like he fucks hard,” Hope observes. “Imogen seemed to be enjoying it.”

I can feel Hayden’s stare. “So he knows what he’s doing?”

I smirk as I take the next right. “Yes. Definitely.”

“Lucky bitch,” Hope breathes, and I catch her falling back against the chair. “Do you think Zach will phone the police on us?”

“Not unless he wants my bat up his arse,” Hayden threatens.

“When the fuck did you get that in my boot?” I ask. “You never left our sight once at Hope’s.”

“I’m always prepared. Why are you acting so shocked?”

“Oh my god. Did you put the bat in my boot when I got to Hope’s? You went back to the car for your jacket,” I note. She had arrived at the same time as I did. Jackson had dropped me home so I could get my car. The goodbye had been awkward and fast, and after, I got changed into jeans and messaged Hope and Hayden to meet me at Hope’s. She took one look at

me and said she needed to grab her jacket. “How did you even know to bring it? We didn’t even know we were going to visit Zach.”

Hope sits forward, placing her head between the two seats. “You totally knew we were going to fuck someone up.”

“When a girl calls you to meet up after a date with a hot guy, you know something bad went down. Admittedly, I thought we were going to be fucking Jackson up. I thought he might have gotten a bit handsy or something.”

My eyes widen. “You would have beaten a policeman for me?”

“He was off duty,” she snorts. “And it’s not like we’d get caught. We never get caught.”

“We mostly get caught,” I remind her.

“Mostly is just as good as never,” she argues. “And the bat came in handy so I don’t know why we’re arguing about this.”

“Oh, we aren’t arguing. Just wondering how you always know what to bring.”

Hayden grins. “I’m a—”

“A Carter, we know,” both Hope and I state simultaneously.

“Let’s just go get drunk. If we hurry, we can drink enough before closing to make that happen.”

I take the next left, a wide smile on my face. Hayden might be called heartless, immature, and even a psycho, but to us, she’s the best. She’s loyal as hell—unless it involves food. Then she’ll let you starve.

Tonight, she came through for me. And I wouldn’t have gotten through all of that without her.

I just hope Zach has learnt his lesson. Because she wasn’t joking when she told them she sends people to the nut house.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

Ben

The icy wind cuts into my face when I head outside. I rub my hands together, wishing I had picked up my gloves.

A neighbour from the floor below mine is walking towards me, wrapped up in a thick coat, gloves, and a scarf. “There’s some rich kid standing next to your car,” she announces. “Think he’s in the wrong place?”

“No idea,” I reply, glancing to where my car is parked.

Fucking Zach.

“Well, be careful,” she warns, her throat hoarse from all the cigarettes she smokes.

“Will do,” I confirm, shoving my hands into my pockets as I make my way over to Zach. He’s got a nasty bruise under his eye. “There a reason you’re leaning against my ride?”

If it had been my bike, we’d be having problems right now.

“You should stay away from Imogen.”

I duck my head briefly, before smirking at the fool. “Really?”

“Yes. She’s not who you think she is.”

“And, pray tell, who do I think she is?”

“She’s a fucking liar. She will get you in her grasp and then fuck you over.”

“Zach, you’re the one who fucked her over. She broke up with you. She didn’t steal from you. She didn’t cause you to lose your job. You did that shit.”

“She’s a whore.”

“No, she’s fucking not. And if you don’t want another black eye to match that one, I’d shut up now.”

“Yeah, she fucking is. She recorded you two having sex and sent it to me to make me jealous. Does that sound like a goodie two shoes to you?”

I grab his jacket in my fist. “If I were you, I would forget her name. You don’t get to come around here and spread fucking shit.”

“Don’t believe me? Ask her,” he demands as I let him go. “She’ll probably come up with some lie about me recording it knowing her. She’s sick in the head.”

“Yeah... Then why the fuck can’t you leave her alone?”

“She ruined my fucking life,” he spits out. “People need to know the truth about her.”

“Funny you say that. Because I’m sure her dad was telling me the other day that you were at her house, begging for her back.”

He shrugs, still not catching on to the fact I don’t believe a fucking word he’s saying. “I can love her and hate her at the same time. We’ve been together a seriously long time. I know she still loves me and wants me back.”

“She broke up with you,” I remind him.

“I broke up with her actually. Yeah, there was a moment when I thought I made a mistake, but now I can see it wasn’t. Don’t make the same mistake I did,” he warns.

“Yeah, I’m late for work. Don’t come here again,” I tell him, and push past him to get into my car.

“I’m warning you man to man,” he swears. “Don’t go near her.”

With one leg in the car and one hand on the open door, I turn to face him. “There’s only one favour you can do for me, and that’s to fuck off. Leave her alone. The next time I see you hanging around my place, you won’t be as lucky as you are today. Now fuck off.”

As I slide into the car, he leans in close. “Don’t say I didn’t fucking warn you.” I slam the door closed, and he

barely moves out of the way in time. “You fucking prick. You almost took my head off.”

“Almost being the key word,” I call back, and put the car into reverse.

Thanks to him, I will no longer be a few minutes late. I’ll be twenty minutes late. Last night, my mind had been on what I was going to say to Imogen today, so I couldn’t sleep. Then I had been too exhausted to hear my alarm.

I want her. I want her so badly, I’m ready to go against the one person who believed in me. Who helped me out of a tricky situation.

All for her.

I can’t go a day without thinking about her. Not even alcohol can get rid of the taste of her. She thinks I only want a good time but she couldn’t be further from the truth.

Imogen is an uncontrollable force, and I made the mistake of trying to control the situation. In the end, all I did was make it worse. I *was* afraid to be with her, but now I’m afraid to lose her. This is a dangerous game we’re playing. I can’t just roll the dice and take a chance. My life could be turned upside down. She’s worth it right now, however this could just be the attraction of wanting something you can’t have.

That’s the chance I’m scared to take.

And Zach...

The crap he said about Imogen recording us whilst we were having sex is bullshit. She’d never do something like that. She may have a revengeful streak but only to those who deserve it. And she’d never bear the brunt of it, which is why I know she didn’t send Zach jack shit. She would know he’d post that shit all over social media.

I pull up at work, taking the first empty space I can find to park. She needs to know about this. I’ve met guys like Zach before. They are either scarily obsessed and get to a point of, if I can’t have you, no one will, or they feel like they are owed something and will do anything to get it. Both are dangerous as fuck. And Imogen is the target.

I get out of the car and lock it behind me. Scanning the carpark, I notice everyone is here. And the last time everyone was here together, a guy got fired. He fell asleep during a night shift and didn't do the right checks. A woman's home got broken into and she was beaten badly.

As I let myself in through the side door, there's a lot of chatter coming from the main room. Everyone turns at my arrival and begins to clap and cheer like the greeting committee.

"Did I get stabbed again?" I ask, arching a brow.

"No, you're fucking late. Again," Evan replies. "Don't make this a pattern."

"Sorry. I had to get rid of an unwanted guest."

He holds out a bin. "Pick a piece of paper out. It's for secret Santa."

"I thought we weren't doing that again this year?" I voice, my gaze falling on Paul. His wife nearly divorced him last year because Dean—the new guy at the time—bought him lingerie and his wife thought he had been cheating. Evidently, Dean had swapped with another member of the team and they had pranked him and wrote Paula on the note.

"Yeah, well, there are new rules. Spend what you want but it has to be twenty pound or over. No getting any kind of underwear. No swapping and changing names," Evan demands, his gaze falling on Levi. "Nothing that will cause distress to a partner, and for fuck's sake, open it before you get home."

Harris rubs his upper lip, hiding his amusement. "And if any of you fuckers get me, I don't drink cheap fucking whisky."

"Now get back to work," Evan demands.

I run my gaze over the room, searching for Imogen. When everyone begins to break off from the huddle, I spot her hiding in the doorway to her dad's office.

I shove the piece of paper into my pocket and make my way over. “We need to talk,” I whisper when I reach her.

She brushes past me, heading for the desk nearest her dad’s office. “We said all that needed to be said on Friday, when you came over to ruin my date.”

I scoff. “With Jackson? Please. You’re too good for him.”

She drops a pile of paperwork on the desk before moving on to the next. “Get lost, Ben. I’m working.”

“Oh no, you pissed her off already, Ben?” Levi teases.

I roll my eyes. “No.”

“Yes,” she replies.

Thankfully, Paul isn’t sitting at his desk when she moves down, so I lean in. “I had a visitor this morning.”

Her brows pinch together as she spares me a glance. “Why are you telling me? Was I meant to greet them or something?”

“It was Zach,” I tell her.

Her cheeks lose their colour. After making sure no one is paying attention, she steps closer. “Zach was at yours this morning?”

“Yes, and we need to talk,” I answer and grab her wrist. “We need privacy.”

I head towards the back to take the side door, but as we reach the hall, Evan steps out of his office. “Going somewhere so soon?”

I drop Imogen’s arm as fast as humanly possible. “Um...”

Imogen’s soft laughter has the hairs on the nape of my neck standing on end. “No need to get embarrassed, Ben. Dad will understand. He often asks me for advice on what to get Mum for Christmas.” She moves to stand next to her dad, leaning into him. “Is it okay if Ben and I step outside? He wants to show me some potential gifts he got for his sisters.”

Realisation dawns on his expression and he places his hand on my shoulder. “Been there, son. I always left Kennedy in charge of my sister’s gifts. I always messed up.”

“Yeah, but I bet she didn’t throw it back at you when you messed up,” I partially lie to keep up the pretence.

“Uh, no, she didn’t. Don’t be long ‘cause we need you on the fraud case stat. The client needs us to speed it up before the guy catches on to the fact we’re looking into him.”

“We won’t be long,” I promise him.

Imogen takes the lead, grabbing her coat off the hook by the door before stepping outside. I watch as she scans the car park before her gaze falls on my car and she makes her way over.

“Where are you going?” I call. “Are we leaving?”

“I just lied to my dad in there,” she snaps. “The least we can do is make it look like we’re looking at presents. Open your boot.”

I rub the back of my neck. “Yeah. Okay.”

I do, flipping the switch on my keys. As she reaches the back, her eyes widen at whatever she sees. I glance down, unable to see what has her stepping back.

“Are you a serial killer?”

“What?” I ask, not expecting that to come out of her mouth.

“You’ve got tarp, rope, and a shovel. And I’m pretty sure that sheet has blood on it.” I lean against the wall, laughing hard. “It’s not funny.”

“Imogen, the tarp is for my mum’s garden,” I splutter out. “I was helping her with it before the ground freezes. The blood is because I cut myself cutting up some wood. And it’s still in my car because, if you’ve forgotten, I did get stabbed.”

“Right.”

“Zach was waiting for me by my car this morning,” I reveal. “How he knew which one was mine is worrying.”

She sits on the edge of my boot with a sigh. “What did he want?”

“That’s why I wanted to speak to you. He is under the impression there’s a video circulating of us, and I was hoping you could explain that?”

“It’s not what you think. And it’s sorted. I’ve deleted it so you don’t have to worry about it.”

My jaw drops because I hadn’t expected that. I feel like I’m standing in front of a stranger, because the Imogen I know wouldn’t have done that. “Are you fucking kidding me?” I growl.

“We’ve sorted it. You don’t have to worry about it.”

“Worry about it? You recorded us having sex, Imogen, so yeah, I’m fucking worried. What gave you the right to do that?” She gets to her feet, straightening her back. Her nose crinkles as her lips press together. “What gave you the right to send it to your ex-boyfriend? I was a fucking fool for not believing him.”

“Are you finished?” she remarks sharply.

“Not by a long shot,” I reply.

“I didn’t send the video. I didn’t record it. Zach did. And during my dinner date last night, he felt the need to send it to me and blackmail me. He said if I didn’t do as I was told, he would send it to people and that he would be in touch.”

“Fuck!” I hiss. “He’s fucking dead.”

“No. It’s done.”

“It’s far from fucking done,” I growl.

She rolls her eyes heavenward. “I’ve seen this movie before. Whatever you’re thinking of doing, don’t. Two wrongs don’t make a right. All it does is form a circle of retaliation and I don’t have time for that. I don’t want to make time for it. I’ve made my point, and if he decides to do shit again, I’ll deal with it my way. I’ll keep playing the Uno reverse card on him until he gives in. But I’ll be damned if I play a part in keeping the toxic cycle going.”

“He fucking recorded us, Imogen. You have no idea how many laws he’s broken by doing it. He doesn’t get to walk away from this. This isn’t just about you now. It’s about me.”

She snorts. “Are you seriously that scared that someone will find out you slept with me?” Her gaze runs over my body. “Don’t worry, your secret is safe with me.”

“That’s not what I’m worried about, Imogen, but this is fucking serious. He came to my home and told me to stay away from you. He’s telling me I don’t know you. He’s clearly not thinking straight, which is dangerous, Imogen.”

“This isn’t my fault,” she rasps. “I never asked for any of this.”

I place my hands on her shoulders, ducking down a little to meet her gaze. “I know it’s not your fault. It’s all his. But if you think this is a game to him, it’s not. I never pegged you as stupid. He’s watching you. He didn’t get lucky getting that video, Imogen. He didn’t accidentally come across it. He’s not in the right frame of mind. And he’ll either become obsessed with you to the point he hurts you, or it will end up being a case of, if he can’t have you, no one will.”

She shoves my hands off her shoulders. “Don’t do that. Don’t call me stupid and speak to me like I’m some naïve little girl.”

My eyebrows lower. “That’s not what I’m saying, Imogen. And I’m sorry if that’s how it came across. But we need to go to the police about this.”

“No! No one can know about this, Ben. No one. I mean it. They’ll have to recover the picture and video, and I can’t stomach the thought of someone seeing it. I’m still reeling over the fact it was recorded.”

Her lower lip trembles as she bows her head. And I feel like a prick. I step closer. “I’m sorry. I didn’t look at it from that perspective.”

She swipes at her cheek, unable to look at me. “It’s like he’s a different person. The Zach I thought I knew wouldn’t

have done something like this. I thought our friendship would always come first.”

“I can’t answer that for you. Love can be painful. It can hurt. But you don’t set out to destroy that person. That’s not love,” I admit, before stepping close. I take her hands in mine and she lifts her head. “I do understand why he couldn’t jump back into being friends. Because as much as I treasure our friendship, I want it all, Imogen. I want you. I want us.” I lean down until our lips are a breath away. “I want a relationship. But there are things you need to understand.”

She pulls her hands back with an exhale. Her expression crumbles into agony as she steps aside, leaving the space in front of me empty. “I can’t do this, Ben. I just can’t. You say you want these things, but nothing has changed. You are clearly holding something back, and until that’s no longer an issue, we can’t do this. We can’t.”

Her heels click against the tarmac as she makes her way back inside. I sit down on the edge of the boot, dropping my head into my hands.

“Fuck!”

I should have been honest with her from the beginning. I shouldn’t have lied and said it was just sex.

Because it’s more than sex.

It’s her.

And I have no idea how to make this right between us.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

Imogen

A silver Honda pulls into the private carpark at my dad's work. I take a step down to greet George, but he's not the only one who gets out of the car. Laura is with him, and she's holding a laptop and a backpack.

"Hey," I greet, then glance to Laura. "Is everything okay? I didn't expect to see you."

"We need your help," George dramatically declares. "The launch is going to shit."

"It's not going to shit," Laura scolds, giving him the side-eye. "It's just hitting a few snags."

"They still need her help," George mutters.

I love his loyalty. He's still pissed that they fired me, but he has no reason to be. They did what they had to, and I can't begrudge them for that.

"Come on in out of the cold," I offer, rushing up the steps to open the door. "And ignore the brutes if they try to speak to you."

"Brutes?" she questions, and I hear her steps come to a stop.

"You'll be fine," I promise her.

"I'm intrigued."

I hold the door open for them and the complaints begin. "Shut the door!"

"Were you born in a barn?"

"We have company," I yell, startling Laura as I close the door behind them. "Be on your best behaviour."

Laura gulps. "Maybe we should meet up later?"

"You stole company property," George blurts out. "You might need to beg Imogen for a job soon so I would get used

to them now.”

My eyes widen as I come to a stop at the edge of the main room. “You stole the laptop?” I whisper. I knew it looked familiar but I didn’t want to assume.

Her cheeks flush red. “Yes. But I wouldn’t have done it if it wasn’t vital. I’ve poured my blood, sweat and tears into this project and I am not going to let it fall apart because a group of men think they are the better sex and know everything.”

“Marry me,” Dean pleads.

She gapes when she realises the room is crowded. I notice Ben, who was talking to Dad before I went out to meet George, stop to see what is going on.

“Piss off, Dean. She’s too good for you.”

“Can I have your number?” Levi asks.

“Oh my god,” George whispers. “I’ve landed in dick heaven.”

“George,” Laura scolds under her breath.

“I have a boyfriend. I have a boyfriend,” he chants.

“Dad, we’re going to sit in the staff room,” I tell him as he begins to walk over.

“Is everything okay? I thought you were having lunch with a friend?”

“Um, yeah. This is George. George, this is my dad,” I introduce.

George holds out his hand, his lips parted. “Nice to meet you. Imogen has told me a lot about you.”

George doesn’t let go of his hand, and I can see my dad trying to get free. “George, you might want to let go of my dad’s hand.”

“I have a boyfriend,” George blurts out, dropping Dad’s hand.

Dad’s eyes crinkle in the corners. “And I’m married.”

George sighs heavily. “A damn shame.”

“Oh good god,” Laura groans.

I elbow George in the gut and he grunts. “Wipe your chin,” I whisper. “And this is Laura. She works with George at Castle and Games. She’s just come to pick my brain.”

“But you don’t work there,” he reminds me.

I roll my eyes. “I know. But I’m not going to say no to helping them.”

He crosses his arms over his chest and I hear George whimper. “They fired you, Imogen.”

“And it wasn’t personal, Dad. It was business. You should understand that running your own. I messed up. This is the consequence.”

“Zach messed up,” he argues.

I shrug. “Yeah, well. He wouldn’t have been there if it wasn’t for me.”

He leans down to give me a kiss on the cheek. “All right. I’ll drop it. Enjoy your lunch.”

I beam up at him. “Thank you, Dad.”

As I turn to leave, he calls me back. “Do you know why Ben wants a bunch of security equipment?”

I shake my head, wondering why he’s asking me.

Does he know something is going on between me and Ben?

I clear my throat. “You’d have to ask him.”

“He’s already left to install it.”

“Then I can’t help you, I’m sorry.”

But then our conversation from earlier comes back to me.

He’s been watching you.

“All right. I’ll be in my office if you need me.”

I turn to my guests. “Just go through that door there.”

“Everything okay?” George asks.

“Yeah, I’m just going to grab my bag.” I tell them. I don’t wait for them to reply before rushing down the centre of the room to my desk. My bag doesn’t look like it’s been touched, but this is what they are trained to do. They are meant to go unnoticed. I search through the contents, and my keys are nowhere in sight.

That sly mother fucker.

I grab my phone and fire off a quick text.

Imogen: You’d better not be anywhere near my house, Ben. I mean it. Leave it alone.

Dean holds his hand out with a piece of paper. “Give this to your hot friend.”

I snatch it off him, ball it up, and throw it at him. “No!”

“Why?” he whines.

“Because the last girl you slept with went psycho.”

“What does that have to do with me? I can’t be held accountable for her issues.”

I lean down over the desk. “Her issue was that you slept with her sister.”

Paul laughs. “She has you there.”

Dean has the audacity to look affronted. “How was I meant to know?”

“They were twins,” Levi replies before I can.

“Identical ones,” I add.

He holds his hands up. “All right. All right.”

I leave the men to tease him and head into the staff room. George is just setting the last of the food containers down.

“That smells amazing,” I moan. “Sometimes I wonder if it’s the food I miss the most. All they have here are protein bars and out of date pot noodles.”

“Well, fill up. We have a longer lunch today,” George announces.

“What did you need my help with?”

Laura opens up her laptop, and it immediately lights up. “First, this. The game is glitching here and no one can figure out why.”

She points to the level in which the character needs to hit the red hidden button in order to gain entrance to a concealed bunker. I already tabbed this issue for the engineers to fix. “I already flagged this. They’ve tried attaching it to the current game and that’s not how it works. They need to do it so it’s like opening a new tab on the web. The code they have there has errors in it. Which is why when you press it, it erases all of your progress and you need to start again.”

She’s already jotting everything I say down, and my brows pinch together when her notes become unreadable. George grins as he swallows his food. “Don’t bother commenting on her writing. She understands it.”

Laura lifts her head. “Huh?”

I grin. “It doesn’t matter,” I assure her.

“I wasn’t expecting it to be solved that quickly,” she admits. “It has everyone stumped and none of them are prepared to admit that they messed up.”

“Sounds about right,” I mumble. “What are the other things?”

She pushes the notes aside and brings out a folder. “I read through all of your notes, and I swear, I followed each instruction to the letter, but no one has signed up for the demo launch.”

“You need to send invitations,” I tell her.

She taps her pen against the table relentlessly. “I did. Twice.”

I shake my head and point to the list of emails she has. “You sent them an email. They’ll think it’s spam. My plan had been to organise a demo party. Send invitations out to them and have a small gathering.”

“But we’re having a launch party.”

“I know. But this isn’t for a launch. And you don’t need to do anything big. The second-floor venue hall has the space for this. Set up a meet and greet. You have well-known voice actors who would love to attend. Have the invitations set up as VIP, and I bet you will have a full R.S.V.P. attendance.”

She pinches the bridge of her nose. “I don’t have time for this. How can I organise this in a just over a week when I have the launch to prepare for?”

“Right,” I begin and grab her pad and pen. “Laura, you will need to make sure the hall is free. Then call this number for tables, chairs and equipment. There is a budget set aside for this.” I write down all the things she will need. Including screens. “Have a few stations set up where people can play the demo.”

She places her hand over the pad. “Just help me do this. Please. I will pay you myself.”

“I’m happy to help where I can but I can’t take full control. I’m banned from the building if you remember. But I’ll do everything I can to lessen the load.”

She nods, placing her hand in her lap. “Okay.”

“I will get the invitations made up. I know a great designer,” I offer. “You can pay her when she’s sent the template.”

“Will people turn up on such short notice?” George asks.

“I can’t guarantee it, but we can always add a QR code for the R.S.V.P. They can either attend the event in person and pick up a goody bag whilst they are there or they can have it sent out to them. But personally, I think they’ll want to go sooner. Free stuff always lures people in. You should see what other merchandise you can scrounge up for the game to add into the bags. Which I can help put together at mine. You’ll just need to add the demos in at the company.”

“We have some pens, postcards with discount codes, gloves and headsets. Someone actually over ordered so we have plenty. And I think there are a few hoodies and T-shirts lying around.”

“Perfect,” I reply. “You already have a catering service on site so all you need to do is hire a bar for the night. I can send you a recommendation later.”

“This is amazing of you,” she breathes.

“It’s not a problem,” I tell her before glancing at George. “You need to call the voice actors and see who can confirm for the date you choose. I can’t get the invitations made up until we know who has confirmed.”

He quickly gets out his phone, probably adding it to his calendar. “On it.”

As we talk more about the party, the pang in my chest grows. I miss working there. I miss George. And yeah, Laura. We might not have been close but I still liked her. I’ve learned a huge lesson throughout all of this though. You cannot trust anyone.

The door flies open and Hayden and Mark come stumbling inside, like dogs after a treat.

“Food!” Mark breathes.

“I was here first,” Hayden snaps, and pushes him out of the way.

“I brought plenty,” George offers warily, pushing the food closer.

“What are you doing here?” I ask.

Hayden pokes Mark in the ribs. “She’s talking to you.”

“She could be asking you too,” he snaps as he takes the container of tikka.

“I don’t need to explain myself. She likes me.”

“She likes me too,” he argues.

“Guys, these are my cousins. Mark and Hayden. Hayden actually works at the radio station you guys have on in the staff room.”

“Oh my god, I knew I recognised your voice,” George gushes. “You helped me get revenge on my ex-boyfriend. He

cheated on me with a yoga instructor whilst I was nursing his sick nan to health. I had to wipe her arse.”

Hayden’s eyes widen. “I remember. I told you to give him that tablet that makes your junk stink.”

“The one you gave to Liam?” Mark asks, scrunching his nose up.

“Yeah. Whoever made that shit was clearly someone scorned,” she replies.

“I did,” George boasts. “And the laxative worked a treat. My neighbour was in his yoga class and she said he shat himself.”

Hayden high-fives him. “Love it. I don’t get to hear about the aftermath often.”

“I need you to sign the merch T-shirt I got from your store. I’ll give it to Imogen the next time we meet up.”

“Hey, give me your number. You can bring it the next time we go out.”

There is hero worship in his eyes. “I so wish I wasn’t gay,” he murmurs.

She grins. “I like you too, pooch.”

He turns to me. “She called me pooch.”

I roll my eyes before turning to my cousins, who are close to demolishing the food. “So... are you going to explain what you are doing here?”

Hayden gives Mark a pointed look. He snorts. “I came to give your dad some cookies Mum made.”

“I didn’t see any cookies,” Hayden states, staring at him.

“They kind of got eaten, and I completely forgot I didn’t need to come until I got here. Then I smelled food.”

“And you?” I question Hayden. “Not that I mind. Just curious.”

“Oh, I came to let you know Zach won a box of sex toys.”

I choke on the mini pizza I just put in my mouth. “What?”

“Isn’t Zach the guy who screwed you over and stole from work?” Laura asks. “I thought you broke up?”

Hayden grins as she reaches over to take a fry out of Laura’s tray. “Oh, they did. But no one gets away with messing with a Carter.”

George’s eyebrows rise to his hairline. “I thought your last name was Smith?”

“Legally she is. But she’s a Carter at heart,” Hayden replies, not picking up on the fact both of them are completely freaked out.

“Why does she want to know he won a box of sex toys?” Mark asks, just as clueless as the other two.

“Because we entered him into a competition,” Hayden announces. “A few. I can’t believe the fucker actually won.”

I splutter out a laugh. “He’s going to be so freaked out.”

“He’ll be more than that when he realises we hacked his marketing page on Facebook and he’s now paying for sex ads.”

“Please marry me,” George pleads.

“I’m already spoken for, sorry,” she reveals, continuing to search through the food for more.

“I love you!” I tell her, pulling her in for a hug.

“Why are you hugging me?” she grouches.

“Because you are the best,” I tell her as I pull back. “Hopefully he backs off now.”

“He’s still bothering you?” George asks.

“Fucker hit her,” Hayden blurts out without thinking. Her eyes widen when she realises what she said. “Shit!”

“He did fucking what?” Mark roars. “He fucking hit you?”

“Calm down,” I plead, glancing to the door. I don’t want anyone knowing.

“He fucking hit you?”

“Who fucking hit you?” Ben demands.

Hayden glances up from her food but doesn't turn around. “Oh, look who cares.”

“Zach hit you?” he demands.

“I'm asking the questions,” Mark snaps.

“Maybe we should go,” Laura announces.

“Yeah, um, let me pack up—”

“The food stays,” Hayden orders, and George slowly moves away from the table.

“I'll speak to you later,” I promise before turning to Laura. “And I'll email you later.”

“I fucking knew something was up,” Ben growls. “Why didn't you say anything?”

“Because it doesn't matter,” I argue.

“Yeah, it fucking does,” he snaps back.

“I'm going. I'll catch you later,” Mark declares.

“Wait, no. You can't do anything, Mark. I mean it. And you can't say anything to the others,” I yell after him, before glaring at Hayden. “Seriously?”

“It slipped out,” she states, holding her hands up.

“Have you gone to the police?” Ben questions.

“No. Because I just want this to be over,” I breathe out.

“Are you serious? You are enabling toxic behaviour, Imogen. He needs to be stopped.”

“He's fucking lashing out because he's hurt,” I yell. “He'll be over it soon.”

“If you say so,” Hayden grumbles.

“I never pegged you as that girl,” Ben utters.

“Ohh, we don't want to be going there,” Hayden sings. “Say what you must, but if you disrespect my girl, I will have your balls.”

“I’m not scared of you, Hayden. Your threats mean shit to me. And out of everyone, you should have her back,” he rages.

She gets out of her chair so fast, I don’t get the chance to tell her to leave it. “You really want to do this?”

I get up from my chair, stepping between them. “Stop it! Both of you. I want to deal with this in my own way,” I growl before turning to Ben. “If I needed your opinion, I would have asked for it.”

He turns from Hayden to me. “You can say whatever you want about this not being my business. But you’re wrong. *You* are my business. And I’m not going to sit on the sidelines and watch you get hurt over and over.”

“Maybe it’s my punishment,” I state, glancing away.

He runs the back of his hand down my cheek. “I think you are punishing yourself enough.”

He leaves, and my shoulders drop as I collapse back into the chair. Hayden follows, resuming her lunch. “You two are totally gonna fuck again.”

“Shut up!” I order under my breath.

How did my life become this messy? I hate drama—love watching it, but hate being a part of it.

And now I’m at the centre of it.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

Ben

Even on her night off, my *mamma* still can't leave well enough alone. She has the next best cook in the country working for her yet she still keeps leaving the table to check on everything.

It's Isabella's birthday and we are all sat around the large table at the far end of my *mamma's* restaurant. Our grandparents, uncles, aunts and cousins are here. All of them are digging into the starters *Mamma* helped bring out with the waitresses.

Carina leans into me. "Are you okay, *mio fratello*? You've been distant all evening."

I force a smile. "I'm fine."

"No, brother, you aren't. Please talk to me. I worry."

"There's someone who needs my help but they won't take it. I'm worried they're in danger."

"Danger? What kind of danger?"

"There is someone she didn't mean to upset. Someone who is now going out of his way to make her life hell."

"Imogen?" she whispers, meeting my gaze. "You're talking about Imogen?"

"Yes," I reply.

"Then you need to ignore what she thinks she needs. Imogen is strong, but sometimes that can be her weakness. She believes she can handle everything, but a person can only take on so much."

"I know. He's been watching her. He recorded her during, um... an intimate moment, and then tried to use it against her. He's tried to get her arrested and he's hurt her."

"He hurt her?"

“I found out today. It’s taking everything in me not to go to his house and confront him.”

She takes my hand under the table. “Brother, you can’t do that. You can’t get in trouble with the police.”

“I know. Which is why I’m in a foul mood. I want to kill him. But I know him. He’ll happily go to the police and get me arrested.”

“Then you need to make sure the police are focused on him. You have to get them to see what he is like.”

“She won’t let me go to the police.”

“What are you two talking about?” Mum asks.

“Imogen!” Isabella answers loudly.

My eyes widen because there is no way she heard us talking from where she’s sitting. “What?”

“Imogen,” she repeats, this time pointing to the other end of the table.

I turn, and sure enough, Imogen is standing there, grimacing as she glances at the balloons and decorations. “Sorry. I completely forgot you were having a party.”

“Come sit. Eat,” Mum orders.

“I actually only came to see Ben, if that’s okay?”

“*Si*. But then you sit, our *amate* Imogen,” Mum orders.

She nods, not attempting to fight, and makes her way down the table. Mum makes Uncle Leo move down a chair to fit Imogen in next to me.

She leans down. “Can we talk in private for a minute?”

I nod, pushing back in my chair. “*Mamma*, we’re going to use your office for a moment. Imogen needs to talk to me quickly about a private work matter.”

“Don’t be long,” she demands and resumes her conversation with our aunt from our dad’s side.

“Happy birthday, Isabella,” Imogen calls, before grabbing my plate of starters. “I’ll be taking this.”

I let her lead the way, and my stomach grumbles as she eats my chicken wrap. It's my favourite too. It has slices of chicken, DeLallo roasted pepper bruschetta, arugula, provolone cheese, tomato, DeLallo artichoke bruschetta, black olives and red onion, topped with a Balsamic glaze. It's mouth-watering.

And Imogen Smith is wolfing it down.

"I was looking forward to eating that," I grouch as we enter the office.

She sets the plate down on the desk and whirls on me. "You put security cameras up outside my home."

"He's watching you," I bite out. "I also installed a doorbell camera, so the next time he hits you, we can take the proof to the police."

"I was getting to that," she snaps. "But first, the cameras. It's a breach of my privacy, Ben. How could you do that knowing what Zach has just done to me?"

"I'm nothing like that boy," I growl, stepping closer. "I didn't do it to make you feel like this. I want you to feel safe."

"He's not going to hurt me. He isn't like that. He's just upset right now."

I shake my head in disappointment. "That boy has been obsessed with you since before you even realised he existed. Look at what he's done whilst upset. Now imagine what he'll do when he hits anger. You are still seeing him as the boy you knew. But he's not that person anymore. I don't think he ever was. He's showing narcissistic behaviour and has done a good job in gaslighting you. You are so quick to blame yourself, and you have no reason to."

"No, I'm not blaming myself for what he's done. He did that. Not me. But I did hurt him and I can take responsibility for that."

"Why, Imogen? Why? You did nothing to him."

"Because I was in love with you," she screams as tears slip down her cheeks. "He knew. And we got together because

I thought it would help erase you from my mind.”

“I know. He did too. That’s on him,” I state, stepping closer.

“You don’t get it.”

“Yes, I do. Because we’ve had this conversation before. You wanted it to be more, but it never happened. Letting him do this to you is enabling his toxic behaviour. You need to get angry. You need to mourn your friend, because he’s no longer the person you knew.”

“You think I don’t know that?” she spits out. “And I am angry. I’m angry at my part. I’m angry at him. I’m angry at you. And I hate it. This isn’t me. I don’t let negativity outshine the positive. But I am.” She takes a breath. “I’ve already mourned my friend. I don’t hate him because I don’t feel anything for him. But you... You are supposed to be my friend. And you went behind my back and installed those cameras after I told you not to get involved.”

“I haven’t done anything. And trust me, I’ve wanted to. He put his hands on you,” I grit out, barely keeping it together.

I don’t tell her I drove to his house. Or that I saw him crossing the street and my foot flinched on the accelerator.

“Me being the key word in there. He did it to me. So I get to choose how to handle it.”

I step closer, my fingers gently brushing across hers.
“Okay.”

“Okay?”

“Okay, I’ll leave it alone. But the cameras stay.”

“My dad asked questions about them.”

“What did you say?”

“He asked me this morning if I knew why you wanted security cameras. I told him I didn’t know, so I had to lie and say I forgot I asked you to install them.”

“I’m sorry you had to lie to him,” I utter.

She shrugs. “Just don’t put me in a position where I need to again.”

I lower my head, knowing that’s exactly what I need her to do. Before I ruffle feathers, I want to make sure that what I’m feeling for her is true, and not some infatuation for wanting what I can’t have. I want her to keep it from her friends and family.

Only for a short time.

Most importantly, if she ever gives me a chance.

I hear her soft intake of breath as I link my fingers through hers. “Ben,” she rasps. “You need to stop.”

“You want me. I want you. Why avoid the inevitable?”

She lifts her head to meet my gaze. “Because—”

The door crashes open behind me and I quickly step back. I watch as Imogen’s shoulders fall and she glances down at the floor to hide her hurt. But I see it. And she’s wrong if she thinks I’m worried about being caught. I just want her to make her mind up without having people in her ear. And if it’s who I think it is... she will stop at nothing to get Imogen in a wedding gown and walking down the aisle. My mum adores her and has loved her since the moment she first met her.

“Oh dear, did I interrupt something?” Mum calls.

“No, Maria. We were just coming to join you,” Imogen promises.

“Hope has joined us too,” Mum reveals.

Imogen smacks her forehead. “Crap! I forgot she was still in the car,” she hisses.

My lips twitch. “You forgot your cousin/best friend was in the car?”

She narrows her eyes into slits. “I had other things on my mind.”

I arch a brow because I’ve seen the girl multi-task whilst on the phone chasing up a delivery. “Really?”

She folds her arms over her chest in a huff. “The food smelt good.”

And there’s the real truth.

“Uh, huh,” I mumble, earning a cute little glower.

“Come! Come eat,” Mum demands.

Imogen takes Mum’s arm and lets her lead them out. I will find time to speak to Imogen after the party is finished, and admit that what I feel for her goes beyond sex.

Our exit didn’t disrupt the party. My sister is still being pampered and the food is still being passed around. Most traditions in our family are that the birthday boy or girl pays for their own party, but we do ours a little different. Everyone pays an anonymous donation and whatever is left after paying for the meal gets donated to a charity of the celebrant’s choosing. Which is why no one bats an eyelid when Imogen joins Hope in posting some money into the box.

I wait for Imogen to take her seat before taking my own. The family have shuffled about to let Hope sit down next to Imogen.

“Thanks for letting us join in celebrating your birthday,” Hope calls down.

Isabella beams. “I’m so glad you could join us. We consider you all family.”

“Don’t say that to our uncle or he’ll never leave,” Imogen announces, causing those who know him to laugh.

Mum folds the napkin in front of her. “He has a hearty appetite, that man.”

“Max Carter doesn’t have a stomach,” Stefania declares, shifting in her seat. “He should come to church with us.”

Hope splutters out a laugh. “I cannot wait to extend the invitation to him.”

“Are you all set for Christmas, Imogen?” Mum asks.

Imogen politely lowers the food she just piled onto her plate. “Mostly. Just a few more bits to get before I’m

finished.”

Lucca leans forward in his seat. “Does it not get expensive? Since you and the Hayes became friends, you could fill an entire town up.”

Hope snorts. “I wouldn’t call us friends per se; more like frenemies.”

“I heard you—”

“Not at the dinner table,” Mum scolds.

His shoulders deflate, so Imogen answers his other question. “It is expensive, but we were taught to budget in our teens so we don’t really see the loss. We put money aside each pay day for Christmas and holidays. We’re not allowed to spend mega amounts on anyone, but we can for parents and siblings.”

“What about birthdays?” I ask, a little intrigued. My sisters give me a list of gifts they want and sometimes it can add up to six-hundred quid.

“Not a requirement. Although we do top up each other’s giftcards for Starbucks, Greggs, Netflix etc. Whichever they use the most.”

I glance at my sister, Isabella, and she narrows her eyes at me. “We are not doing that,” she states before quickly glancing at Imogen. “No offence.”

“You practically live at Starbucks,” I point out. “Just think of how much you would save.”

“It’s bad enough my birthday is in December. I always have to hear, ‘this is part of your Christmas present too’ and I’m done with it.”

Imogen taps the end of the knife on the table. “I have to admit, I wouldn’t like to share my birthday with Christmas. It’s bad enough mine is in November.”

“She gets it.”

“You fucking bitch,” is roared, and Imogen startles, spinning around towards the door.

“Shit!” Hope hisses, watching Zach storm towards us.

I get up, standing between him and Imogen. “You need to go now before I throw you out.”

He doesn’t even look at me. “What have you been telling people now? Isn’t ripping my heart out, shacking up with him, and ruining my fucking life enough? Are you that insecure? I tried to give you a second chance and you blew it.”

“What are you talking about?” she asks, getting to her feet. And I notice Hope pry the knife from her hand. “Are you not sick of singing the same tune?”

“You’ve been telling people fucking lies,” he screams.

“Sounds like a Clubland song from two thousand and twelve,” Hope mutters.

“Someone has set fire to my car and spray-painted ‘woman beater’ on my house,” Zach continues like he wasn’t interrupted.

“That wasn’t me,” Imogen declares.

“No, but you’ve clearly been telling your psychotic family lies, and in return, they’ve torched my car. It has their animal behaviour written all over it.”

Hope clears her throat. “And here you are, tempting fate once again.”

“First, that sounds like a *you* problem. And second, how is it a lie if you raised your hand to me?”

Mum inhales sharply. “Benjamin, take the trash out,” she orders, then starts rattling off profanities in Italian.

“Shut the fuck up,” he snaps, before turning his angry glare towards Imogen. “You are going to pay for this. You want to treat me like this after everything I’ve given you. Then so be it. But I’m taking back the years you took from me. I’m going to take everything you love away and see how you like it. I’m going—”

“That’s it, you’re done,” I demand, and quicker than he expected, I have his arm pinned behind his back and I’m

pushing him towards the door. I want to rip his head from its socket, or smash it against a wall until it caves in. When footsteps follow, I stop and turn to Imogen. “Enjoy the food. I won’t be a minute.”

Something in my expression must give her concern because she nods and slowly takes a step back.

I continue to push him towards the exit, ignoring the gazes from the other guests eating their dinner.

“Get the fuck off me,” he roars.

Once we get outside, I shove him away from me. He tries to go back inside, so I quickly grab him and pin him against the wall, my forearm across his throat.

“You will not come near her again. You will not stalk her home. You will not speak to her. Or breathe the same air as her. Imogen is no one to you anymore, and it will stay that way.”

“She set her fucking family on me,” he spits out, his face bright red. “Can’t you see what a bitch she is?”

“All I see is a scorned ex-lover who isn’t happy things have ended.”

“Then you understand why I’m angry.”

“I’m talking about you,” I growl. “You think I don’t know you? I do. You’ve had that girl fooled for years, and now she is seeing the real you.”

His veins in his temples bulge. “I don’t know what you are talking about.”

I press harder against his neck. “Yes, you do. You used Imogen’s insecurities and heartbreak to worm your way into her life. She barely noticed you before. And don’t think I’m not aware of the crap you pulled to tarnish her other relationships, and how you emotionally manipulated her into thinking you were the better choice. Now her eyes are wide open and you hate that you can’t control it. Control her.”

“She was mine before she was yours,” he spits out. “She’ll always be mine. If it wasn’t for you, we would still be

together. I know it. You know it. She knows it.”

I’ve only ever witnessed hatred and jealousy so pure and dark in one person’s eyes before. It was the man who stabbed me, who nearly took my life.

And I see this isn’t just about Imogen’s choices. This is about me. And the fact he hates that she cares about me. Maybe even still loves me.

“The only reason you can still walk is because she asked me not to get involved, but push me one more time and I can break that promise as fast as I can snap your neck.”

He smirks. “And that there proves she still loves me. You’ll never have her the way I did. She’ll never let you fuck her the way I did.” He gasps for air for a second. “I’m going to make sure I’m the only person she has left. I’ll push her until she has no choice but to come back to me. Leaving her alone is going to give her what she wants, and I’m not going to give her the satisfaction. I won’t stop until she’s broken and back under my control, and there’s nothing you can do to stop me.”

I press harder against his neck until his eyes begin to bulge. “You’ll die before I let you do that to her.”

I let him go, and he bends at the waist, gasping for breath. “And I’ll still win. Because I would have taken away the one person who means the most to her.”

“Then you never knew her at all. If you did, then you would know her family are the most important people to her, and nothing, not even you, could ever rip them away from her.”

He begins to laugh, but I don’t want to give him any more of my time. Instead of giving him the beating he deserves, I head back to the entrance—and notice Imogen standing there, her eyes wide as she glances up at me. I quickly guide her back inside, and the minute the door closes behind us, she pulls me aside, taking my hands.

“I’m so sorry.”

“You don’t need to apologise for him,” I tell her.

She shakes her head, tears gathering in her eyes. “That’s not what I’m apologising for.”

My brows pinch together. “Then why?”

“Because I misjudged you. I’ve been telling you for weeks now that you don’t know me but you just proved me wrong. What you said about my family meaning the most to me is something no one else has ever understood about me. You did. So I’m sorry for misjudging you.”

I tuck a strand of hair behind her ear. “I won’t pretend I know everything about you because something tells me there are more layers to you than anyone realises. And I want to know them all.” I can’t look away, not when she’s watching me so intently. “And what he said out there, it’s not true. I know it’s not, because I know your heart, Imogen Smith, and you will not break.”

She swallows deeply. “I know.”

I lean down until I’m close. “And you can tell me I was right about the cameras later.”

Her eyebrows narrow as she smacks my arm. “You’re a fucking dick.”

I laugh as I wrap my arm around her shoulders, steering her back over to the table. “Let’s go eat. I didn’t put three hundred in that box to only eat garlic bread.”

And hopefully my family will work hard to make her forget about the scene Zach just caused.

It’s far from over.

But I’m involved now.

So if a fight is what he wants, a fight is what he will get.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

Imogen

Christmas is less than a week away and everyone at work is in high spirits, looking forward to some time off. Dad doesn't make his staff request time off. He thinks life is too short to be ball and chained to a job. So if they need time off for a holiday or another event that's a week or two long, they just need to write it on the board. And if someone needs an emergency day off, the others step in to make sure everything is covered. But Christmas... Dad makes sure his staff spend it at home with their loved ones, and this year, we are closing up early because Harris swears it's going to snow. And he's never been wrong before.

The Christmas party is beginning to get rowdy. Family and friends have joined us, but I make my way to my desk, slowly lowering myself into the chair.

This morning, Aiden and Bailey had their door kicked down by the police, who were under the impression his daughter, Sunday, was in danger. A *concerned* member of the public had called them and said he'd witnessed a young infant being dragged inside. Thankfully, Bailey has cameras installed.

But I knew when Mark called to say someone had stabbed his tyres, and Hope had eggs thrown at her house, that it was only the beginning.

And ironically, it had been Aiden, Mark and Maddox who set his car on fire and spray-painted his house. If it was just a guess, it was a hell of a good one. Unless he was picking them off one by one.

And then this morning, I walked outside to dozens of white roses littering my front garden. Hunger Games is my favourite movie, and the flowers reminded me so much of the scene where Katniss steps out of District Thirteen's shelter to find the enemy had covered the damage with white roses. It

gave me chills seeing it, and I knew it was Zach. And I knew he wasn't going to give up. I'm scared for my family.

Mum startles me when she drags a chair over to sit down next to me. "Are you okay, sweetie?"

I give her a brief smile. "I'm good, Mum," I assure her. "The food was great, by the way."

"Don't change the subject," she softly scolds. "A mother knows. You've put on a great front but you've distanced yourself all night. I'm worried."

"I've been messaging George and Laura all night about their VIP party. That's all." I think the two are just stressing over the responsibility because nothing I helped with was something they wouldn't have figured out for themselves eventually.

"No, it's more than that. Talk to me."

I let out a soft breath as I tuck my hair behind my ear. She won't let this go until I talk. "Do you think Zach is dangerous?"

She pauses for a moment. "I think anyone can be dangerous and you should be careful of everyone."

"Mum, I think I need to report him and I'm worried it will make it all worse. After this morning, I'm scared."

She takes my hand. "We will never let him hurt you."

"I'm not worried about me. I'm worried about you and our family. You've already been through too much because of me. I don't want to cause you anymore upset. I won't. *I can't.*"

"What happened when you were a *baby* had nothing to do with you and it was not your fault. It was a series of events that led to it and you were just an innocent bystander who got dragged into it. You had no part in their choices any more than I did. The same with Zach. You are not to blame for the choices he's made or for his actions. You can't control him any more than he could control you. And taking on the guilt of what he does is what he is expecting. You'll let him win. The

only thing he can do to us is hurt you and we won't let that happen. And I'm pretty sure Ben won't either."

"Ben?"

She smirks knowingly. "I've seen him watching you tonight. It's not the same look as before."

"What do you mean?" I ask, my heart racing.

Does she know?

Does Dad?

"Well, before, he watched you like you were someone he couldn't have so he wanted you more. Tonight, he's watching you like he's had you and doesn't want to let you go."

"Mum," I breathe, and she must sense the panic in my voice.

"Don't worry. Your secret is safe with me," she promises. "I knew it would happen eventually, but your dad won't be happy."

I relax a little. I want to ask her how she knew but her comment takes me off guard. "Why won't he?"

As Dad clinks his bottle with an envelope opener, she gets to her feet. I follow so I can hear her reply. "Because he told them all to stay away from you," she explains, then leans down to kiss my cheek. "We can talk about going to the police tomorrow when your dad's sober."

She walks over to him as he announces: "Everyone can open their secret Santa presents."

My lips twitch as I sit back down, my focus on Ben. His bag is massive and he pulls out the present on top. He warily glances around like he's expecting a blow up doll. But when he rips into the paper and finds the duck pyjamas, he grins, glancing my way. I grin back because he has no idea that it's a theme with most of them, except the one at the bottom. I got him a duck oodie too, which he laughs at. It matches the rubber duck, and the slippers.

"Something you want to share?" Phil teases.

“Guess I like ducks,” he chuckles.

Mum meets my gaze, her lips twitching. She knows the pyjamas are a men’s replica of my own.

When he opens the last present, I glance away. It’s a pair of Ray Bans that I know he’s been wanting for a while. Using the last bit of my present fund was worth it to get them.

I’m drawn to the box on the desk, though I’m a little hesitant to open it. They aren’t exactly buying to make someone happy. Last year, I got a phone case with Phil’s picture on it. The year before it had been a box of condoms. And the year before that it had been a creepy clown Jack-in-the-box.

I lift the box and scream as a bunch of stuff flies out, going all over the place. I catch one mid-air and grin when I see it’s a Starbucks gift card. The others are for gaming shops and other places.

I notice everyone watching me as I pick up the others. “You couldn’t have given them to me normally?”

“We all chipped in with yours,” Harris announces.

“Thank you. All of you.”

They all go back to their own presents and I smile down at the cards in my hand. They were really thoughtful about where they got them from because one is for Victoria’s Secret.

My phone vibrates with a message and I click on it.

Ben: Thank you for my gifts. I love them. I’ll be taking a bath with the rubber duck tonight, and then I’ll enjoy my night tucked up in my new pj set playing games. You didn’t need to spend that much, but I appreciate it.

I smile, my thumb running over the screen before it clicks off.

Imogen: You’re welcome. If I had known you’d love it that much, I would have bought you a back scrub.

I slyly peek out to see him reading his phone, his lips spreading into a smile.

Ben: You could scrub it for me.

Imogen: You wish.

Ben: I do!

Ben: Look under your desk.

My brows pinch together but I do as he asks. Tucked at the back is a bag full of presents. I drag it close and peer inside. Then I grab my phone to message him.

Imogen: Can I open these here or is something going to jump out at me?

Ben: Yes. And nothing will jump out. I promise.

I tear open the biggest one first and my heart literally stops at the logo on the front. Louboutin's. Real Louboutin's and not a pair of fakes from the market.

“Holy crap,” I whisper as I pull one out.

The black ankle boots are suede in material, but the stiletto heel is all dark glitter. And I can't believe I'm actually debating whether to put them in a glass case and put them on display. They're beautiful.

I notice a card on the other shoe, so I place the one I have in my hand gently back in its place and pick it up.

Before you begin to panic about what you think these boots cost, don't worry about it. I bumped into Cole and Emily, who were with River and Harriet. They saw me scowling at a fake pair, and once Harriett and Emily pointed to which ones you'd like, River had contacted his designer friend, and before I knew it, they had a pair with your name on and they didn't cost me a year's rent.

I couldn't lose the smile even if I tried. He gets me. He really gets me. And my resolve is threatening to break. I want to say fuck it to whatever is holding him back, and just take whatever he will give me.

I grab the next package, this one in a smaller box. Inside is a bracelet, and the diamond rhinestones sparkle under the light. It's beautiful.

I very carefully place it back into the box and grab the next one, which is the same shape as the jewellery box but taller.

I rip it open and burst out laughing, but quickly quiet down in case someone is watching me. They'll put two and two together instantly because I'm holding a rubber duck with a shower cap on.

Instead of messaging him, I meet his gaze and mouth, 'thank you'. He lifts his chin, a smug smirk on his lips, so I pick out the last present.

On the front is another card and I flip it open.

This one you might want to open out of view. Hopefully you'll give me a chance to see you in it.

I clench my thighs together as I open it. I don't pull it out but I can see what it is. A silk lingerie gown with a pair of briefs.

And I'm back to wondering what to do.

He's told me he wants me, and he wants to give this a go. But I don't understand what has changed and if I'm just a phase.

He gets me in a way no one else ever has. And I don't think ever will.

But maybe Mum was onto something earlier. Maybe I'm overthinking this and it's as simple as my dad warning them away. I've been so focused on thinking there is something wrong with me, I didn't really consider it could be something else entirely.

Maybe I should give him a chance to explain.

*** **

It's midnight, and my intrusive thoughts and an unexpected epiphany got the best of me. For some unknown reason, I thought it would be sexy to turn up at Ben's in a

trench coat wearing nothing but the underwear he got me for Christmas.

I don't have a trench coat. I only have a winter coat because my other jacket showed off too much of what I was wearing.

Women in the movies seem confident and sexy. My heart hasn't stopped racing and not in a good way. I'm so afraid of getting caught I think I might pass out.

And I don't even want to talk about the chafing between my legs. Or think about the fact I flashed an older gentleman when I stopped to fill up my car.

Then to kick a girl when she's down, the lift in Ben's building is broken, so I had to trudge myself up a million stairs.

I pictured this going completely different. I'd have the perfect hair, flawless makeup, and look sexy as hell in the lingerie he bought me.

Instead, my makeup has melted off with my sweat, my hair feels frizzy, and I don't even want to think about how red I look right now.

I just hope he can see past my appearance and instead focus on me actually being here. I'm tired of fighting him, and I feel like I've been at odds with him for too long. I want this. I want him. If I'm going to fight, I'd rather it be for him.

I tap my knuckles against the door, and inhale as I step back. After a few seconds, I begin to wonder if he's asleep.

Until I hear the key turning. He pulls open the door, illuminating the dim hallway behind him.

His torso is bare, and he's only wearing socks and a pair of pyjama bottoms. "Imogen? Are you okay? What's happened?"

I exhale and go for it. "You said you wanted me, that you wanted a relationship. Is that still true?"

He drops his hand from the door, no longer on alert but still tense. "Yes."

“Then tell me one thing. Is the reason you held back because of my dad? Is he the reason you didn’t want a relationship?”

He gulps, his eyes widening a fraction. “Yes,” he replies.

“Why? And what changed?”

“Because when Mickey went to ask you out, he made us all promise to never ask you out. He didn’t want conflict in the workplace so I made the promise.”

My eyes narrow slightly. “And?”

“And your dad was the only person who believed in me when so many people gave up. He saved my future and in turn my life. I owe everything to him. My freedom, my job, and my family. Without him, I wouldn’t have seen them for a long time. I respect him, Imogen, and going there with you, it felt—it feels like a betrayal.”

Which I completely understand. “If you feel like that, then why did you kiss me? Why did you sleep with me?”

“Because as hard as I try, I can’t seem to stay away from you. I made that promise before I knew what you’d mean to me. And I want to honour it; believe me, I do. But this...” he gestures between us, “is something I can’t fight. I can’t get you out of my head. And if it means blowing up my life to do that, then I will. I think of your dad as family, and it’s killing me to go against him like this, but you are worth it, Imogen. What we have is worth it.”

I can see how much this is hurting him. I understand his reasons more than ever and I don’t begrudge him for them. If anything, I admire him. “Okay.”

His brows pinch together. “Okay?”

“Okay, I’ll give this a try. I don’t like the thought of being a dirty secret or lying to everyone, but I get why you need to. We can see where this is going before we reveal it to everyone.” I unzip my coat, revealing what’s hiding underneath. “But I have rules.”

His pupils darken as he steps closer. “Rules?” he rasps, eyeing me up and down.

“Rules,” I agree. “If my dad outright asks us if something is going on, we tell him.”

His hands run over my hips. “Any more rules?”

I lean into him. “We get to have sex whenever I want.”

A small whimper slips free as he lifts me up, and my legs go around his waist. “I can live with those rules.”

I kiss the corner of his mouth before pulling back to meet his gaze. “Then take me to bed.”

He slams his mouth against mine and carries me inside. As the door slams shut, my pulse spikes because there is no going back now.

I wouldn’t want to, even if I could.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

Ben

Staying away from Imogen tonight has been harder than all the years I avoided getting close to her. Now I know how she feels, how she smells, and how she sounds when I make her moan. Since I've gotten all of her, I never want to go back to brief greetings and a few words of conversation. Not when I've gotten a side to her that she rarely gives anyone outside of family.

We've spent the past couple of weeks getting to know each other and exploring each other's bodies. The only two days we spent apart were Christmas and the day after Boxing Day, since her cousin, Lily, went into labour at Christmas. They welcomed her home by throwing a Christmas dinner, since it was her favourite time of year. The rest of our time, we've spent together. It's the first holiday I've had where I'm not working other jobs to keep myself busy. This time, I have a reason to be home.

I never thought I could have so much of someone yet still want so much more. I hate being apart from her, which is why I've not been able to stay away. The fire she ignites in me only grows stronger. And tonight, celebrating the New Year with our family and friends, it has me wishing it was just us.

The Carters open the lower half of their club nearly every year to family and friends. And Evan's invitation extends to our family, so the place is packed and pumping.

And my woman stands out like a beacon. She has on a black glittery dress that looks simple from the front, but at the back it lowers to the tip of her arse. If she moved just right, you'd see her crack. She wears her sexuality like armour and doesn't even see it. Her smile lights up her entire face, and when she laughs, she laughs hard and can be heard over the music.

Stefania jabs me in the shoulder and I pull my gaze away from Imogen. "Can I help you?"

She rolls her eyes. “Is there something going on between you and Imogen?”

And here comes the first lie. “No. Why would you ask that?”

“Because you have barely taken your eyes off her all night,” she answers and lifts up a serviette. “You might want to wipe your chin. You’re drooling a bit.”

I snatch the serviette away and throw it on the table. “Fuck off!”

“*Mio figlio*, we don’t speak to your sisters like that,” Mum warns.

“Sorry, *Mamma*,” I grouch.

“I’m going to dance,” Stefania announces. “Maybe you could loosen up and ask Imogen to dance. I mean, if Reid Hayes doesn’t get there first.”

I glare at her because I know what she’s doing. And Reid doesn’t stand a chance. “I thought you were going to embarrass yourself on the dance floor?”

“Arsehole,” she mutters, and gets up to join our sisters on the dance floor.

Mum picks up her red wine. “I thought you to be a better secret keeper than this. What I don’t understand is why you and our Imogen are keeping it a secret.”

“*Mamma...*” I swallow, because I can’t lie to her. I’ve never been able to lie to her. “You can’t tell anyone.”

She cups my cheek. “Sweet boy, I’m overjoyed by the news, but why are you intent on hiding it? I’ve been waiting for this moment for a very long time.”

“We want to keep it private until we are ready to announce it. You know about the promise I made to Evan.”

She removes her hand and clucks her tongue. “And you made that promise as a boy. You are a man now and Imogen is a woman. You can both make your own choices. I’d be disappointed in Evan if he didn’t approve of the two of you.”

“I think it has more to do with conflict at work. We’re a tight knit group, and if we break up, he’s going to take his daughter’s side and it could cause tension at work. I’m not sure it will be about me personally. Or I would like to think it won’t be.”

She clucks her tongue again. One thing about my mum is that she doesn’t have time for bullshit. Life is meant to be lived and mistakes are meant to be made. “Are you happy?”

“Yes.”

“Is Imogen?”

“As far as I know, yes.”

“Then be happy, *mio figlio*. Everything else will fall into place. And our Imogen will make a wonderful wife.”

I chuckle. “Mum, we aren’t there yet.”

She smiles wide. “*Yet*. You said yet. So there is hope.”

I lean down and kiss her cheek. “You are a sneaky woman, *Mamma*.”

“It’s why your dad married me,” she admits, then lowers her half empty glass to the table. “Which reminds me, I need to be with your father to see the New Year in.”

My chest constricts. It still breaks my heart that she goes there every year. We all used to go with her, but I think as we grew, we understood it wasn’t about us being there together, but about her holding on to the man she loves.

Mum, even before Dad passed away, always said she would outlive him. It’s in her genes apparently. She just didn’t expect to lose him so young. So she goes every year because he’s still the love of her life and the person she wants to see the New Year in with. Sometimes we tag along, sometimes we don’t to give her alone time. She tells him everything he has missed, tells him what she has planned for the year, then reminds him she is one year closer to joining him.

“Are you sure you don’t want me to come?”

She glances over at Imogen. “No, *mio figlio*. You now have someone to celebrate with, and believe me, son, you want to celebrate them all for as long as you can. How you spend your New Year dictates how you spend the rest of the year. And my son, I want happiness and love for you more than anything. I have a lot to discuss with your father so I’d best be going.”

I help her to her feet and kiss her cheek once more. “Happy New Year, *Mamma*. I hope the new year will bring you the same.”

She gives me a sad smile. “I have had the love of my life. He gave me beautiful children. All I can wish for now is their happiness.”

“You never know, *Mamma*; you might find someone new to give your heart to.”

She taps my cheek. “Only one man will ever have my heart. Now a lover I could get on board with.”

I can feel the blood drain from my face. “Yeah, maybe stay single.”

She chuckles. “I’ll say goodbye to your sisters and I will see you all for dinner tomorrow.”

I nod and retake my seat as I try to find Imogen in the crowd. Something catches my eye in the corner of the room, and I lean forward to see if what I’m seeing is real. Reid drops down in the chair next to me. “What are you staring at?”

“What is Hope doing?”

He squints in the direction I’m looking. Hope is smuggling something under the table. “She’s a Carter. She could be planting a bomb,” he announces.

Maddox and Mark drop down in the empty chairs next to me. “What are we looking at?”

“Hope,” Reid replies without expanding further.

“Why the fuck are you looking at my cousin?” Maddox growls.

“And your sister,” Reid states, jerking his chin to where Madison has joined her.

I glance at the time, wondering when I can steal Imogen away. The countdown is going to start in ten minutes and I want to start the new year with her in my arms.

“If you wanted to be killed, you only had to ask. I would have done it without the provoking,” Maddox growls.

Before it kicks off, I intervene. “Your sister and Hope are smuggling something under the table.”

“Huh?” Mark grumbles, and begins to squint.

How either of them made it this far in life is beyond my knowledge.

“They read online that if you eat twelve grapes at midnight, you’ll find love in the new year,” Hayden interrupts as she lowers herself down in her partner’s lap.

“Really?” Mark asks.

“The bomb seemed more reasonable,” Reid mutters, but the others hear.

“We don’t joke about that in here,” Hayden snaps.

“Bombs?” Reid asks, a smug smirk on his face. “That is what bothers you out of the entire scenario?”

“How you lot haven’t killed each other is surprising,” I growl. “Mate, this place had a bomb go off in it whilst one of the parents were getting married. They nearly lost people.”

“All right. All right. But someone needs to tell them they need more than grapes to get a date with you lot as bodyguards.”

He gets up and leaves, and I see Clay’s fingers clench around Hayden’s waist to stop her from going after him. “I’m going to shove a cucumber up his arse.”

“He’ll probably like it,” Mark replies.

“I thought you were watching Zach tonight?” I point out.

Imogen went to the police and told them he was harassing her, but they couldn't take a proper statement until after the new year. Instead of waiting for him to do something else, we've all been taking turns to watch him. She tries to act like it's not bothering her, but I can tell it is.

"She's good to enjoy her night," he answers, and I narrow my gaze.

"Seriously? That's your response after the shit he's pulled? He might have been quiet for a—"

"Jesus Christ, we slipped him a few sleeping pills. The last I checked, his friends were dragging his unconscious arse into a taxi," he remarks. "Now get off *my* arse. And you're welcome, by the way."

"And you couldn't have stated that from the beginning?"

He flashes his teeth with a smile. "Where would the fun in that be?" He claps me on my shoulder and leans in close. "Her dad and colleagues might be clueless, but we aren't. Hurt her and it won't be your car or bike I set on fire. It will be you."

He stands and dances his way to the dance floor. Hayden bites into the cherry she pulls from her glass, arching an eyebrow. "You going to threaten me too?"

She points to her chest and swallows. "Oh no, I'm not going to threaten you."

Even her bloke looks away, clearly not believing her. "Really?"

"Yes, really. I don't make threats. I just do it."

God, I've never met a group of people more infuriating than the Carters. I would think they were dropped a lot as kids, but their parents aren't much better. Hayden's dad right now is in the middle of the dance floor, his shirt over his head, dancing like he wants to take people out. Which he will do if he keeps pumping his hands out.

"Duly noted," I mutter as I get up. "Oh, and your dad hid a cake in the office."

“Prick,” she hisses, but Clay pulls her back down on his lap.

“It’s nearly midnight, baby,” he soothes.

Meeting Imogen’s gaze in the crowd, I gesture for her to meet me near the column.

“One minute until midnight,” the DJ announces.

I tag Imogen’s hand and pull her behind the column, away from prying eyes. “Have I told you how incredible you look tonight?”

Her ruby red lips pucker as she tilts her head to the side. “Yes, but you can tell me again.”

I run my hands down her back, my fingers brushing under the material of her dress. “This has tempted me all night.”

She grins up at me. “I had hoped it would.”

“Vixen,” I tease, and lean down, capturing her lips with mine. She tastes sweet, like fruit, so I know she’s been taking advantage of the free cocktails all night.

“I’m glad you came tonight,” she admits. I had planned to cancel, but I knew it would be pointless since she’s all I can think about.

“Thirty seconds,” the DJ calls.

“Nothing could have kept me away,” I tell her, pulling her in closer.

“We’re going to get caught,” she rasps, as I run my nose along hers.

I pull back, cupping her jaw. “No girl deserves to be left standing alone at midnight when she has a man who wants her. We might be keeping our relationship hidden, but I will never have you feeling like you are the secret. I never want you to feel like this means nothing. Because you mean everything to me.”

“Ten.”

“You mean that?”

“Nine.”

“Every single word.”

“Eight.”

“Ben,” she whispers.

“Seven.”

I lift her chin with my knuckles as the countdown continues. “We are going to start the new year together.”

“Ben—”

“One.”

“Happy New Year, darlin’,” I call and lean down, capturing her lips in a kiss.

She wraps her arms around my neck, leaning up on her toes. With one hand on her lower back, I walk her back until she’s leaning against the column.

I know the chances of her family searching for her are more than likely and I should stop. But I can’t. Not when she kisses me back just as hard. Not when her fingers run through my hair. And not when I feel her knee sliding up the side of my leg, giving me room to get closer. All I want to do is slide her dress up her legs, pull my dick out, and fuck her like I’ve pictured doing all night.

She pulls back, her red lipstick smudged, her pupils glazed over with lust. I try to fix the lipstick as best as I can but it’s useless.

Her lashes flutter as she stares up at me. “Mine or yours?”

I kiss her once more. “Yours,” I reply, and kiss her once more before I have to share her with everyone else. “Now go say Happy New Year to your family because your mum is looking around for you.”

“How do you...” she begins but then shakes her head. “Never mind.”

“Happy New Year, gorgeous.”

“Happy New Year,” she replies. Her entire face is lit up with happiness, and I never want to be the reason it goes away.

I can't wait to get her alone in a few weeks when we go away. Well, she is going away with the family, and I'm tagging along for the room and to help a client Connor has been working for. But we'll still be together, and if most of her family already know, we won't need to hide us being together, and I can't wait.

Now I have to get my boner under control because I am not facing her family with one.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

Imogen

Music blasts out of the speaker as I belt out the lyrics to a Taylor Swift song at the top of my lungs. Because if anyone deserves the theatrics, it's the mother of all music.

Ben shakes his head as he pulls into the space at a service station and hears Hayden, Madison, Hope, Ciara and Amelia doing the same.

It's how we roll. Maddox, Mark, and Liam are all driving with Clay, so I decided to jump in with Ben. If he stays with me after my off-key singing the entire ride so far, then he's a keeper. Charlotte is the only one of us who can hold a real tune but she isn't coming up until tomorrow—with Drew, Landon, and Paisley.

Hayden throws open her door, "My sex is on fire."

"Go to the doctors then, you freak," Liam yells back.

"He does realise she brought her bat, right?" Ben asks.

"Um, she won't use it," I promise him.

"Why are they giving Clay and Amelia money?" he asks, pulling his attention away from Liam.

I hand him a twenty. "Um, we're kind of banned from going inside so I need you to get me a burger and fries."

"How do you get banned from a service station?"

I lower my gaze. "You just do. It was Aiden's fault, in case you want to know. We had nothing to do with it."

"I'm sure they won't remember you," he tells me.

"You can't come in here," a frazzled man calls out, racing over with a black bag in one hand and a litter picker in the other.

Hayden jumps on the hood of Hope's car as I get out. "Calm down, old man. We aren't going in there."

“You can’t be out here,” he tells her.

“No. The letter clearly states we aren’t to go inside the premises. We’re outside. And the quicker you leave us alone, the quicker we can leave,” she tells him.

“How?” Amelia breathes as she clutches Maddox’s hand.

“It was all Aiden,” he swears as Ben meets me at the front of his car. He lifts me up so I can sit on the bonnet.

“You chased me around the car park,” the man accuses.

“You took my food and I wasn’t finished. I wanted it back,” Maddox argues.

“I’ll go get your food,” Ben mutters and kisses my cheek instead of taking the money.

Amelia races off after Ben, probably thinking the same. The quicker she gets it, the quicker we can leave. “Do not leave without me,” she orders, pointing at them.

“We aren’t going anywhere,” Hayden promises and grins over at me. “How’s he taking the live concert?”

“Like a champ,” I beam. It’s the only way we know how to travel. Belt those tunes out and if the set list isn’t finished, we drive around until it is.

As Ciara pulls her into a conversation along with Madison, Hope comes to sit down next to me on the car bonnet.

“You glad to be out of Coldenshire for a little bit?”

“Yes,” I confess. “I want to believe Zach has backed off, but now that he has, I feel more on edge, like the other shoe is about to drop.”

“I knew he would take a break up hard if it was you ending it, but I never thought he would go to this extreme. It’s crazy. He’s crazy. But we’re here for you. You know that.”

“I know. And I love that you guys have had my back.”

“I heard from a friend who attends the same university that he went nuts at the staff in the main office. She was

working in the filing room and overheard it all. Apparently, the university are refusing to transfer his credits to another university. I guess when that happened, the one he wanted to transfer to declined his application to study there, and he doesn't like it."

"Great," I grumble. "That's all I need. Something else he can blame me for."

"It's not your fault."

"I know, but he doesn't understand that. His mum messaged me to get Maverick to put in a good word with an estate agent. They want his house on the market. And since Maddox does a lot of work getting houses ready for sale, a couple won't take Zach on as a client. Every other estate agent that has no morals is refusing to sell it because Zach is making it difficult."

Hope snorts. "What did you say?"

"I didn't. I told Dad and he called Mav, and the next thing I know, Maverick had given the Armstrongs an offer they couldn't refuse and now he owns the house. He plans to rent it out once the sale has gone through."

"Zach isn't going to like that."

"Nope. He really isn't," I muse.

"Are you talking about Dad buying Zach's house?" Mark asks.

"Yeah. You heard too?" I ask.

"He had it coming," Mark states. "I should have set fire to his car with him in it. Fucker laid his hands on you and has gotten away with it."

"You set his car on fire," I point out.

"So?"

"And you spray-painted his house."

"I'm not understanding why you are bringing it up."

“Don’t forget the glitter bomb Uncle Max planted in his suit that exploded during his second police interview. Faith called me and said Beau couldn’t stop laughing when Gray walked out covered in glitter,” Hope states.

“Why are you making us out to be the bad guys?” Liam demands. “Dad said he was lucky it was glitter.”

“Wait, I thought your dad put glue in his shoes?” Mark asks.

“Yeah, but that was after he turned up at the same restaurant he was at and threw the shrimp all over him,” Liam answers.

“I thought he slapped him with a wet fish?” Mark continues.

“That was when he pretended to apologise,” Liam replies.

“Wait, so who made the remix video of him saying he’s a woman beater, a liar, then the one where he looks like he’s verbally abusing people?” Hope asks.

“That was Bailey. She felt left out the day Aiden pushed him into the lake,” Mark replies.

“Wait, when did all this happen?” I ask, utterly shocked. I only knew about the car and the spray paint. “And what video?”

“Ages ago,” Liam quickly replies.

Yeah, ages ago my arse.

Hope chuckles. “Evidently, Hayden recorded the bar incident, and then she got the footage from the woman who lives across from you. She had the assault on camera.”

“Wait, Hayden went into Mrs Langley’s?” I ask, not believing it for a second.

“Well no, I did. But then Bailey used clips to make him say some awful things, then showed clips of him losing it. It’s gone viral.”

“Guys, I told you not to get involved.”

Maddox pulls his attention away from his phone. “No one messes with a Carter and lives to tell the tale.”

I gulp. Maybe that’s why I haven’t heard from Zach. “Please tell me he’s not dead? I don’t want you guys going to prison.”

Maddox gives me a pointed look. “Like we’d get caught if he were. The prick is fine. He’ll just rethink fucking with us. He’s lucky that’s all we did after the shit he’s tried to pull.”

“I really am sorry he’s dragged you all into it.”

Hope wraps her arm around me. “You’re joking, aren’t you? This is the most fun they’ve had since they were up against the Hayes’. This time, they don’t need to hold back.”

“Who are you bloody texting because Amelia is inside,” Mark asks, nudging Maddox.

“My kids. It’s the first time we’ve been apart and they’re missing me.”

“They’re missing you?” Liam questions, raising his brow.

“Yes. They cried, and I’m telling you, if it wasn’t for her mum shoving me out of the door, I would still be there. She doesn’t know how Asher likes to be rocked. She’s alright with Jasmine but, mate, it killed me to leave her,” he explains as his phone rings. “It’s Nita Facetiming me.”

“Answer it then,” Hope orders.

He does, and Nita’s face appears on the screen. “Maddox Carter, you’ve been gone an hour and a half,” she scolds.

“I just didn’t want him to forget me,” Maddox explains.

“You spoil them,” she declares.

He sucks in a breath. “I do not.”

“You do. Little miss keeps calling me to bring her food.”

“Bring her food? Is she sick?” he stresses, moving his head side to side like it will let him see more of what’s going on behind Nita.

“She’s perfectly fine, but I’m assuming this behaviour is your doing,” she states and turns the screen. We all lean in and see Jasmine tucked up on the sofa with a thick, fluffy blanket. Food wrappers and a plate surround her and she’s clicking her fingers.

“Grandpa, the juice, please,” she demands, holding her hand out.

Maddox scratches the back of his neck. “We, um, we like to cabbage on the couch and watch movies,” he replies.

“She had Gareth on the floor painting her toes. Said you do it for her all the time,” she continues, and it earns a few sniggers from the lads. Me and Hope just melt.

“Look, I can’t say no to her.”

“Grandma, are you recording me?” Jasmine demands, shoving her headphones off her head. “Because I have rights. Girl rights. You need my permission.”

The screen turns again and Nita arches a brow at Maddox. “Your doing?”

“She ain’t wrong,” he argues sheepishly.

“Maddox,” Jasmine squeals. “Kisses.”

He doesn’t even hesitate before he’s blowing kisses down the phone. “You missing me?”

“Like cheese on a burger,” she answers.

“Be good for your grandparents remember,” he warns gently.

She huffs. “I can’t help but be awesome.”

Maddox chuckles but quickly turns the phone around and presses his lips together. It’s only when Jasmine is back on the phone that he continues. “You can only be that awesome when I’m there.”

“All right. I need to go back to the game. You’ve missed a good one,” she replies.

He beams. “Yeah, we’ll call each other later. Love you, princess.”

“Love you too,” she replies before Nita turns the screen back to her.

“Does Amelia know you’ve bought Jasmine a phone?”

He grimaces. “No.”

“You bought our daughter a phone?” Amelia demands.

“Um, I guess she does now. I’ll call you later,” he quickly tells Nita and ends the call. “Babe...”

“No. We talked about this. She’s too young.”

“But how can I speak to her if she doesn’t have one?”

“Call my parents like we planned,” she argues.

“But then we wouldn’t be able to talk to them whenever we wanted.”

She drops the food down next to us and the others are quick to dive in. “Because you called or messaged every five minutes the last time and we were gone for two hours. They are going to be fine, Maddox. I told you this.”

“And we’ll know for sure if Jasmine is on the case.”

She pinches the bridge of her nose. “You totally paid her to tell you how Asher is doing too, didn’t you?”

He rubs the back of his neck. “I miss them. Is that a crime?” he cries. “They’re my kids and I don’t want them to feel alone.”

“Babe, they aren’t alone,” she replies, stepping close so she can wrap her arms around his waist. “I get it. I miss them too. But we need this. It’s been a long year, and we’ve never really had time for just us.”

“All right. I’ll compromise by checking in every couple of hours.”

“And she’s not keeping the phone,” she warns.

“Maybe she could have it when we aren’t with her. That way, we are only a phone call away.”

Amelia shakes her head but I can see her resolve melting. “I love you, you maddening fool.”

He grins. “Love you too.”

“What did I miss?” Ben asks as he comes to lean against the car in front of me. “Why is the cleaner still watching us?”

I glance over to the other side of the car park where he stands, pretending to be busy whilst keeping an eye on us. “Amelia’s mum called to tell Maddox he spoils Jasmine too much.”

“Which I don’t,” Maddox argues.

“He does,” Amelia agrees. “She wanted a princess castle in the garden. I told her no, but this one went out and built her a massive tree house with a slide and swing underneath.”

“I own a construction company,” he argues.

“And what about the day she was too sick to go to the pamper party and you spent the night pampering her instead?”

Ben chuckles, lowering his gaze, and Maddox hears. “Listen, Sunglasses, she’s hard to say no to. One day, when you have kids of your own, you’ll understand.”

“No judgement here. I just didn’t think you had that side to you.”

“What side would that be?” Maddox confronts him.

“One that cares about others.”

“Listen here—”

“Don’t start,” Hayden warns. “Litter guy is heading over.”

“We really should get back on the road. I need to check in before my client’s set later,” Ben admits as he helps me down.

That’s when chaos erupts.

A group of lads crash into our huddle, bumping into Liam and knocking his food all over the ground. I noticed them messing around while on their way back to their car and was hoping they’d walk around us, not through us.

“Watch it, dickhead,” the tall, lanky guy snarks, as Liam stares down at his food.

“Shit,” I hiss when Liam comes unstuck and begins to lay into the guy.

“No one messes with my fucking food,” Liam growls as the others go to attack.

Maddox tries to save his food, but the fourth guy knocks it out of his hand.

Hayden jumps from the car, landing on the guy who is about to gang up on Liam.

“We’re going,” Ben orders. He drags me over to the passenger side door and ushers me inside his car.

I watch as Clay tries to drag Hayden away. When Ben closes his door, I turn to him. “Dude, we need to help them.”

“I’m pretty sure Clay and Mark can pull them off.”

“I don’t mean help the food destroyers. I mean we need to help my family,” I argue as he pulls out of the parking space. “Ben!”

He breaks sharply, and I have to hold on to the dashboard to stop myself from moving out of my seat.

He turns to me sharply, pointing. “Stay there. I mean it.”

I nod and watch as he gets out of the car. My lips part when he rips a guy off Mark like he weighs nothing before knocking out the one fighting Liam.

Hayden begins howling over the unconscious guy she’s standing over.

Amelia is shaking next to the car, but thankfully, Hope has her arm around her.

When I turn back to Ben, he’s handing over an unconscious Maddox to Liam. All the rest are in some sort of unconscious state or are rolling around on the ground. When Ben jabs a finger at Mark in some kind of warning and Mark steps back, taking it, I let out a breath.

My man is seriously fucking hot.

He hasn't even broken a sweat.

He dusts off his jacket and makes his way back to the car. As the door closes, I say, "You need to teach me how to fight like you."

He checks to see if I'm serious. "Maybe one day. But I've seen you in action. You don't need to fight to take someone down. Although, you'd probably win if you did."

I grin as I slide my belt on. "Thank you."

"Your family are going to be a pain in my arse this entire trip, aren't they?"

I lower my gaze. "Is that going to be a problem?"

"No. I would just rather get a heads up so I can prepare myself," he states as he places his hand on my thigh.

"Then most likely, yeah."

"Alright."

I sit back and smile, staring out the window. He knows what they'll be like yet he'll still put up with them for me.

I lose my smile when a thought occurs to me. "My fucking food," I growl.

Ben grimaces. "Yeah, you won't be seeing that again. I saw Maddox snag it when Hayden warned us about the litter guy. Don't worry, I'll stop at the next service station to get you food."

"Thank you," I breathe out.

Because my stomach is eating away at me, I'm that hungry.

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

Ben

Being back out on assignment, however minimal it is, is getting to me more than I let myself believe it would. I thought I'd be okay, that I was ready for this. But as I wait for the gates to open, there's a pit of dread in my stomach. Imogen being with me isn't helping. I wish I had dropped her off at the lodge they hired. Sabrina's stalker might be inside awaiting his sentence, but he's not the only person to stalk her. The actress has had to move three times this year because of crazy obsessed fans, men who want her, and twice because of the character she played in a TV drama. They took her acting and actions in the show literally, and one managed to attack her. What the new issue is, has been kept secret as Connor said it's private, but he has assured me there was no immediate danger. Which is ridiculous since we're taught everything is a possible danger.

"Are you okay?" Imogen asks as I pull up outside the large home. "You've been really quiet for a while now and you've not heard a word I've said."

"Sorry. I've been thinking it might be a bad idea bringing you here."

"Why? Do you think I'll embarrass you?"

"What? No!" I reply. "*Never*. I just never factored in that my attention won't be on the job I'm here to do if something happens. My first instinct will be to protect you."

She lets out a soft sigh, gazing out the window to the house. "Ben, Dad wouldn't have put you on a dangerous assignment. He assured me of that."

"You asked him?"

"I did. He was worried about you coming."

I grip the steering wheel tighter. "Does he not think I can do my job?"

“Not at all. It’s because you only went to two counselling sessions after your ordeal and the terms are you attend for two weeks.”

“I didn’t need them. She signed me off.”

“Are you sure? Because you’ve been tapping the steering wheel for twenty-five minutes and your leg has been bouncing every time we hit a red light. I think what happened has affected you more than you let on.”

“You don’t know what you’re talking about,” I reply, then lower my gaze when it comes out harsher than intended. “I’m sorry. You didn’t deserve that.”

“No, I didn’t. But you are right. I don’t know what I’m talking about. I wasn’t there. But I can comment on what I’m observing and you aren’t as okay as you’re saying you are.”

I blow out a breath and sit back. “No, I’m not. I think I’ve lost confidence in my ability to do my job. I failed Cole and Emily, and as much as people have said otherwise, I can’t change how I feel.”

“Then don’t dwell on it. Instead, learn from it,” she whispers, taking my hand. “You might not have been the hero of their story but you weren’t the villain or the reason they got hurt. Emily came to Charlotte’s after seeing you in the hospital. She broke down, blaming herself for you being hurt. She said she owed everything to you. You might not have done as much as you wanted to that night, but what you did for her during their Halloween scare fest, and then with her family, is something she can never repay you for. You have no idea what it meant to her having you there.”

“I guess. Just promise me if anything happens, you’ll run. You’ll run until you get to safety.”

She snorts. “If something does happen, I’m not leaving you.”

I cup her jaw and tilt her head up until she meets my gaze. “I’m not saying this to be heroic or to make myself look good. I’m being dead serious. If anything happens or there’s a potential threat—whether it’s here or at home—and I tell you

to run, you run. You will do more harm than good by staying. I'm not saying you can't handle yourself, because we both know you can, but I cannot do what I need to and worry about you at the same time. You will get us both hurt." I lower my hand to take hers. "My wellbeing and my life will mean nothing if I get you hurt. It's something I'll never be able to get over. So promise me you will run, or I will turn this car around and take you to the lodge. I mean it."

Seeing how much this means to me, how much it will kill me if she gets hurt in my care, she squeezes my hand. "I promise I'll run, Ben. I promise."

I lean over the parking brake and pull her in for a kiss. As I pull back, I lean my forehead against hers. "Thank you."

"Just one more thing," she breathes.

If she tells me she'll only run if something happens here, I might take her back and fuck her until she agrees. "What?" I ask as I pull back to shut off the car.

"If I act like a crazy fan in front of her, I give you permission to gag me."

I chuckle and shake my head. "With pleasure."

She smacks my arm as she unclips her belt. "We should get in there before she phones the police. I'm pretty sure she's been watching us from the downstairs window."

I grab my phone out of the storage compartment and push open the door. Imogen gets out, stretching the kink in her back as she meets me at the front of the car.

"It must be sweet to visit houses like this," she murmurs.

"I actually hate it," I admit. "There are too many blind spots."

"It is huge," she muses as the door unlocks, but she doesn't hear it and continues. "I would seriously hate to be the one who cleans it."

"It's a nightmare," Sabrina greets. "The glass tiles might look pretty, but trust me, they take a lot of work."

“Smudges?” Imogen guesses, not acting at all flustered.

Sabrina brushes her hair over her shoulder with a tinkling laugh. “Yes. I cannot wait until the remodelling starts and I get carpet,” she admits and holds out her hand. “I’m Sabrina. It’s nice to meet you.”

Imogen takes her hand and gives it a shake. “I’m Imogen.”

She pulls her cardigan tighter around her stomach. “Ah, the daughter of Connor’s boss, I assume.”

Imogen narrows her eyes slightly. “Did he say I’m a crazy fan or something? Because I’m a fan but I’m not crazy. I swear. I love a badass female as much as the next woman, but I’m not crazily obsessed. I mean, I might have watched the episode where you—”

I place my hand over Imogen’s mouth to stop her before she declares her undying love for the woman. “She’s—” I begin, but an elbow to the stomach knocks the wind out of me, and my hand drops back down to my side.

Imogen stands straighter. “I’m not crazy. I swear.”

Sabrina’s lips twist. “I’m not accusing you of being a fan. It’s actually a funny story. Connor had been ranting about a delivery and your name kept coming up. I was intrigued, and then he, um, he explained who you were.”

Imogen grimaces. “Was he really mad?”

“More freaked out and pale,” Sabrina explains.

“What am I missing? What did you send him?” I ask. I know there’s nothing going on because Connor thinks of her as an annoying sister.

“Remember when he was ignoring everyone and Dad was getting worried?”

“Yeah. It was right before Christmas,” I reply.

“Well, I had boxes of cotton wool specially delivered to him. In batches of thousands.”

“Cotton wool?” I ask, my brows pinching.

“Evidently, Connor is afraid of cotton wool,” Sabrina announces.

“Cotton wool?” I turn to Imogen. “Really? How did you figure that out?”

“The same way I know your fear is failing to protect someone.”

“Why don’t you two come on in and have a cuppa,” Sabrina offers. “I’m sorry Connor has made you check in on me tonight. I told him there was no need.”

“It’s okay. It’s my job,” I assure her, then feel Imogen tense beside me as we step inside.

Imogen bends down to unzip her boot, but Sabrina stops her. “No need to take your shoes off.”

Imogen gapes down at the glass floors. “But your floor,” she breathes.

“Will get smudged with or without the shoes,” Sabrina teases.

I close the door behind me and glance at Imogen. “Cotton wool? Really?”

She shrugs. “Don’t ask me to explain it to you.”

I really should be asking Sabrina questions, but I can’t drop this. “But he’s scared of cotton wool?”

“Not scared,” she muses, but doesn’t expand further.

“He doesn’t like the sound it makes when touched or the touch in general. He isn’t scared like one would be scared of heights. More like triggered.”

“Like someone breathing heavily, or a fork scraping across a plate,” Imogen explains.

“Still. Cotton wool?”

“Get over it already,” she mutters, shaking her head.

“Sorry,” I utter and get to the reason I’m here. As Sabrina gestures for us to take a seat at the kitchen island, I address her with my next question. “Connor assured us your attacker is

behind bars, but that there is still a matter of concern. He didn't expand on that. I'm just wondering who or what I should be looking out for."

"Connor is worrying over nothing," she admits. "Tea or coffee?"

"Coffee, strong," Imogen pleads.

"Same," I add. "Connor isn't one to worry."

She lets out a breath as she presses a button on the machine to make a coffee. "My fanmail goes through a third party. They sort through them and put them into piles of, genuine fans, obsessive fans, and potential threats. I get a lot of threatening mail. It comes with the job."

"No offence but no it doesn't," Imogen interrupts before I can speak. "Your job is to play a character. It's not a reality show. It's them who need a reality check because that shit is crazy. Connor is right to worry. And if there's anyone who is really scaring you, just send me their address. I know people."

"You know people?"

"She knows no one," I butt in, not wanting Imogen to get the Carters involved. That's all they need. A celebrity status from protecting a star. Their egos are already big enough.

"Call me," Imogen whispers.

"I don't want to make you feel like that isn't enough, but I feel like I'm missing something," I admit.

"My husband, Oliver," she begins, sliding our drinks over. "We've been separated for over a year and he's been making the divorce difficult. We've petitioned the courts and are now in the middle of breaking down our relationship. I have to prove he wasn't a good husband and the adultery. He's denying ever raising his voice, spending my earnings on his mistresses, and having a long-term affair."

"You got cheated on?" Imogen breathes, and I have to lower my head to hide my amusement. "That was meant as a compliment."

Sabrina smiles. "I know. Believe me, I get it a lot."

“Guy’s a fool,” Imogen continues. “A big one.”

“What has he been doing to make it difficult?”

“Many things. I don’t go a day without hearing from him in some way. Since the new proceedings will happen soon, he has access to my address. He is the reason I moved out of our marital home. He has a daughter from a previous relationship, and he used her during our first hearing so he could move back in. My assumption is, he was hoping I would stay there too. I didn’t. He leaked my home address for the first house and that was when I had someone break in. He refuses to let me go back into the house to collect sentimental items. Connor tried, and he used the disagreement to make me look bad in court.” She stops to take a breath. “I was wealthy before I got into acting. My parents started a trust for me when I was born. I inherited it when I turned eighteen under conditions it wasn’t overspent. When my mother passed away, I inherited half. My dad had the other half. Oliver wants half of everything, but my trust and inheritance are secured by the papers my dad had a colleague write up. Oliver would have only been able to get half if we had children, and I made sure that didn’t happen when I started to feel unsafe and unhappy.”

“I really don’t want to sound rude, but these things still don’t explain Connor’s behaviour,” I announce.

Imogen sets her mug down. “Ben’s right. Connor takes his job seriously but he never gets invested or overemotional like this. Are you two a couple?”

Sabrina smiles and loosens the belt at her waist. “You could say that.”

I gape at the small bump she was hiding behind the baggy cardigan. Unable to form words, I lean back, letting out a breath.

“Holy crap,” Imogen splutters. “No wonder he’s acting like a goon right now.”

“I’m only five months along, but there have been a few complications. He’s worried all this added stress isn’t doing me any good.”

“Congratulations to you both,” Imogen announces. “But seriously, you need to invest in more than carpets if you plan to give birth to a mini Connor. His brothers are animals. And that’s coming from me, someone whose family are, um, spirited.”

“I haven’t met his family yet. He wants to wait until the drama has died down,” she explains, but I can see how unsure she feels about it.

“Connor loves his family but they can be a bit much. If he’s not announcing the pregnancy or your relationship, then it’s because he doesn’t want to scare you away,” I assure her.

“Am I that obvious?”

“Kind of. But to be fair to you, you are going through a difficult divorce. You are bound to be a little cautious,” Imogen replies, then turns to me. “Who knew you could be sentimental.”

“Really? Right here?” I ask dryly.

She shrugs, uncaring. “Just saying. You didn’t run away when she got personal.”

“She’s a comedian,” I grumble to Sabrina.

“My cousin was telling him about a new business opening soon that she had planned to purchase, and she was getting upset over it. He practically ran away.”

“I went to use the toilet.”

“You ran,” Imogen sings.

“Like I said, comedian.”

“I am pretty funny. I could definitely do a stand-up show.”

Sabrina chuckles. “How long have you two been together?”

I feel myself pale and grip the counter. “Um…”

“We’re keeping it on the downlow. So if you could, please don’t mention this to Connor,” Imogen pleads.

“I promise. It’s not like we aren’t already keeping a secret. He said his boss can’t find out just yet.”

“Yeah. Sleeping with a client is a big no-no in their bizz,” Imogen announces, and grimaces when Sabrina pales. “It’s because some situations can be intense. They don’t want transference to occur; where the victim falls for their saviour.”

“He won’t get into trouble, will he? I don’t want him to lose his job. Because I swear to you, that isn’t what happened. I fell for him before he helped me.”

“Connor has everything handled. And I think our boss would prefer to hear he’s happy than denying himself someone who does make him happy.”

“But Ben’s the exemption,” Imogen adds brightly.

“You’re his daughter,” I argue.

She shrugs. “Just saying.”

“I promise to keep your secret if you promise to keep ours.”

“We will,” Imogen promises.

“When do you need me? Imogen and her family have rented a place not far from here so I’ll be staying with them. I won’t be far. But if there’s somewhere you need me to accompany you to, I can make sure I’m here on time.”

“It’s going to sound silly, but I need someone to come to set with me tomorrow. I’m still anxious about going since I’m still getting flowers sent to me every day and no one knows how they’re getting in,” she begins. “It’s my last day on set for a few weeks. I’ll be here the rest of the time working from home.”

“It’s not silly,” Imogen blurts out.

I hand her my card. “If you message me a time, I can come here and pick you up.”

“Thank you,” she breathes, taking the card. “I appreciate you coming here but I feel like I’m wasting your time.”

“You aren’t,” I assure her. “I’m glad I was asked to do this.”

“He gets to spend time with me, so you’re totally not wasting his time. My family would never have agreed to let him come otherwise.”

“I thought your family liked me?”

“If you think tolerating means they like you, then yeah, they like you.”

I growl as she pats my arm in pity. “Then why did Hope say she was grateful I was coming?”

“Because the lodge cost more than we predicted it would and dad is covering some of the cost.”

“Liam said he was glad another man was tagging along,” I argue.

“Because he can punch you if you touch his favourite foods,” she admits.

“We’re going,” I state darkly. Because I can’t wait to get her into bed and punish her with orgasms for being a little vixen.

“You two act like a married couple,” Sabrina muses. “Imogen, I know you are with your family, but you’re welcome to tag along tomorrow.”

Imogen sits up straighter. “Can I bring my—”

“Nope. No Carters,” I blurt out.

“I’m a Carter,” she growls.

“You’re a Smith. And you’re mine,” I point out.

“I love it when you say I’m yours,” she breathes. “It makes me pity you.”

And she had to go and ruin it.

“Come on.”

“I’ll check my schedule and message you,” Sabrina promises as we begin to make our way to the front door.

“Thank you for hosting us,” I tell her.

“You’re more than welcome.”

As she watches us walk back to my car, I lean down so only Imogen can hear me. “Have I told you how much your sass turns me on?”

“Really? How badly?”

“Badly enough that I might not make it back to the lodge.”

“Promises, promises,” she sings, then gives one last wave to Sabrina, who is standing in the doorway.

This is going to be a long four days.

I had planned to give her time with her family, knowing these outings mean a lot to them. I’m going to struggle to share her with them because I don’t think I’ll be able to keep my hands off her.

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

Imogen

Staring into the open cupboard, then back at the haul I brought back from Tesco's, I begin to get to work, grabbing all of the food with the tabs labelled 'Maddox'.

I throw his favourite cereal into the freezer compartment, mix his M&M's with some Skittles, and then grab the box of Oreos, knowing I'll need to do them last.

As the microwave dings, I head over to it, feeling judgement coming from my audience.

"You could help," I grumble as I begin dipping Brussels sprouts into the melted chocolate.

"I'm not getting involved," Ben maintains as he grabs one of the last few chocolate strawberries and pops it in his mouth.

There would have been a lot more but Maddox decided to ruin my surprise. I bought chocolate covered strawberries and champagne. He left us four out of the twenty that were there.

As I finish up with the Brussels sprouts, I pop them in the fridge and begin to work on the Oreos. After scrapping out the yummy middle, I replace it with toothpaste. "He stole our dinner. And snacks. He did the unthinkable and thinks he will get away with it."

"And we went out and got more," he whispers when we hear noise from above. "I know better than to get between a Carter and their food."

I sniff, glancing away from his reasonable answer. "What about your girlfriend, who you absolutely adore and worship? What about the fact she had *hers* stolen?"

"You don't even know it was Maddox," he whisper yells. "Just put the Oreos down and come to bed. We've got to be up early, remember."

“Look, if you need to sleep, then go to bed,” I growl, breaking the biscuit in my hand in the process. “But I am not leaving until the last one of these has been replaced with toothpaste. And it was Maddox. He was caught chocolate-handed. It was bad enough he stole my lunch. But to steal my snacks too... Nuh-uh.”

“Jesus Christ,” he mumbles as he grabs another knife. “If they do something to me in my sleep, I will retaliate regardless of the consequences or how you feel about it.”

My shoulders drop as I lean over and press a kiss to his lips. “I wouldn’t expect anything less.”

As he takes another Oreo, he states, “I still think we should just go to bed. He isn’t worth it.”

“Ben, he took everything I had planned for us tonight. The chocolate strawberries? I planned to have them whilst we soaked in that big tub. The whipped cream? I planned to let you lick it off me or vice versa. I never got that far ahead. And the tubs of snacks? I had planned to have those after we had wild, wild sex.”

“Pass me that goddamn toothpaste,” he growls. “And go and put the shaving cream in the whipped cream he bought.”

I grin as I grab the last packet and hand it to him. I head over to my bag of goodies and pull out the shaving cream. I didn’t know what I was going to do with it when I bought it, but this is probably better than anything I could have come up with.

Once I’m done, I place it back in the fridge and marvel over my handiwork. He will never see this coming. Not when it’s me. If he had messed with Hayden’s food or his brother’s, he would be wary about his own.

I turn back to the breakfast bar and help put the Oreos back in their packets. Once we’re done, we’ll be heading up to bed. I’m kind of gutted we can’t just sit in front of the fire and stay up all night.

The lodge is beautiful and bigger than the pictures let on. Hayden, Amelia, and I tagged the main rooms with en-suites

since we were part of a couple. Madison, Hope and Ciara took the biggest room, as the bed was massive. The three could have bagged the two adjoining rooms, but they didn't want to leave one of them alone. Liam and Mark are bunking in the double room, since the last two rooms are for Landon and Paisley, then Charlotte and Drew.

The main floor has a huge living room, a cinema room, kitchen, laundry room, and a downstairs toilet. Down from us is a games room, gym, and a sauna.

Out on the deck is a seating area and a huge hot tub, which the others took advantage of whilst we went to visit Sabrina.

I can't wait to go exploring as we're surrounded by beautiful scenery. Whilst the others are going canoeing tomorrow, we are going to set. Much to Hayden's dismay because she's always wanted to see how it all works.

"What is that?" Ben asks, gesturing to the little device I pull out of my bag.

I arch a brow. "I'm no amateur, Mr Donovan. This little nifty device is to reseal the packets. He will never know they were opened until he bites into them."

He tags me around the waist, pulling me between his legs where he's sat on the counter. "How did I not know how devious you are?"

I grin. "Does it turn you on?"

"It scares me a little," he admits, but the corners of his lips tug up into a grin.

I wrap my arms around his neck. "Good. You now know never to get between me and my food."

He kisses the corner of my mouth. "Now, is there anything more you need to do or can I take you to bed now?"

"You can take me to bed," I confirm with another dramatic sniff.

He slides off the side and lifts me up by the back of my thighs. I kiss him, enjoying the freedom I feel when he kisses

me back. There's no fear over getting caught, or any anxiety from keeping this a secret from my dad.

I pull back. "Wait, put me down," I cry quietly. He does and I race over to the Oreos and quickly pop them back where I stole them from. I run back over and he catches me. I swing my hair out of my face. "Now you can take me to bed."

His pupils darken. "I'm going to make sure your vengeance is forgotten. No more distractions."

"Promise," I whisper against his lips.

*** **

I always thought doggy style was a way for a person to detach themselves from the intimacy that comes with sex.

But as it goes, Ben has a fascination with the curve of my back, and my arse. It has nothing to do with him wanting to imagine another woman, or not grow close. If anything, this feels more intimate, since I'm completely at his mercy. I feel vulnerable yet powerful, which has only heightened my arousal.

I would never have done this with the men I've had sex with before. Albeit, there are only two others, but still, doing this would never have entered my mind.

With one hand still digging into my hip, he frees the other to curve around to my front, pinching and tugging at my nipples until I have to reach down and bite into the pillow to avoid alerting everyone in the lodge to what we are doing.

When his thrusts become punishing, I know it won't be long until my orgasm hits me. The heavy sway of my tits and the sound of our skin slapping together feels dirty, raunchy, and I like it. I like it even more when he presses down on my tailbone. It somehow makes him thrust deeper inside of me.

"Oh God," I groan as he grabs my hips and slams me against him. His balls hit my flesh, completely undoing me.

My vision blurs as wave after wave of my orgasm hits me. Never have I felt one this strong, and never has one made me collapse, completely spent.

“Fuck,” he growls, his dick twitching as his own orgasm is released inside of me.

I want to crawl away when he continues to thrust, this time softer. I have never felt this sensitive, not to the point I want to cry because it feels so good. My body can't handle any more.

He drops down beside me, sparing me from having to move away. I turn to cock my leg up over his, forgetting I haven't wiped myself clean. I feel it dripping between my legs, onto his thigh, but he doesn't flinch or move away.

I rest my chin on his chest and blink up at him as he runs his fingers along my spine. “Tell me a flaw about you,” I demand softly.

“A flaw?” he questions as his brows pinch together.

“Yes. Because it's unnerving that I can't find anything wrong with you.”

His lips twitch. “Is putting my foot in my mouth not enough?”

I think about it for a second, then let out a sigh. “Actually, it is. I keep forgetting about that.”

“Which I'm grateful for. I was a shitty person to you, and I want to make amends.”

“By killing me with orgasms?”

“Are you complaining?”

I smile wide as I drop down to rest against him. “Not even a little,” I reply. My fingers go to the scar on his side, the one that almost took his life. “You must have been scared during the night you got this.”

“I think it went deeper than fear,” he whispers.

I lean back to look at him. “What do you mean?”

“I knew my injuries were bad. I knew there was a high chance I wouldn’t get out of there, but my fear wasn’t because of death itself. It was the regrets I would go to my grave with. It scared me more than not seeing tomorrow.”

“You said that before but never explained what regrets,” I tell him quietly.

“If I tell you, will you keep my secret and not ruin my reputation as a badass?”

I pat his chest. “It’s funny you think you had one to begin with,” I tease. “But I swear to take it to my grave.”

“I regretted not being able to keep my word with Cole and Emily. I couldn’t keep them safe. But mostly, I regretted you.”

“Me?” I ask, my breath hitching.

“Yes, you,” he tells me, and closes his eyes. “I regretted being unable to stay away, even when you needed me to. I regretted not telling you how I really felt about you. All I pictured when I was hurt, was you. You kept me breathing. You kept me focused. And it was your voice I wanted to hear. Then Emily found me. She applied pressure to my wound, and it wasn’t Emily whispering above me. It was you. I couldn’t form words or tell her to pass on a message. I couldn’t do much of anything. I’ve made many mistakes in my life, but I have never had regrets.”

“Then why did you try to keep me at arm’s length? Why not tell me everything? We missed so much time together.”

“You already know the answer,” he reminds me. “It had nothing to do with anything else. Not you, and not us.”

I lower my gaze, feeling like a fool. I recall what Stefania said to me at the birthday meal. I didn’t understand it then, but I do now. And what I’ve put on Ben, what I’ve made him turn his back on, is worse than what Zach did to me when he tried to keep me from my family. “I’m sorry,” I whisper.

“Sorry?” he asks, tilting my chin.

“Your sister told me not too long ago that you are just like your dad. You have the same pride, and the same honour of

keeping your word. Making you go against everything you are, everything you pride yourself in, is something I should never have done. I couldn't see past my own needs and wants to truly see what keeping this secret would do to you."

"My sister has a big mouth," he comments. "But there is something I've come to realise. Evan reminds me of my father. His family is his world and they mean everything to him. You guys probably made him the man he is today, the same as my mum and siblings changed my dad. I look up to Evan in a way I haven't with anyone since my dad died. He's become family. And as much as I hate keeping this from him, I always think if he does have a problem, he isn't the man I believe him to be. The man I know would want his daughter to be happy. And although I'm probably nothing more than a member of staff he is fond of, I would like to hope he sees me as worthy of you. That's what I couldn't see before. I couldn't see past the promise I made at a young age."

I cup his jaw. "I want to say I know how he will react, but I've learned recently that people can surprise you. But I don't think he will have a problem with it. He's never spoken a bad word about you. I never got the lecture saying, stay away from Ben; he has dozens of conquests on his bedpost."

"Enough of talking about your dad whilst we're naked," he remarks, and twists us until he's lying over me. He nips my chin, grinning. "We need to shower."

"We should be getting some sleep. We have to be up early."

"Sabrina messaged me when you went to get a glass of water. She said to be at hers for ten."

I wrap my arms around his neck, smirking. "Then what are you waiting for? Let's go get dirty in the shower."

As he slides off the bed, he doesn't wait for me to follow. He hauls me up over his shoulder, and I can't help the boisterous laugh that escapes me. Never did I believe our relationship would be like this. Teasing, laughter, and so open.

But as he flips on the shower, my mind wanders back to my dad. He loves his children, and he is overly protective. I wasn't lying when I said my dad hasn't said a bad word against Ben. But that could change the moment he finds out we're sleeping together. I have no idea how he will react, or if he will approve. And now that I've really thought about it, I'm not sure I want to tell him. I don't want to ruin what Ben and I have.

There's dread in the pit of my stomach, and I have to wonder, when it comes down to it, when my dad finally figures out the truth, will Ben pick me or his job?

CHAPTER THIRTY

Ben

The studio isn't what I thought it would be. The place looks like a real town. It has worn out railings, weeds, and even litter and leaves in places, but it's all fake. I'll never be able to watch this television drama without noticing all the things that aren't real.

Sabrina only shot one scene outside her on-set home, another inside, which was on another part of the set, and now they are in a huge marquee doing a wedding reception.

I move through the corridors back to her changing room and unlock the door to let myself in. I close the door firmly shut behind me and move over to her dressing table. There, sat in the centre, is a bouquet of roses, the card still attached. I lean down to read it.

Bitch, that sex scene might have looked modest on the big screen, but I have the entire tape. Thanks for making me money by taking your clothes off, whore.

Connor warned me she had some crazy fans, but I assumed it would be dramatic declarations of love, or demented messages of hate.

I pull out my phone and snap a picture, before I pick out the card and pull out my kit. When no prints show up, I snap a picture anyway, to prove to Connor I tried.

Dialling his number, he answers on the second ring. "What's happened? Is Sabrina okay?"

"Sabrina is fine. But she received some roses at her work. I'm sending you a picture," I tell him as I quickly send it in our private WhatsApp chat.

"Fuck!" he hisses. "I'm coming back."

"I'll stay with her," I promise. "You don't need to do that."

“Are you with her now? Put her on,” he demands.

“She’s shooting a scene,” I explain.

“So you aren’t with her? Are you fucking kidding me right now? She’s—”

He stops himself from revealing the truth, so I let him know I already know, and that I understand his concern. “She’s pregnant, I know. Don’t worry, I have her covered. Imogen is there and she will call me if anyone is acting suspicious.”

“She told you?”

“Yes. And no, I’m not upset you didn’t tell me,” I muse.

“Fuck off!” he remarks, then mutters under his breath, “Shit, I’m coming back.”

“I’ve got her covered,” I assure him.

“No. I’m nearly done here anyway. I’ll just move my timeline up and make my way home tonight,” he announces with a heavy breath.

“Look, I’m not going to try and talk you out of it. If this is what you need to do, then do it. But I promise you, nothing will happen to her under my watch.”

“I’ve been going crazy being away from her. I can’t sleep because I’m too fucking worried. She wants to quit, but man, she loves her job. It would be like one of us quitting. We wouldn’t know who we are.”

“She told us this morning that she wants to be a mum and is working with the producers for a way out of her contract. She said when the time is right, she wants to get into producing her own movies or TV shows. She doesn’t need to be on the screen to do what she loves.”

I hear another heavy sigh, and I can picture him rubbing a hand over his face. “She never mentioned that to me.”

“Did you let her?”

He lets out a weary chuckle. “Probably not. I’ve been too busy not giving into what these fuckers want her to do. She

shouldn't have to put up with this crap.”

“I'm going to get back to her. Is there anything you want me to pass on?”

“Yeah. Tell her I'm coming home tonight.”

“Alright. I'll check in again once she's home,” I tell him.

“Thank you for letting me know. I know your orders are to report to Evan.”

“You're welcome.”

“Hey, before you go, have you told Imogen how you feel about her?”

My back straightens, and every muscle in my body tenses. “What?”

He has the gall to laugh. “Like we're blind to it. Me and some of the guys have a bet on for when you'll finally grow a pair and go for it. We see the way you look at her. And we see the way she looks at you. Since you're both on a getaway together, I thought that meant you had taken the leap.”

“Do you really want me to tell the guys that you love heart-to-hearts?”

He laughs even harder. “Then you'd have to tell them about the subject.”

“I'll tell them you were crying over a hallmark movie,” I taunt.

“Message clear. You don't want to talk about it. Which, if you think about it, tells me everything. You—”

“Goodbye, Connor,” I snap, and end the call.

Shit!

I wanted to ask who knew, and who made the bet. I didn't want to admit it, but I couldn't deny it either. Denying it felt like I would be dishonouring Imogen and everything she means to me. I won't do that to her. I can't.

Which means, if they know, it won't be long before Evan finds out. One side of me wants to get it over and done with,

but then the other, the part that looks up to him, doesn't want to let him down. By breaking my promise, I already let myself down. I can't find it in me to be sorry for it though. She's worth it. Us together are worth it. Acting like I'm ashamed of my choices would be like telling her I'm ashamed of her, and I'm not.

I head back out, locking up behind me, and make my way back to the marquee they have set up in a large open space. Green screens have been placed on all the windows they have, and Sabrina explained it will show fields or greenery. The out of the marquee scene won't be shot until they travel out to a location they have set up to do it.

It takes me five minutes to get there, and when I do, Imogen is where I left her, surrounded by snacks of all kinds. One of the producers' assistants had been getting annoyed with her going up to the snack table every five minutes and sarcastically asked if she would like a selection brought over. Imogen, knowing she was being sarcastic, pasted on a smile and profusely thanked her for being so considerate. Within ten minutes, they had a few side tables set out next to her with snacks.

She's chomping on popcorn as the producer yells cut and orders the cast and extras to take five minutes.

"Dude, you missed *a lot*," she calls out. "That guy just told his son's girlfriend to meet him in the bathroom. They're having an affair. And I'm pretty sure he's about to kick some extras off set."

I lean over and capture her lips in a kiss. It feels good not to hold back. Being so free with her makes me realise we need to tell her dad when we get back. Because there is a high chance I will fuck up and kiss her in front of everyone out of habit.

"Having fun?" I tease.

"Totally. It's all going to blow up because his wife is also having an affair—with his son from a previous marriage. The dad's mum is drunk and has already figured it out. She's just deciding whether or not to reveal it all. She hates Sabrina. But

Sabrina has already said, if you tell him my secret, then I'm going to tell his son who his dad is fucking behind their back."

"Do they really have an argument if they're both cheating?"

"Sabrina's is new and she did it for revenge. The son isn't into her like that. But she's blackmailing him and saying she's carrying his child," she reveals, all giddy. "I cannot wait for this to play out."

Sabrina makes her way over, slowly dropping herself down in the chair, and pushes the white shawl off her shoulders. It's hiding the bump perfectly on screen. It's amazing how they did it. The one scene where she had it off, she was standing behind a table, and the flower décor on top was hiding her small bump. "These shoes are killing me," she groans.

"What size are they?" Imogen asks. She tries to ask innocently, but I know her obsession with shoes.

"Five," she answers.

Imogen's eyes glaze over. "Do they let you keep them?"

"Sometimes, why?" Sabrina questions, watching her closely.

"Immy," I call, grinning. "You can't steal the shoes."

She pouts. "But they're so pretty," she teases, nuzzling my nose before kissing me. She pulls back to look to Sabrina. "I'm normally a boot girl, but those shoes are something I would kill for. No lie."

"If you'll be an extra for thirty minutes, I'll give you the damn shoes," Neil, the producer, snaps. "Fucking idiots are wasting my time by looking into the camera."

"I'll get the shoes?" Imogen asks.

"Yes, and I'll even give you the dress you wear if you say yes now."

"I'm in."

“The man too. I need a couple slow dancing who actually look like they love each other instead of two people awkwardly looking elsewhere,” he demands, then clicks his fingers. “Sandra, get the girl dressed up. Then grab him a suit.”

“No,” I reply as he walks off.

Imogen bounces in her chair, turning to me. “Come on. It will be so much fun.”

“No.”

“What if I offered you the sex I had planned for last night? Whipped cream and chocolate,” she sings.

I lean in close. “You’re a bad, bad girl, Imogen Smith.”

She grins. “And you like it.”

She presses a kiss to my lips before following Sandra to a dressing room. When a guy holding a suit stands in front of me, I know I need to follow. There is no way I’m letting another guy dance with her.

“Have fun,” Sabrina muses.

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I let out a loud groan when the director yells cut for the third time. If he does it one more time, I’m shoving my fist down his throat.

The first time was because a woman smashed the champagne fountain and they had to redo it. The second time was my fault, but instead of yelling at me they should be thanking me because I saved the entire set. One of the extras tripped on a wire, and it came loose halfway. Now, I have no clue what the fool is yelling about.

When he stops in front of us, glaring daggers, I want to warn him to watch his words and remind him that he asked us to do this. We’re doing him a favour. We aren’t after some big break.

“Can you not look so stiff? You’re at a wedding. You aren’t twelve being forced to do a school play.”

“Funny, it feels like it,” I grumble.

Imogen smiles. “Am I allowed to help him relax? Or do you need us to keep to the direction you’ve given us?”

He pinches the bridge of his nose. “Honestly, do what the fuck you want as long as you don’t get into the main scene and you bloody dance,” he barks.

“Got it.”

I glance down at Imogen. This seemed worth it when she came back out wearing a soft green, thin-strapped dress, which had a split that ran up high her thigh. I’m not sure what they’ve done to her hair but it looks professional with loose curls flowing out of the up do. Her makeup stayed light, but fuck, she looked gorgeous. I had to adjust my trousers.

But now I have had enough.

“Stop frowning,” she whispers, and wraps her arms around my neck. “And lean in closer.”

“Action!”

I do, still flowing to the music that isn’t even playing. When she nudges my nose with her own, I forget about the dozens of people watching and only focus on her.

She presses her body closer, her lips hovering just over mine in a tease, until I capture them. She doesn’t let me stop dancing, and soon enough, I let myself follow her steps, doing anything I can to keep the kiss going. If I could do this until the day I die, I’ll leave this world a happy man. Kissing has always been a hit or a miss thing with me. But with Imogen, I find myself never wanting to stop. I could do this dance with her forever.

When she pulls back, she keeps her hand on the nape of my neck and keeps her gaze on mine. Her chest rises and falls, and a flush begins to work up her cheeks.

The scene breaks out behind us. “You stay the fuck away from my son,” is screamed.

Imogen and I break apart as instructed, and remembering what I need to do, I pull her away, watching the scene unfold.

“You can’t make me,” Sabrina snaps, shoving at the older woman.

“I will tell him,” the pretend mum hisses.

As the man comes in, and the scene gets more heated, I pull Imogen further from where the scene is going on and keep her close. She doesn’t need to act like she’s in shock, because she is. She’s watching the entire scene in fascination, and when the truth comes out about the affair, she glances up at me and mouths, “Holy crap.”

As the scene comes to an end, and it looks like the actors are leaving, the director calls cut. Sabrina heads over to us, a huge smile on her face. “You two are so cute together.”

“Did we do okay?” Imogen asks.

“You were perfect.”

“Yeah, do you want a job?” the director asks. “You are a natural. The man is not.”

Imogen laughs. “Thank you for the offer but I’m more of a tech girl.”

Sabrina smiles as the director leaves, muttering under his breath about a wasted talent.

“I forgot to mention earlier that Connor is arriving home early,” I disclose.

Her brows pinch together. “Not because of the flowers? I told him to stay there and spend time with his family.”

My gaze softens at her words. “You’re his family now. They will understand. And if I know Connor, he will get them down here soon.”

“I don’t want him to keep dropping stuff for me. I know he should have been on another assignment by now.”

“He’s been doing assignments. He just doesn’t leave town to do them,” I reassure her. “Let him do this.”

“All right,” she replies. “I feel bad you’ve come all this way and are only working the day.”

“I’m glad I came. Me and Imogen got to spend some time together.”

“Yeah. It’s just a shame we’ll only get one day to ourselves. My other relatives are arriving today, and when we get back, we’re doing a barbeque. Tomorrow, we’re going to the outdoor ski centre.”

“You should climb up to the bluff that’s on the land you’re staying on. There’s a story that if a new couple reaches the top and leaves an item that belongs to them, their relationship will last a lifetime.”

“We’ve not heard anything about that,” Imogen tells her, her interest piqued.

Sabrina shares a smile. “You wouldn’t. The town has a lot of tourist attractions. The people want to keep some things to themselves. But it’s not a secret it’s there. It’s just not advertised. It’s spread by word of mouth.”

Imogen glances up at me, biting her lip. “I don’t own a pair of trainers.”

“Not one pair?” I ask, sure she’s pulling my leg.

“Not one,” she answers.

“But you’ve gone to the gym.”

“I went to take self-defence classes and I did it in high-heeled boots.”

“You took self-defence classes in boots?” I repeat, unable to comprehend what I’m hearing.

She has to be pulling my leg.

“If I’m going to get attacked, it’s going to be in boots. There would be no point in me wearing trainers to practise if I’m just going to twist my ankle trying to fight off an attacker in my boots. At least now I know I can fight back wearing boots.”

Sabrina's eyes are wide, and she nervously runs her hand over her stomach. "You need self-defence classes?"

"Yeah. Um... My family has a tendency to be in the wrong place at the wrong time," she admits. "You should take them too. I can set you up with a great instructor if you ever come down. Or get Connor to teach you. Dad said he's good."

"Her family tends to cause trouble wherever they go, she means to say," I correct. "And Connor can teach you the basics but it's always better to get a teacher who isn't afraid to go hard on you."

"I'll keep that in mind," she replies softly before turning to Imogen. "I have heard about your family. The Carters, right?"

"Yeah. How did you know?" Imogen questions warily.

"I listen to a certain radio station religiously, and Connor always turns it off. When I asked what his problem was, thinking he might have dated the radio host, he explained that he knew her and told me it's not an act. She really is that badass."

"He called her a badass?" Imogen asks, her entire face lighting up.

Sabrina winces. "That's not the word he used. He said chaotic, psychotic, and neurotic," she admits.

Imogen splutters out a laugh. "That's about right too. But you should meet her dad. He has way more, um, character."

"You don't want to do that," I butt in.

"Why?" Sabrina replies.

"Even with all your money, you wouldn't be able to afford the therapy you'd need after meeting him. Trust me." Noticing the other actors are no longer lingering around, I change the subject. "Are you finished now?"

"Yes. He doesn't want to start the next scene because of how much time has already passed so he's sending everyone home."

When she yawns, I know it's time to get her home. "Come on, let's get you back. Connor shouldn't be too long now."

As Imogen takes my hand and we walk across the stage area, she leans over to look at Sabrina. "Can I really keep the dress?"

"Yes. He would never have said it if he didn't mean it."

My shoulders drop at her answer because I can't wait to take it off her.

I just have to get through a night with the Carters first.

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

Imogen

I watch with a grimace as Maddox goes flying down the slope, taking Landon, Drew and Mark with him in his attempt to tackle Ben. He didn't count on the fact this isn't Ben's first time on a ski slope. Ben skilfully moved himself and Charlotte out of the way before they took her out too. Ben and Charlotte are the first to reach the bottom, and after they've unclipped the board from their feet, they begin to make their way over to where me, Hope and Ciara are taking a breather.

Well, the girls are. I'm still sulking over the fact I had to wear pumps. They feel unnatural on my feet and I'm walking like I've got something shoved up my arse.

"Your cousin is going to get someone killed," Ben hisses.

"You shouldn't have touched his food," Hope and Ciara reply like they rehearsed it.

Ben's not going to give me up even though Maddox already knows I played a part in it. He's just too afraid to confront me.

"I'll do more if he keeps trying to take me off the slope," Ben growls as he turns to Charlotte. "Are you okay?"

Ever since I told him what happened to her, and why she is still a little jumpy around people, he has changed the way he treats her. Most people mistreat her, thinking she has a screw loose or something, but she really is that sweet. Still, she is a Carter and has a conniving streak just like the rest of us.

When I addressed his change in behaviour, he surprised me by saying that he's always thought she was too good for this world, and to know someone did that to her, it made him wish he could kill the bastard who hurt her. I'm not even jealous of what he said because every little bit of it is true. She is too good for this world. He also has three sisters, so I can understand his concern. What happened to Charlotte happens to a majority of women.

In a daze, she pulls her gaze away from the slope to answer him. “I’m admiring my boyfriend.”

Ben’s lips twitch as he walks over to pluck me off the chair like I weigh nothing before dropping down, depositing me on his lap. I huff out a breath, pretending like I don’t think it’s sweet.

“Are you really still in a mood about the shoes?”

“I could have done this better in my boots,” I reveal.

“No, you really couldn’t have,” Hope teases. “Remember when we went sledging in the snow?”

“It was a one-time thing,” I argue.

“What about when you went arse over tit from the ice at the office?” Ben questions. “Cause none of us had an issue walking across the car park. Want to know why?”

“No, I really don’t.”

“Because we had better shoes,” he answers anyway.

“My legs are aching,” Charlotte announces as she takes a seat.

“Did you get hurt?” Ciara asks, biting her bottom lip.

“No, I had a lot of sex,” Charlotte blurts out, then goes back to staring at her boyfriend like she didn’t just reveal personal information.

“Well okay,” Ciara replies, unable to hide her amusement.

“Must be from going around his huge frame,” Hope mutters dreamily.

I laugh. “You will find someone,” I promise her. “Maybe on the cruise.”

Faith and Beau are planning their honeymoon before their wedding and decided to make the best of it by inviting all of the family. My aunt Harlow has said she will cover half since she only has one daughter’s wedding to pay for. Her parents died young and left her with a lot of money. Both of the twins got their trust fund when they turned twenty-one, and Trent

will get his when he comes of age. Maddox started his construction company, and Madison is happy with her florist shop and market stall that is open on a Thursday and Saturday. She wanted to expand to open a bridal or party shop, where she could display chairs, tables, and décor flower arrangements with the proper setting, but she got outbid and still hasn't gotten over it.

"I actually can't believe we'll all be going away together at the same time. We've not done that for awhile," I muse.

"No, I'm pretty sure the last time was when the triplets dared the twins to put tap water in that mean woman's drink," Ciara reveals.

Hope splutters out a laugh. "Oh my god, yeah. She didn't make it to the toilet and they had to close the entire pool area off to clean up shit."

"So glad we aren't abroad," Ben declares, knowing they would have done that to him.

"Are you coming on the cruise? We reserved two places just in case anyone wanted to bring a plus one," Hope asks, and I don't miss the twitch of her lips.

"We're still keeping it on the downlow," I tell them, unable to keep my embarrassment in check. I've never lied to my family and I don't like doing it now. We've all been raised to be comfortable enough to go to our parents. The consequences were ten times worse if we didn't go to them.

"If I can get the time off, and it's alright with Faith, then yeah."

I spin to face him so fast. "What about Dad?" I ask.

"I think we should tell him together when we're back. I don't want you to keep this from him anymore. And I don't want to pretend you aren't mine."

"She's not an object," Hayden snaps as she takes the free chair by Charlotte.

"No, she's much more than a possession and you know it. She is mine just as much as I am hers and I'm getting seriously

tired of the digs,” Ben growls.

Hayden grins, relaxing back. “Well okay then.”

“You traitor,” Liam hisses.

“Excuse you?” Hayden sweetly replies.

“Don’t talk to the enemy. You know what he did to me,” he hisses.

“Oh, for God’s sake,” I remark, but Ben covers my lips with his hand.

“Let it play out,” he whispers.

“You’ve only got yourself to blame,” Hayden sniffs, picking up her water.

“You’re supposed to be one third of me. And you’re taking his side,” he hisses. “That’s a betrayal I cannot forgive.”

“Did you hear me ask for it?” she asks. “No.”

“Landon, are you going to let her do this after what he did?”

Landon arches a brow as he pulls Paisley down on his lap. “Hayden’s right. You let it happen and it’s a let-down.”

“He put toothpaste in my Oreos,” Liam screeches. “It’s bad enough Beau won’t come and arrest him but to have my siblings take his side...” He shakes his head. “We’re meant to be triplets.”

“And we taught you better than to leave food out in the open,” Hayden snarks.

“They were in a cupboard,” he yells. “You know my love for Oreos and he destroyed them.”

“Yet you still ate them,” Ben responds.

“Do not speak to me,” Liam snaps, holding his hand up. “You might have avoided my attempts at revenge, but mark my words, I will get you back for this heinous act against my Oreos.”

“Oh my god, it was me. I did it. Leave Ben alone,” I warn. In all fairness, I didn’t know they were his. But I don’t regret it

since Hope told me Liam was Maddox's accomplice. "And if you think of doing anything to me, I will make you so sick you won't touch food again. Let this be a lesson to you for touching my food."

Before he can utter a word, Landon tugs him down into a chair. "She has you and you know it."

"You let us down, brother," Hayden mutters, turning away from him. "You should know better."

As Liam keeps his glare on me, I turn to Drew, who is taping Mark's fingers together. "Shit, what happened to you?" I ask.

Mark sends a glare at Maddox, who is still on the bottom of the slope, trying his hardest not to fall head over tit. "Him. He makes accidents look convincing," Mark growls.

"Nearly took off his fingers," Drew growls. "That would have been Charlotte had Ben not moved her quickly enough."

"I went to help her, but Ben got there first, which is why I ended up in her spot," Mark reveals.

We all turn to Maddox, who stops his struggle for a second. "I only meant to take out one person."

"You took out twelve," Ciara replies. "Those kids will never find the fun in doing this again."

"Hey mister," a little girl snaps. Maddox glances down, gulping. When she punches him in the nuts, he falls to the ground with a thud, groaning with his hands on his balls. "Don't get between me and the slope again."

"He won't," Amelia promises, glaring down at Maddox as the little girl storms off. "I told you not to."

"Oh my god, I think my balls are in my stomach," he wheezes. "I don't think I'm gonna have any more kids."

"Oh my god, get up," Amelia grumbles. Taking pity on her, Drew heads over, lifts Maddox by the scruff of his coat, and drags him over to solid ground.

“Did you not hear me mention my balls?” Maddox cries when Drew drops him down close to where we are sitting. “And who let that psychotic child off its leash?”

“Dude, you have issues,” Liam comments. Feeling all our gazes on him, he narrows his eyes. “What?”

Hope laughs. “If he has issues, so do you,” she tells him.

Maddox peels himself and his dignity up off the floor. “Are we eating now?”

Madison arrives at the table. “Yes,” she announces, then pulls out a receipt with scribbles on the back. “Maddox, Liam, Mark, Landon and Hayden owe me fifty quid each.”

“Fifty? What the hell did you order, a five-course meal?” Liam asks.

“I can go back and tell them to cancel everything you ordered,” she tells him. “Hope and Ciara owe me fifteen each. Amelia’s, Paisley’s and Charlotte’s were ten. Drew, yours and Ben’s cost sixteen. Immy, yours cost twenty-five.”

“What did you order?” Ben asks, no judgement in his tone.

“A pizza in case I don’t like the sandwich, fries, potato wedges, and some cheesy garlic balls,” I disclose, before remembering, “Oh, and a drink.”

“I’m stealing those garlic balls,” he muses.

“I might be persuaded to share,” I tease.

His eyelids lower as a smirk reaches his lips. “What do you want in return?”

“For you to come with me on the sledging slope,” I admit.

“Oh, that reminds me, they do have one for longer legs,” Charlotte announces. “Please come on it with me.”

“Not literally,” Liam coughs out, earning a glare from Drew.

Drew turns away to smile adoringly at Charlotte. “Then we’ll go on it as many times as you want.”

“Yay,” she squeals, kissing him, which earns a few groans from the lads around the table.

I love him for her. They are not an obvious match, but together, they fit. I couldn't picture her with anyone else now. He treats her differently. He doesn't coddle her the way we do, but he still treats her with care. He doesn't speak for her, but he will stand and support her. And although he would kill for her, he makes sure she can stand up for herself. He loves her just as much as she loves him, and it's been beautiful to see another side to her. He did that. Not us. And unless he breaks her heart, he will always have my vote.

“That kid is staring at me,” Maddox whispers, his wary gaze aimed on the other side of the food court.

Amelia glances over and laughs. “You made an enemy.”

“I knew we should have brought the kids. Jasmine would have put the psycho in her place.”

“She looks like she might follow you home to finish the job,” Landon observes.

We all glance back over, and sure enough, she points at Maddox before cutting her finger across her neck.

Liam shudders. “Definitely triple lock the doors tonight.”

“Hopefully there are no kids on the cruise. One might push you overboard,” Hayden remarks. “It would be tempting.”

“No pushing anyone overboard,” Clay mutters.

“Yeah, it ain't the Titanic,” Maddox snaps. “There won't be a door waiting for me.”

“No, you'd probably sink the door,” Madison comments.

“I would not,” he yells, aghast.

“God, if a kid doesn't throw you over, I will,” she promises.

“I'm your twin,” he barks.

“Not conjoined so I'll be safe,” she replies.

“Are they always like this?” Ben asks.

“Yes,” everyone replies, making me laugh.

“This is tame compared to what it’s normally like. We come away to blow off steam,” I assure him.

“The police actually suggested it a few years ago now, and we’ve been going away ever since,” Hope explains. “It makes their job easier.”

“Easier?” Ben questions. “I’m pretty sure I heard they have your picture on a board in the staff room. Max Carter’s has a warning sign not to feed him.”

“It’s true,” I tell them when they go to argue.

Liam grins. “I knew they fucking loved us.”

Drew clears his throat. “I don’t think it’s a temple.”

“Yeah, more like a most wanted board,” Ben answers.

Mark’s grin couldn’t get any bigger. “Wait until I tell the others. We need to get a picture with it.”

“Ask Beau to take one,” Charlotte offers.

I smile. “I think he means he wants one standing next to it.”

Mark nods, along with the others, and Charlotte turns to Ben, her complexion pale. “Am I on it?”

“No. Neither is Madison,” he tells her.

“Wait? I’m on it?” Hope asks, narrowing her gaze. “Why am I on it?”

Ben shifts beneath me. “Um, I don’t know.”

“Yes, you do,” Landon calls him out. “Why is she on it? Tell us.”

“Because you stole a dog,” he answers.

“Oh God,” Charlotte whispers, her flesh even paler. “I’m so sorry, Hope. I’ll hand myself in.”

“What?” Drew asks.

Hope clears her throat. “It was a misunderstanding. I was returning the dog.”

“Returning it?” he questions.

“Because I stole him,” Charlotte rasps.

“Meaning you set him free,” Drew replies. “You didn’t steal him.”

“What? How did you know?” Hope asks.

“Because Charlotte wouldn’t steal a dog from a loving home,” he responds before turning to Charlotte. “What happened?”

“They had him tied up in the garden and he was always whining with his tail tucked up.”

“So the police should have given you a reward,” I declare, and the others nod with a grunt.

“We’ll make sure they’re corrected,” Landon promises.

“Thank you,” she breathes out, relaxing.

“Food,” Maddox blurts out, sniffing the air. When I don’t see anyone bringing anything out, I think he might be mistaken, but then three waiters walk out with bags of food.

I turn to Ben whilst the others are distracted. “You having fun?”

“Aside from my life being at risk, yes. I’m glad I got to tag along.”

“I’m glad you’re here too,” I tell him.

“You can show me how much later,” he orders, his pupils dilating.

I kiss his cold lips, smirking. “With pleasure.”

As the food gets handed out, I can’t help but get butterflies in my stomach. Did he mean what he said earlier about telling my dad? As much of a relief as it is to no longer keep this a secret, I’m nervous about what the outcome will be.

CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

Imogen

When Sabrina suggested climbing the bluff, I thought it would be the most romantic time ever. I saw myself walking up with ease and confidence. Instead, my T-shirt under my coat is soaked with sweat, I've been unable to walk in a straight line since the first ten minutes into it, and I'm pretty sure I need an oxygen mask.

"Do you want to take a rest?" Ben questions again, unable to hide his concern.

"No," I wheeze. "No. I can do this. I can!"

"Imogen, you look like you're about to pass out."

"I'm good, really," I choke out. "The mountain is just taller than I realised."

"It's not a mountain."

I stop to shoot daggers at his reply before continuing on. "It's a mountain. We've been walking around this hill for hours now, when that sign said an hour walk to the top. That sign is false advertisement. We're not getting any closer. It's been so long, I'm beginning to worry we should have brought a tent."

"Love, it's been an hour, not hours," he replies with a smile. "And we aren't at the top because you refuse to take a break. You've been moving slower and slower with every minute that passes."

"Your clock is wrong," I argue.

He chuckles. "It's not," he promises. "Come on, we can walk back down."

"And ruin our relationship before we reach the top? You heard what Sabrina said. People who leave a personal item have a relationship that will last. So, I will die on this hill, Ben. I will. Us Smiths, we don't give up. We never give up."

“Then take a bloody break before I have to carry you back down and need to call an ambulance,” he demands softly.

“No...” I start, but then I see a bench up ahead. “Maybe just for five minutes.”

“Why are you so freaked out about the woods?” he muses, unable to keep his amusement in check.

The first half of the mountain—which we are still on—has a trail winding up into the side of the mountain and the trees still manage to grow straight, giving the effect that the ground is still flat.

“They creep me out. And hay mazes,” I reply.

“Is that why you didn’t go to the Halloween scare fest?”

I nod. “If you tell the others, I will deny it,” I warn him as I drop down in the seat.

He hands me a bottle of water and I gulp half of it down before sitting back.

“Your secret is safe with me.”

I lean into him when he puts his arm around me. “Did you mean what you said about telling Dad?”

“Yeah. I don’t want anymore secrets. I won’t be able to go back home and pretend I’m not crazy about you. I don’t trust myself not to slip up and kiss you in front of everyone. And I don’t want your dad to find out that way.”

“I don’t want you to feel pressured into it,” I admit.

“I’m not. I put the pressure on myself. No one else did. But I think once he sees this is serious, he’ll be okay.”

He doesn’t sound so sure about it being okay. “Serious, huh?”

He grins and captures me around the waist to press a kiss to my neck, then jaw, before capturing my lips. His fingers brush through my hair, tilting my head back. “Does that feel serious enough?”

I tilt my head a little bit more. “You should try again,” I order, and my flesh breaks out in goose bumps when he does.

“If I didn’t know there are a few other people on the hill, I’d be inside of you right now.”

I splutter out a laugh and push him back. “No, you wouldn’t.”

His pupils dilate. “Oh, I would.”

My phone begins to ring, and my eyes widen in surprise. “Shit, I’ve got signal,” I muse.

“You won’t soon so I’d answer it,” he warns.

I pull it out of my pocket, and my lips part at the name on the screen. “It’s Castle and Games.”

“Answer it,” he orders, pushing the phone closer.

Pulling out of my shock, I swipe the screen and bring the phone up to my ear. “Hello?”

“Miss Smith, it’s Larry Carpenter at Castle and Games.”

“Hi, Mr Carpenter,” I greet.

“We would like to call you in for a meeting.”

“A meeting? If this is about the game that was stolen, I’m not allowed to discuss it with anyone due to it being an ongoing case.”

“No, no. It’s not about the game,” he assures me.

“I’m confused,” I admit.

“Laura and George told me what you did for the VIP launch.”

My heart races. “Look, don’t blame them. I told them they could come to me if they needed help with the plans I made before my departure from the company. Please don’t take it out on them. I shouldn’t have gotten involved.”

“Imogen, Imogen,” he calls out, stopping my rambling. “I’m not upset with them. I’m actually calling to see if we could set up a meeting to talk about the terms of your return.”

“My return?” I ask. “But I’m fired.”

“We want you to come back,” he offers.

“I don’t know, Mr Carpenter. A lot was said and done, and I’m just not sure I’ll be comfortable working there again.”

“Please, come to the meeting. If it’s a no, we won’t bother you again.”

“I’m away right now, but I’ll email you when I’m home to arrange something.”

“Thank you,” he replies, and I swear I hear relief in his voice. “I know we don’t deserve it after everything, but I would like a chance to apologise.”

“I appreciate that,” I reply, not knowing what else there is to say.

“I’ll look forward to your email.”

“Enjoy the rest of your day,” I tell him, and end the call after saying goodbye. I turn to Ben, utterly gobsmacked. I never thought I’d hear from him again.

“I take it he’s realised just how big of a mistake he made and wants to fix it,” Ben guesses.

“Yep.”

“How do you feel about that—him calling and his offer for you to go back?”

“I don’t know what to feel. I know it wasn’t personal, it was business, but the way he addressed me was personal. Or at least, it felt that way to me.”

He pulls me against his chest. “You loved working there, Immy. Do you not want to go back?”

I close my eyes as his lips press against my temple. “I did love working there. But it won’t be the same if I go back. No one will trust me. And they’ll always stare and talk about me behind my back.”

“You don’t seem like the kind of person who would get upset over that,” he points out.

“I wouldn’t normally, but it felt like a family there. Not like at Dad’s work, but a different kind, and I felt like I belonged. Going back now, I would feel like an outsider.”

“I’m not so sure about that. They would probably tread carefully around you. For someone to come back after a scandal like that, it will prove how valuable you are to the company. They’ll be scared to go against you.”

I grin because he has a point. “Maybe. I’ll see what he has to say and think it over.”

“If he begins to offer things to bribe you back, tell him you want a chance to prove to him you can do more than you did originally.”

I pull back to gaze up at him. “What do you mean?”

“I mean, there’s a reason he wants you back, love. All workers in places like that are replaceable. Hell, I’m easily replaced at my job. If he’s asking you to return, it means you are irreplaceable. But you need to placate him into thinking you worked for it. So offer to prove yourself by managing your own project in return for ten percent of the profits. By the end, you should have his trust, you’ll be running your own projects, and he’ll have no choice but to give you a raise.”

“I’m not sure how you think that will work. No one has ever been given their own project.”

“Then make him start now. Show them you are meant to be there, and if he says no, prove you can do it yourself and he’ll kick himself over it. You have nothing to lose. You’re already fired.”

I love you.

Those three words are on the tip of my tongue but I’m too afraid to say them out loud. I’ve loved him for a long time, but not like this. Now it consumes me.

But I need him to be the one who says it first.

No other boyfriend has believed in me the way he does. They’ve never supported me like he has.

I cup his jaw and tilt my head up. “If we were alone on this mountain, I would give you a blowjob.”

He grins. “And risk getting your jeans dirty? Never,” he teases.

“Come on, let’s get to the top. I want to see the view already.”

“We need to be quick because it’s going to be dark soon. We shouldn’t have left it so late to start.”

I roll my eyes as I get to my feet. “You’re the one who wanted to have sex again.”

He grins wider. “You tempt me with those eyes.”

As we begin to walk, I glance over at him. “Wait, did you bring torches? I’m not getting stuck up this mountain in the dark.”

“It’s more like a hill,” he tells me as he continues ahead of me.

“Ben,” I call out. “Ben.”

He laughs. “There are two in my bag.”

“I hate you,” I yell, and begin to walk faster to catch up with him.

I never thought I’d say this but I’m so glad he forced me to get some pumps. As much as I love my boots, they would never have survived the rocks, and the blisters would have been ten times worse.

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Ben wraps his arms around my stomach as the wind picks up. I’m sitting between his legs, my back resting against his chest.

We’re resting against a large rock that is surrounded by other rockery and wild grass. Belongings of those who have walked on this bluff before are on the trees on the level below us. The top is set in three levels, the path dug into the wall of

the hill, making a winding path in the shape of a zig-zag. Which means the further up we went, the smaller the space became. We spent time on the level below, leaving a shoelace of Ben's and a keyring I've had since I went to Ibiza with the family. But since we got that far, I wanted to walk up to the very top, and it didn't disappoint. Although, the smaller space did give me a chill.

At the back of where we are sitting, the bluff edge has a drop down to the third platform. It doesn't share the path on the side we are facing. Ben tried to get me to take a look down, but fear of falling that far down made me take two steps back.

"We should start heading back," he tells me, nuzzling my neck.

"Just one more minute," I plead, taking in the view.

The view is like nothing I've ever seen before. We can see over the high trees, where lodges and homes are starting to light up.

But it's the sky that has me transfixed. On the horizon, deep pink and purple blooms with the coming of night. Whereas to the left, blacken clouds have amassed with a promise of rain.

"We really should go," he tells me. "We don't want to get caught up here in the rain."

"All right," I give in.

He stands before me and helps me get to my feet. "Don't worry. We can come again next year in the summer."

"Oh, making plans for next year already. Maybe this mountain does have magical powers," I tease.

He takes my hand. "It's not a mountain," he whispers, grinning like a mad fool. "Which way do you want to go down?"

I glance at the two paths set on either side of the bluff. "Which way is the quickest way down?" I ask.

"Going somewhere so soon?"

I spin around to face Zach. At first, I think my brain is playing tricks on me. But he's real, standing in front of me. I jerk at the sight of him, and my hand squeezes Ben's out of fear.

What is he doing here?

How did he get here?

My gaze falls to the knife handle tucked into Zach's jeans, and then to the nearly empty bottle of vodka in his hand.

"Zach? What are you doing here?" I ask, as Ben pulls me back to get me to stand a little behind him.

"Stop!" Ben warns when Zach takes a step closer.

Zach laughs, but there's no humour to it. "You think I forgot you were coming here this week? I knew you would come even though I told you not to," he starts. "I overheard the others at the lodge saying you were here. *With him.*"

"Zach, you're drunk. Let us walk back down and talk about this," I begin, hating how unstable he is as he stumbles across the platform. One wrong move, and he could end up going over the bluff behind him.

"We aren't going anywhere," he spits out through gritted teeth.

"Imogen? Run!" Ben orders, and I startle.

"What?"

He grips my hand tighter and meets my gaze. Uncertainty and fear shine back at me in those wide eyes. "Run!"

Knowing the promise I made, I lean up and kiss his cheek. "Come back to me," I plead on a whisper.

I run, tears gathering in my eyes as I hear Zach yelling at me to stop. As I hit where the path begins, I look back, my breath hitching when I see the knife now in Zach's hand.

This can't be happening.

Pain like nothing I've ever felt before rattles through my chest. I don't want to keep moving, but I remember Ben's

words. He wanted me gone so he didn't have to worry about me. He wanted me free to get help.

I pick up speed, moving quicker than I ever thought possible. When I reach the wooded area of the hill, things begin to darken, and rain starts to splatter. I don't let it stop me, and a sob catches in my throat when I pass the bench we sat on not too long ago.

Wind bites into my cheeks, but I pick up my speed regardless. I move so quickly, my legs and the downhill slope fall out of sync and I don't land right on my ankle. I scream as I tumble, falling down the embankment. I cry out when my wrist snaps back trying to break my fall. Instead of stopping, I keep rolling, and dirt, stones and sticks cut into my flesh, tearing at the clothes I'm wearing. I try to grab onto something, but everything I touch just tears into the palms of my hands.

My head smacks into stone, and before I have the chance to absorb the pain, light flashes behind my eyelids and everything goes black.

CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE

Ben

Seeing Imogen disappear, I relax a little, yet stay vigilant as I give Zach my full attention. He hasn't shaved in a few days. His pupils are huge, and the rims of his eyes are stained red. This is a side of him I've never seen. It's like he's been split into two and this person in front of me is the dishevelled side of him. No longer is he wearing clean, ironed clothes. His hair isn't perfectly styled, and his posture is no longer straight. He has to be freezing up here because he only has a thin jacket.

"Zach, what are you doing here?" I ask calmly, as rain begins to splatter.

I'm anything but calm though. I want to rip the knife from his hand and restrain him. I want to tear into him for scaring her like this. I saw how panicked she was at the sight of him. The quiver in her lips and the shake of her hand. She didn't even try to mask it. And I know I've probably broken a part inside of her for making her run. I just couldn't risk her being here. Not when he's drunk. And as confident as I am that I can restrain him, I thought that once before and I ended up in a pantry, blood draining from my body.

"What am I doing here?"

"Yes."

"I came to see my girlfriend," he taunts before taking a hefty swig from the bottle he's holding.

"She's not your girlfriend, and I don't think you want her to be."

He laughs. "No. I fucking don't. She's ruined my life."

"This again? Really?"

"You don't understand," he roars, as saliva spits out of his mouth. "I've lost everything. I lost my home, my car, and my place at the university. My career is blown before it even

began. I'm going to serve time. Not even a takeaway will hire me now. My friends aren't talking to me. My parents can't even look at me. And it's because of that bitch."

"You are missing key information. You stole from her work, blamed it on her, then got her fired. She would have been facing criminal charges for something *you* did. You harassed her, recorded her having sex, scattered roses outside her home, and let's not forget you raised your hand to her and damaged her family's properties."

"They fucking deserved it and so did she. She used me. She didn't appreciate me. I gave her everything and this is how she repays me. *Me?* I gave her a chance when no one else would. I should have followed in their footsteps and stayed the fuck away."

"You coerced her into a relationship. What did you think would happen?"

"She loved me," he screams, smashing the bottle of vodka on the ground. Shards of glass fly everywhere, and I step back to miss a piece coming my way. "Then she threw it away."

"No, she didn't love you, not like that. She felt what you needed her to feel because you gaslighted her. You're punishing her for not wanting you. Do you know how crazy that is? She didn't cheat on you. She didn't make you promises. She gave you all that she could."

"And you think she loves you?" he accuses, jabbing his finger at me. "She'll never love you."

"I know she loves me," I admit.

"Then she's lying," he barks.

I shake my head, almost feeling sorry for him. "She's never said it, and I don't need her to. I see it when she looks at me. I feel it when we are together," I explain, trying to get the bite out of my words. "Which is why I know she never did any of the things you are accusing her of. She might not have been in love with you, but she loved you as a friend. All this, what you're feeling, is what you've caused."

“No,” he chokes out, scratching his temple with the hand holding the knife. “This is all her fault.”

I lift my hand up and take a step closer. “No, it isn’t, Zach. This behaviour isn’t normal. We need to get you help.”

He lowers his gaze a little. “I loved her for so long,” he chokes out.

“I know.”

“I gave her everything.”

“No, you didn’t. Because you didn’t get to know her, Zach.”

“I know her better than you,” he screams, holding the knife out when I take another step. “Don’t come any closer.”

I step back, holding both hands out. “I won’t. I won’t.”

“I knew her better than you.”

“Then you would have known that her family are the most important people in her life. You would know that she doesn’t like being told what to eat or what to wear. You would understand her craziness and embrace it instead of making her feel ashamed of it.”

“I was helping her,” he bites out. “Her family are a bad influence on her. She doesn’t want to end up fat and ugly. And she could do with putting on more respectable clothes, and talking less trashy. I was doing it for her.”

“You were doing it for yourself,” I snap. “She doesn’t need to change.”

“Oh, is she Little Miss Perfect to you?” he spits out. “Is that how you got into her knickers?”

“Stop!” I bark. “Stop with this bullshit.”

“No. She’s fucking ruined everything.”

“Is that why you brought a knife? To get revenge for stuff *you* did?”

He stares at the knife like he’s seeing it for the first time. “I actually don’t know why I brought it.”

“Then why are you here?”

He shakes his head, wobbling for a second before straightening himself up. “I have nothing left to lose.”

My breath gets trapped in my throat for a second. “What does that mean?”

“What do you think it means? She’s taken everything. *Everything*. I have nothing left to lose. My attempts to get her back for what she did to me have backfired, and now I am done. She left me with no choice.”

My heart hammers in my chest. “Zach,” I call, trying to distract him so I can get closer.

“I guess since she isn’t here, you will have to do.”

I freeze in place at his underlying threat. “What are you talking about?”

He meets my gaze, and I see nothing. I don’t see any anger. I don’t see the hurt or resentment. I see nothing. “I’ve got nothing to live for. Our future ended the day she broke up with me. Then what I had left, she took that from me too.”

Getting a sinking feeling of where this is going, I take a step closer. “Don’t do anything stupid, Zach. You don’t mean this. You’re drunk and emotional.”

“I’m thinking clearly,” he bellows. “My plan was to get her arrested for my murder. This knife? It’s from her kitchen set. But since she isn’t here and is probably already getting help, you will have to do. Which works out better.”

“No, it doesn’t. I’m not going to let you do anything,” I warn.

“You think vodka was the only thing in that bottle?” he laughs. “I just wish I could see her face when you go down for my murder.”

“No, I won’t.”

“Oh, but you will. The seed has already been planted. I told the police she wants me back and that she planted the game in my home ‘cause I wouldn’t agree. They’ll know she

has something to do with it. I also told them you probably had something to do with the game getting in my home, that you've been jealous of me ever since we got together."

"That's not evidence," I tell him, trying to make him doubt his plan.

"No, but she isn't the only one who can hack an account. Don't think I don't know it was her and her asbo family who hacked my accounts, signing me up to ridiculous subscriptions."

"What did you do?" I bite out.

"Sent myself an email from her account asking me to come here to sort things out, that she was scared of you and had to make up those lies about me stealing the game. Then I used her laptop to Google where to stab someone to kill them right away."

The blood drains from my face. "You didn't," I breathe out.

They'll crucify her. She'll never be free of this. It will follow her around forever, even if they don't charge her for it. As for me, they could try to charge me too.

"Oh, I did. But I guess this is better. They'll think she made you do it."

"Zach, no. Don't do this to her. Whatever you're feeling right now, it will go away."

"I don't care. I want her to suffer. Whilst the world is accusing her of my death, she'll be blaming herself for my suicide. She'll never forget me." His laugh sends a shiver down my spine.

"I won't let you do this to her," I grit out, losing my calm.

"You can't stop me."

"Do you know what it feels like when a knife goes inside you? I do. It hurts like a bitch. It's not easy either. It takes some force. Then it feels like your insides are being tugged out. And let's not forget, if you survive it, the pain can be unbearable. You'll get an itch that feels like it's inside of you,

and when it starts to get to you, you'll have moments when you'll want to rip the stitches open just to get relief."

"You are just trying to stop me," he announces sharply.

"No, I'm not. I was stabbed last year, remember?"

"You really think she'll stay with you after this? If you don't go to prison, you'll just be a reminder of what happened. Of what she caused. She broke up with me for you. Now she'll never be able to look at you without feeling ashamed."

"She didn't break up with you over me. You're wrong. We happened weeks after you broke up. And I won't let her feel like that. Her family won't."

"Lies," he screams. "You both think I'm stupid. I'm not."

"I'm not lying and you know I'm not. You just need to tell yourself we were cheating so you feel better for the shit you've caused in your life. You've not once taken any responsibility. Even now you're taking the coward's way out."

He holds the knife out, taking a step back. "Why do you even care?"

"I don't care about you. I care about Imogen. Do you think she wanted this? Because she didn't. She was your friend first, but you threw that away. You pushed her to hate you and that's on you."

"Let's see how you two fair after tonight."

The skies are getting darker by the second, and if the rock I just stepped on is anything to go by, it's going to be a slippery slope going down to the main path.

"Stop," I roar as he grips the knife with both hands.

"Too late," he tells me and takes a step closer to the bluff's edge.

I race towards him as he slams the knife into his stomach. I watch in horror as the knife slices into his flesh. His eyes widen and he jerks back, letting go of the knife, still inside of him. His foot slips, and instead of trying to stop it, he lets himself fall, smiling like he's won.

I dive to the ground when I near the edge. “No!” I scream, and slide across the dirt, rocks, and wild grass to grab his hand.

The weight of him, and the slippery ground, has us both going over, but I reach out, grabbing at a thick root growing out of the dirt. My shoulder pulls taut, and I cry out when I feel the joint slip from its socket.

“Hold on!” I roar as I feel his hand begin to slip.

I glance down, breathing heavily through the pain vibrating through my shoulder. Black dots cloud my vision and vomit rises in my throat. There’s a little platform to the left, enough to fit two people. I roar out in pain as I begin to swing him.

He will not die on this rock.

He does not get to do this to her.

He reaches up with his other hand, gripping my wrist. And just when I think he’s fighting to stay alive, he takes me by surprise and yanks on my hand.

And dooms us both.

CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR

Hope

I stand under the canopy, watching as the rain falls heavily down on the decking and grass. The sound used to soothe me, but the longer I listen, the heavier the dread feels in my stomach.

Imogen and Ben should have been back hours ago. It's getting late and the storm is messing with our signal, so we've not been able to call her, and we don't even have Ben's number.

My unease only grows with each passing moment. It's like a hand gripping my throat, and I can't catch my breath.

Hayden comes to stand next to me, handing me a bottle of water. I force a smile. "Thank you."

She jerks her chin down at my phone. "Have you managed to get through to her?"

We've all been at odds about what to do. Imogen's a grown woman, and she isn't alone. She's with Ben. So before we do anything drastic, we want to keep trying to get through to her just in case they are waiting out the storm somewhere.

"No," I breathe out. "I think we should go looking for them."

"Yeah," she agrees, just as lights from an oncoming car light up the front.

"Oh my god, they're here," I cry, and all the anxiety and stress I had been holding in comes flooding out.

"That's not them," Hayden mutters, her hand tensing over mine. I didn't even realise I grabbed her hand.

"What is Connor doing here?" Ciara asks, coming up behind us. "Is Imogen okay?"

I share a look with my sister, feeling the blood drain from my face. "She's okay. She has to be."

“Whatever you do, don’t mention that Imogen and Ben are together,” Hayden warns as Connor steps out of the car.

“Why are none of you answering the fucking phone?” Connor shouts up as he makes his way over.

The others step through the sliding door to stand near us as I reply. “The storm is messing with our signal. Has something happened?”

“Kind of. Evan’s been trying to call to check in with Imogen.”

“Why? Has something happened? They only spoke this morning,” Hayden replies.

I hold my breath and step closer to my sister. Ciara links her arm though mine as Connor’s gaze glances around. “Where is Imogen? Where’s Ben?”

“Um...” I begin, but can’t form the right words.

Imogen wants to tell her dad about her relationship with Ben herself. If he finds out this way, she may never forgive us. She’s loved him for so long, so I get them wanting to keep it to themselves. Plus, it will prove to Evan that their relationship isn’t just a fling, that it’s real. And I know it’s real because I’ve watched them together. He’s just as much into her as she is with him.

“Look, her dad got a call from Zach’s parents. He left a concerning note and they think he might be coming here. He took their car,” he announces. “Evan is two and a half hours out. He got worried when he couldn’t get a hold of Imogen or any of you.”

I briefly glance at Hayden and see a mask of indifference cross over her expression, and I know she’s thinking the same as me.

Zach is here. He’s the reason Imogen and Ben haven’t come back. No one says it but it’s what we are all thinking.

“They aren’t here,” I whisper.

“What do you mean they aren’t here?” Connor asks. “What are you lot not telling me?”

“Your girlfriend, she, um, she mentioned a bluff,” I begin.

“I know the one. The hill over there,” he points out, and his eyes widen. “They are up there in this weather?”

“They were meant to be back hours ago,” Ciara blurts out.

“So why are you all acting like there’s a dead body in the house and you are waiting for me to leave so you can bury it?” he grits out.

“Because Ben and Imogen are an item,” Maddox admits.

“Madz,” Hayden hisses.

Maddox throws his hands up. “It’s true. And I don’t know about you, but I’m worried. Woods are a bad omen in this family. Shit happens in the woods. And he needs to know everything. Something has clearly happened. We’ve all been thinking it. Is their secret really worth their lives?”

“You can’t say anything to Evan,” Ciara pleads. “They want to be the ones to tell him.”

“I won’t say shit,” Connor promises, brushing his fingers through his dark locks. “I’m going to go look for them.”

“I’m coming,” I offer.

“I’ll be quicker on my own,” he tells me.

“Yeah, we’re coming. There are two paths on the mountain; you can’t cover both,” Hayden argues.

“We were just about to go and look anyway,” I assure him.

He pinches the bridge of his crooked nose, letting out a weary sigh. “No fucking around. It’s not safe during the rain. The dirt can cause mud slides.”

“We’ll come too,” Maddox announces.

“It’s not a picnic,” Connor barks.

As they continue to argue, I pull Ciara to the side. She’s my little sister, and I don’t want her being in danger. “Can you wait here with the others?”

“No, I’m coming,” she declares, gripping my hand. “We stick together.”

“Yeah, but someone needs to be here. We can’t all go. Evan is on his way, and someone might slip up about them being together.”

She bites her lower lip. “Before I saw the car, I was coming out to tell you we were going to look for them. Amelia, Paisley, Charlotte, Drew and Madison agreed to stay. They don’t need me here.”

“I need you here,” I admit. “What if they come back? Please, just stay. The storm should be passing soon, and we’ll be able to ring each other if something happens.”

Madison joins our huddle. “Hope is right. I think you should stay here. Evan is closest to you.”

“Okay,” Ciara agrees. “I’m going to try and get signal.”

As she leaves, I turn to Madison. “Watch her for me.”

“I will.”

I join the others who are waiting by the car. “We going separately?” I ask.

“Yeah,” Hayden answers, pulling open the car door.

I get in quickly, and turn to Landon and Mark who have joined us, holding a couple of torches. Clay, Maddox and Liam have jumped in with Connor.

“Do you know the way?”

“Yeah,” Landon replies.

“We’re going to the main entrance. They will start on the second path location,” Mark adds.

“Just follow the road out and take the second off-road and follow it until you get to a car park.”

I pull out, following the instructions. “I hope they’re okay,” I murmur as I turn onto the path.

“Told you we should have tied bricks to his ankles and thrown him into the sea,” Hayden announces.

“Your plan had kinks,” Landon replies dryly.

“Fucker is gonna pray for me to kill him once I’m done,” she snarls. “I knew we shouldn’t have listened to her.”

The windscreen wipers are swishing back and forth with force, but it doesn’t make my visibility any clearer. The rain is pouring down, making me feel like I’m in a tin can with how loud it is.

“Stop!” Landon screams close to my ear.

I slam my breaks on, my heart hammering in my chest when I see why he needs me to stop. Six meters in front of us is a blue sedan, the lights still on and the driver’s side door still open. It’s slightly off the road and looks to have hit a tree from where I am sitting.

“I’ll check it out,” Landon offers, and pushes open his door.

Mark follows and I squint through the windscreen to see them jog over to the car. Mark goes straight to the passenger side, and Landon goes to the driver’s side.

“What are they looking for?” Hayden breathes, leaning closer to the windshield.

Landon gets into the driver’s side, and I see him lean over. Moments later, he steps out and shakes his head.

I can’t hear what he says to Mark but it must be bad because they race back over to us. As soon as their doors slam shut, both Hayden and I turn in our seats to look at them.

“What did you find?”

Landon holds out a wallet. “It’s Zach’s.”

“Shit!” Hayden hisses.

My vision blurs for a second. I want to believe Zach wouldn’t hurt her, but I don’t know that anymore. I don’t know him. I never thought he’d raise a hand to her, yet he did. I’ve never been his biggest fan, but for Imogen, I put up with him. They had a friendship I never understood, and I didn’t need to. The Zach we’ve been privy to recently is a stranger.

Yet I still want to hold onto the belief he won't do anything irrational.

"There's more," Landon adds.

"There's an empty bottle of vodka and an empty pack of tramadol on the passenger seat," Mark utters.

I take the car out of park and continue on down the dirt road. "What the fuck is he thinking?"

"Beats me," Mark growls.

"Try her dad again," I announce to no one in particular.

"Already on it," Hayden promises. "I'm still not getting signal."

We reach the car park, which is empty. I park closest to the path, not bothering to use the spaces allocated.

In a hurry, we all jump out, and Landon throws a torch to me. We begin to race up the path. It's eerie being in a forest after dark. There's no sound other than the rain and the rustle in the trees. I can't see anything past the light from my torch. The moon has been swallowed up by the dark grey clouds. This is worse than any scare fest I've been to. It has my hairs standing on end and a shiver racing down my spine.

The path is like a zig-zag winding up the hill. If the footpaths were close to each other, you could probably just climb it like steps. They aren't though, and I bet trying to get through the wild bushes and overgrown weeds, plus the rocks, would make it harder. And take twice as long.

I keep the torch moving in every direction, not wanting to miss something vital. I can't get rid of the feeling of someone lurking, waiting to pounce. The thought clings to me like sweat on a hot summer's day.

And I vow to never watch another horror movie for as long as I live.

The sky expels a low rumble, seconds before a jagged silver flash slashes through the night air, startling a whimper out of me.

Keep going.

My feet hurt from my trainers, the material digging into the backs of my ankles, and I struggle to keep up. The only reason I don't stop is because it's Imogen. She needs us. And she'd do the same for any one of us.

The trees give us a little protection from the rain, and it no longer feels like it's cutting into my cheeks as I run. Yet I still feel like I'm in a nightmare. My footfalls feel heavy, and my movements are sluggish. And in the pitch black, it's like running in a never-ending maze, unable to find your way out. The path just keeps going.

"Did I mention I fucking hate running," Hayden yells.

Preach.

I take note of the post markings as we pass section five. It's just a shame there are no emergency phones out here. They would have come in useful if we need to call the police.

Or an ambulance.

Smudged dirt catches my attention, and I skid to a stop at the sight of it. It's not the only spot. The embankment looks flatter, like something or someone has rolled down it.

"Guys, come here," I yell, searching the ground for any other signs of a struggle.

"We don't have time," Landon shouts back.

"No, look," I order, pointing to the dirt. "Something happened over here."

"It could be a rock," Hayden points out.

I arch an eyebrow. "I've watched every episode of Criminal Minds. I know what this means."

"Seriously?" Landon asks. "We need to keep going. We don't have time for you to analyse a smudged piece of dirt."

Yet my feet can't move. "No! I'm going to check it out."

"Don't be stupid," Mark utters. "It's dangerous."

“No, she’s right,” Hayden declares, and shines her torch down the embankment. “That’s a shoe.”

I shine my torch down and see the glitter shoelace she weaved in this morning. “That’s Imogen’s shoe,” I cry, and before they can stop me, I begin to make my way down.

My feet slide out from under me, and I fall on my arse, dropping my torch. I cry out at the pain ricocheting up my spine as I slide down.

“Hope,” Hayden screams.

Digging the heels of my feet into the ground, I come to a stop and decide since I’m already down here, I might as well keep going like this.

“I’m okay. I’m okay,” I assure her. “I think I broke my arse.”

“Stay there,” Landon warns.

“I’m fine,” I promise.

“He’s talking to me,” Hayden calls out. “And he doesn’t need to tell me twice. I’ve been in this movie before. Watch out for bugs.”

“Bitch!”

My jeans become soaked, and I can feel dirt cutting into my nails as I make my way down on my arse. I stop near to where the torch got stuck in some brambles.

“We’re coming,” Mark shouts. “Just stop.”

I pick up the torch and shine it further down the slope, my breath catching when my gaze lands on a foot covered in only a sock. “Oh my god. Call an ambulance,” I cry, rushing further down.

“I still haven’t got any signal,” Hayden fumes, and her voice carries over the sound of the rain slapping against the trees and ground.

“You don’t need signal to call nine-nine-nine,” Landon snaps, sounding closer. “Hope, stop!”

I reach Imogen and let out a cry. Her head is bleeding and she has cuts and bruises all over her face. Her black coat is torn, and so are parts of her jeans.

Landon grabs my wrist sharply when I try to move further down. “Stop! That’s a drop. One wrong move and you’ll go over.”

I shine the torch in that direction and my stomach coils at the sight. I didn’t even notice it. It’s so dark, you can’t make out much of anything. It’s not a big drop, but it’s enough to cause some serious damage if you go over.

“We can’t move her,” I choke out, hesitating to touch her. She looks so broken, I’m scared I’ll cause her pain. “They tell you not to move an injured person.”

“Oh fuck!” Mark hisses. “If she wakes up, she could panic and fall down further.”

I take her hand in mine, letting the tears fall. “Please be okay. Please be okay.”

CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE

Landon

I link my hands behind my head as the fire brigade pull Imogen out on a board. She still hasn't woken up, and the paramedics mentioned there might be swelling to the brain before they handed us a rope to pull us back up the hill.

We should have been here for her. We should never have let her come out without one of us.

I drop down on a rock, rubbing my hands across my face.

Mark sits down next to me as the paramedics work on Imogen. "None of us could have known this would happen."

"We never fucking do," I snap. "We should have learnt to prepare for the unknown. Never take chances, remember. Now look at her."

"Yeah, maybe. But if we lived in a state of paranoia, we wouldn't be living. None of us are happy about it, but some things are just out of our control."

"Are they gonna let us fucking near her yet?" I ask, rubbing the palms of my hands down my jeans before getting up. I can't sit here and do nothing.

The fireman closest to us overhears me. "I know this is stressful for you, but let them do their job. She's in good hands," he states.

"Landon!" Liam yells.

I turn so quickly, I nearly knock into the fireman. "Did you find him?"

"Him? Did you find Imogen? There's a smashed bottle of..." He stops at the sight of Imogen. "What the fuck? Imogen? Are you okay?"

The fireman holds him back. "Let them do their job."

"Get the fuck off me. She's our cousin."

I rush over and grab him before the police arrest him.
“Brother, she’s being taken care of. She hasn’t woken up yet.”

“What happened? I thought you said search and rescue were here,” he accuses.

“They are. She went down the embankment. I told you that,” I remark.

“The signal is shit up there. I only got parts of what you said,” he answers, his gaze still on Imogen. “Is she okay?”

“She’s stable but they are worried she might have swelling on the brain.”

He nods, then his gaze moves over to where Hayden and Hope are huddled. He pulls out his phone and snaps a picture.

“Dude, really?” Mark growls.

“I’m not apologising,” Liam retorts. “This is gold.”

“She’s injured,” the fireman remarks, his lip curling.

“I’m sorry, did I invite you into this conversation?” Liam starts. He turns to me, jabbing his thumb towards the fireman, arching his eyebrow. “Can you believe him?”

“He’s standing right there,” Mark whispers.

Not wanting the drama, I explain to the pissed off fireman. “He’s getting a picture of our sister. She’s the one who looks really uncomfortable trying to comfort our other cousin in the green coat.”

He glances over, and realisation hits him. Hayden has her arm around Hope’s shoulders, but she’s acting like she’s petting a lion as she awkwardly taps her shoulder. If my head wasn’t focused on the sight of our pale cousin lying on a stretcher, I would have taken the picture.

“What are you doing to find our friend?” Mark asks.

“We still have—” the fireman’s radio interrupts him, and he stops to listen.

“We need assistance.”

My eyes widen. “Is it them?”

He holds his finger up to give him a minute. “Status?”

The person on the radio begins rattling off equipment, and I share a look with Liam that says, ‘oh shit.’

The firemen points at us. “You three stay here.”

Hayden comes rushing over. “Did you hear the radio?”

“Yeah.”

She glances around at the sea of faces. “Do you think they’re dead, and that’s why they need equipment?”

“We know as much as you do,” Liam answers.

“We’re going to the hospital,” she declares. “Hope is going to go with Imogen in the ambulance. The others are going to follow us up. They aren’t being allowed through otherwise they’d already be here.”

“What about Evan? Does he know?”

She nods, glancing away. “They are on their way to the hospital. Kennedy and Josh are with him. Kennedy broke down and Evan had to pull over to console her.”

“Let’s go.”

“Shouldn’t we wait for Maddox and Clay?” Liam asks, following us.

“Call them. Tell them to get a lift with Connor.”

We follow the paramedics and fire brigade down the path.

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Ciara is sitting with Hope, holding her hand. Charlotte is cuddled up to Drew, tears streaming down her face. Amelia is watching her phone, waiting to hear from Maddox. The others are standing to the side, talking amongst themselves.

“It’s going to be okay,” Paisley assures me.

I tighten my grip around her hand. “She was in pretty bad shape,” I reply.

“Where’s my daughter?”

I stand at Evan’s raised voice and move out into the hallway. “Evan?”

He pulls back from the reception desk at the sound of my voice. Kennedy’s shoulders relax and they both rush towards us. “Where’s Imogen? Is she okay?”

“She’s still in with the doctors,” I answer as Hope comes to stand on the other side of me.

Evan brushes his fingers through his wet hair. “What happened? How did she fall down a cliff?” he demands.

“It was more like a steep hill,” Mark answers.

“I don’t give a fuck,” he grits out.

“Evan, honey, don’t take it out on the kids,” Kennedy scolds softly, her breath hitching.

“We don’t know the details,” Hope explains softly.

“What was she doing out there? Why weren’t you with her?”

I give Hope a look to answer. She bites her lower lip, conflicted. “They were going to the bluff.”

“They?” He glances around, probably taking note of the fact we all look like we’re hiding something. Because we are.

“She was with Ben,” Ciara tells him.

“Ben is still here? Where is he?” he asks, scanning the waiting area.

“We don’t know,” I admit.

“You don’t know?” he bites out. “What the fuck does that mean?”

“Honey,” Kennedy calls.

“They can’t find him,” Ciara whispers.

“What the fuck *do* you know?”

Kennedy takes his hand. “Sweetie, you need to calm down,” she pleads, sniffing.

“No, I won’t calm down. Our daughter is injured and we don’t know how badly,” he snaps. “What was she doing with Ben? Why weren’t you with her?”

Kennedy glances to the floor with a heavy breath. “Baby ___”

“Imogen Smith’s family?” a doctor calls.

Everyone who isn’t already standing, stands. “Yes, we’re her parents.”

“Your daughter is on her way to X-ray. We think she might have a break in her arm, and possibly her ankle. She has suffered a head injury, but the MRI is clear, and she has a concussion.”

“Is she okay? Is she awake? Can we see her?” Kennedy rushes out.

“She’s still unconscious, but stable.”

“Why isn’t she awake if it’s concussion?” Evan demands.

“We don’t know. Head injuries are always difficult to treat. In most cases, the patient wakes up after a few hours. If you’d like, I can take you to the room she will be put in to wait.”

“Yes,” Kennedy replies quickly.

Evan turns to me. “Can you see if you can get an update on Ben? I need to know what happened.”

“I will.”

Once they leave, Ciara turns to Hope. “Kennedy has to know. Did you see her face?”

“Yeah, I did,” Hope replies quietly.

“I’m going to try Maddox again,” I announce, and step away from the group to make the call.

CHAPTER THIRTY-SIX

Imogen

The echo of a constant beep and the vibrating sound of voices tugs me from my sleep. I crack my eyelids open and squint at my surroundings. The beeping gets louder the clearer everything becomes.

White walls with healthcare posters dotted around, surround me, and machines are to the right of me. My hand is propped up on a pillow, covered in a cast. Pain ricochets up my arm when I wiggle my fingers.

How?

What?

Something warm engulfs my other hand, and I turn a little to see it's my brother holding my hand. His eyes widen when I meet his gaze, and I notice the redness and tear streaks on his cheeks.

Panic rises in my chest as everything comes flooding back. Zach. The knife. Me running and falling down the hill.

Ben.

"Where is Ben?" I cry out, struggling to get the blanket off me.

I have to get back to Ben.

"Stop! Stop!" Josh stresses, applying pressure to my shoulders.

My movements are sluggish as I try to push him away. I shouldn't be here. I was meant to get help. I need to find Ben. "Let me go. I need to find Ben."

"No one can find him," he cries, pushing me down. "Please, stop before you hurt yourself more. I don't want to hurt you."

"Josh, please, let me go."

“No,” he growls. “Mum and Dad will be back in a minute. They’ve gone to get an update on Ben.”

His words begin to register. “What do you mean they can’t find him?”

He rears back, his eyebrows pinching together. “I don’t know any other way to explain that they can’t find him.”

“But he was at the top of the bluff,” I answer.

“He wasn’t there.”

“He was,” I snap, try to wriggle free.

“He wasn’t,” he sharply remarks. “Don’t make me sit on you.”

I drop back with a sob catching in my throat, feeling utterly useless. The aches and pains in my body are a sign that I’m in no fit state to go looking for him. My back feels like it’s on fire, and I swear my ankle is three times bigger. It’s throbbing like hell.

“Everything hurts,” I choke out.

“If you wanted attention, you didn’t need to go to this extreme,” he states.

I splutter out a laugh that comes out more like a cry. “Arsehole.”

“I try my best,” he replies sweetly.

“Honey, you need to calm down,” Mum hisses softly, and Josh lets go of my hand.

“Calm down? They’re hiding something. My job is to suss out liars, and baby, they’re all fucking lying,” Dad replies heatedly, and I tense at his words. “What was she doing with Ben on that trail? I don’t get it. And no one is giving me a straight fucking answer. They won’t even look me in the eye.”

I hear Mum sigh. “Honey, Ben and Imogen... they are seeing each other.”

“Seeing each other?” he asks, and I can hear the utter shock in his words. “As a couple? Since when?”

“I’m not sure. She wanted to be the one to tell you. After the mess with Zach, and what with Ben working for you, she wanted to wait.”

“And look where that fucking got her,” he grits out. “Our daughter is in the hospital.”

The door opens and I try to force a smile. Instead, a sob catches in my throat. The fear and anxiety I’ve been trying to hold back come flooding out when I see my parents. My safe haven. My world. I feel safe, and no longer have the urge to flee.

“Imogen,” Mum whispers brokenly.

“I was so scared,” I choke out, tears staining my cheeks.

“Oh, sweet girl. You’re safe now,” she cries, rushing over to the bed. “You had us all worried. Are you feeling okay?”

“Again,” Josh mutters. “Attention seeker.”

“Just sore,” I whisper, my heart breaking for Ben.

Where is he?

Did Zach hurt him?

“Girl, I am so glad you’re okay but I want to throttle you,” Dad breathes. “What were you thinking going on a trail walk in a storm?”

“We didn’t plan to be out in it,” I choke out. “Zach turned up. He...” I can’t form the words.

“We know. We were already on our way when we got the call about your accident. His parents called us worried about a note he left.”

“He had a knife, Dad,” I rasp. “He was so angry, and he was drunk.”

“And Ben just left you to fend for yourself?”

Hating the accusation, I turn to him sharply. “No. He told me to run,” I remark, harsher than I intended to. “When we stopped to check in with Sabrina, he was worried about me being there. He made me promise that if there was ever a

situation where I might be in danger, and he tells me to run, I have to run. He told me to run. I didn't want to leave. But Zach had a knife and he was so angry. He..."

Mum takes my hand not in a cast as I struggle to catch my breath. "Sweetie, breathe. Just take a breath."

The monitor beside me is beeping like mad. Black spots dart in my vision, and I try to steady my breathing.

In. out.

Dad takes a deep, pained breath and lowers himself into the chair to my right. "I'm sorry, baby."

I slump back, my shoulders shaking from my uncontrollable sobs. "He told me to run. He told me to run."

"You did the right thing," Mum stresses.

"Where is he then? Why haven't they found him?"

Dad lets out a weary breath. "We don't know."

"If he was okay, he would be here. He wouldn't leave me to worry."

"Ben is strong. He's a fighter, Immy," Dad tells me.

"He will come back, my love," Mum adds.

I turn to my dad, hating the pain in his eyes. "I'm sorry we didn't tell you about us being together. We were planning to tell you when we got back. We just didn't know how you'd feel about it, and Ben was afraid of letting you down. I'm so sorry."

He brushes the hair from my cheeks. "Are you happy? Does Ben make you happy?"

"He does. I love him," I admit brokenly.

I never got to tell him those words. But I do. I love him so much, and it isn't like before. He gave me a part of my soul that I never knew was missing. He made me feel whole. I don't know when I fell *in* love with him. It's not something you witness. Love is much like the wind. You can't see it but you can feel it. And he made me feel everything.

“Then you have nothing to apologise for. I’m sorry for making you think you couldn’t come to me,” he confesses.

“But... outside, you sounded pissed.”

He forces a smile. “Give me some credit. My daughter is in the hospital, and I didn’t have all the pieces. What you heard came from fear. Nothing more. You really did scare us. We thought we had lost you.”

The door handle to the room presses down, making me forget everything I was about to say. My heart races, hoping to see Ben walk through.

But it’s Hope.

Her shoulders drop and tears gather in her eyes. “You’re awake. Are you okay?”

“I’m fine. Just sore.”

“Did you hear something?” Dad questions.

She hesitates, and hangs her head to hide the tears slipping down her cheeks. “Hope?” I call, feeling my chest tighten.

She can’t meet my gaze. “Uncle Evan, can we talk outside?”

“No! No,” I agonize. “Tell me. You need to tell me!”

“I...”

Dad places his hand over my cast. “I’ll be back in a minute.”

Shivers vibrate across my entire body as I try to catch my breath. “No. Don’t do this. Don’t keep me in the dark. Has something happened to him? Is he okay? Please. Tell me.”

It should be me. I’m the one Zach was angry at. I’m the one who should be hurt. Not Ben. Never Ben.

Please let him be okay. I will do anything. Just please... please let him be okay. Please bring him back to me.

“I’m so sorry, Immy,” Hope chokes out.

“No! No!” I push Mum aside and dodge Dad’s hands as I slide my legs over the side of the bed.

“Immy, stop,” Mum cries.

The second I put weight on my right leg, I collapse to the floor. Mum is kneeling down on the floor next to me, and Dad is in front of me within a second. “This is all my fault,” I wail, shoving her away. “I should have gone to the police sooner. This is my fault.”

She wraps her arms around me, her body shaking from her silent tears. “It’s not your fault. It’s not.”

I fall limply into her embrace, no longer fighting. Because she’s wrong. This is my fault. I should have ended things better between Zach and I. I should have gone to the police sooner. “I’m the reason he’s gone.”

Mum pulls back to let Dad lift me up in his arms. I wrap my arms around his neck, sobbing into his shoulder. My heart feels like it’s been ripped out. A few hours ago, I felt whole, happy, and loved. I had a future. Now, all of that is a thousand broken pieces lying on the ground, our future now a memory of what could have been. My core, once filled with warmth now feels like cement drying. I feel cold and empty.

I always thought I was stronger than this, that nothing could cripple me. But as my dad lies me back down in the hospital bed, all I feel is removed from this world.

“What did they say?” Dad asks Hope.

Mum replaces Dad and moves to sit on the bed, resting my head against her stomach. “We’ve got you, sweetie. We’ve got you.”

I grip her T-shirt, my tears soaking through the cotton as grief consumes me. It keeps me in its grasp, handcuffing me to waves of despair.

“He can’t be gone. He can’t.”

“Maddox said,” Hope chokes out, sniffing heavily. “He said both Ben and Zach were unresponsive. Zach was found first, and it took them a while to get to Ben. The paramedics

had to get them air lifted out and they are on their way here. He... he said Ben didn't respond to the defibrillator."

"What happened?" Mum whispers, holding me with all her strength.

"They went over the cliff," she whispers back. "Zach landed on a nearby cliff platform, but Ben landed over a branch further down."

"It should have been me," I cry. "I am just like *her*. I ruin everything I touch."

"Don't say that. Please, baby girl, don't say that," Mum pleads, running her fingers through my hair. "You are nothing like Vicky. *Nothing* like her."

"Immy, this isn't your fault," Dad asserts. "None of this is your fault."

"I want to be alone," I announce, my voice void of emotion. I can't bear to hear them say I'm not like her. Zach wasn't like this before me. Ben wouldn't be dead if it wasn't for me. Everything I touch turns rotten.

"Honey, we aren't leaving you like this," Mum tells me.

"Please, I just need to be alone," I plead, my voice raw. "If you love me, you will do this for me."

"We should go call Ben's mum," Dad announces, and I bite my lip to stop the whimper from leaving my mouth.

"I can't leave you," Mum tells me. "Please, let us stay. You shouldn't be alone."

I can't. They want to comfort me, to soothe me, but I can't handle it right now.

"I'll wait here," Josh declares.

When I don't object, she slips off the bed. "We will be back in five minutes. Please, baby, don't blame yourself for this."

When I don't say anything, Dad takes her hand and gently pulls her out of the room. I hear her sob as the door closes behind them.

Josh gets up and climbs into bed next to me. He pulls me against his chest, and the gentleness of the gesture breaks my heart even more. When I go to tell him I can't handle his kindness right now, he speaks. "Please don't leave us," he pleads.

I pull back, confused by his request. "What?"

"I can see you disappearing," he admits quietly. "Please don't leave us. I know it doesn't seem like it now, but everything is going to be okay. You aren't alone."

"It's all my fault," I rasp. "He's gone because of me."

"It's not because of you. None of this is because of you. Zach wasn't right in the head," he utters. "It wasn't long ago that you sat in the living room telling Mum it wasn't her fault that your birth mum did those things. But here you are, blaming yourself for the actions of another person."

I can't see through the tears pooling in my eyes. "I don't think I'll ever be okay again. I just got him. I planned to spend the rest of my life with him. Nothing will ever make that better."

"It seems like that now," he agrees. "But one day you will be okay."

"You don't know that."

"I do. Grief is like love. It can be comforting, because it means that the person will never be truly gone or forgotten. You only grieve those who mean the most to you. And little by little, you forget about the grief and remember the person."

"Okay, what did you do to my brother?" I ask. I've never heard him speak like this, much less have him comfort me.

"I'm just doing what you did for me," he replies.

"What?"

"Remember when Grandma died?"

"Yeah," I whisper.

Although we had time to prepare and say our goodbyes, it still hit us hard. She always seemed youthful and filled with

life. Josh found it harder. He had only been little and didn't truly understand what it meant. Mum and Dad couldn't console him, so I climbed into bed with him...

"I told you it would be okay, that we had each other, and you were never alone."

"I'm doing what you did for me," he rasps.

"I love him so much," I breathe. "Why did this happen? His mum and siblings have lost someone they love again. I did that to them. They'll hate me."

The door slams open and I jerk away from Josh to see Mum storm into the room. "Sweetie, he's here. He's alive, but critical."

I sit up, the room spinning. If it wasn't for Josh helping me, I would have collapsed back down. "What?"

I must be hearing things.

This must be a cruel joke.

Hope said he was unresponsive.

"Ben, he is here. He's breathing, but needs surgery. They got his rhythm back in the helicopter," she tells me.

I grip her hands, feeling my chest constrict as sweat beads on my forehead. "Ben is here? He's alive?"

She gently cups my cheeks in her hand. Streaks of tears run down her cheeks, washing her makeup away. "He is, baby. He is. Your dad is waiting to get an update. Ben is still critical, but there's hope."

Hope.

Hope is a funny thing. It can keep you dangling by a piece of thread, making you believe in the better, but can snap at any moment, taking everything away. Hope is beautiful yet terrifying. And I want to hope. I want to believe Ben will be okay.

Black spots blur my vision, and as I feel hands place pressure on my back, I fall into darkness.

CHAPTER THIRTY-SEVEN

Imogen

The quote ‘life is too short’ is a mantra people say when they do the unexpected. When they need an excuse to go out of their comfort zone. It’s a quote I’ve often used willy-nilly.

Life is too short, I’m going to have another drink.

I’m gonna spend the last of my money to buy that dress; life’s too short.

Life is too short to waste it on a man who doesn’t respect you.

So many times, I said those words without truly understanding them. I made jokes and people laughed.

Now those words hit me differently.

Life *is* too short.

None of us are promised tomorrow.

I never want to take life for granted ever again. I want to live life to its fullest. I want the good and the bad. I want the laughter and the tears. I want to be with the people I love, and cherish every moment. I want a life where I’m not worried about moving too quickly. I want love.

Ben and I have been given a second chance—if he ever forgives me for the danger I put him through.

He got out of surgery at two this morning. As soon as the nurse left with her update, I snuck out of my room and padded down to the next floor to his room.

Seeing him pale and unmoving broke me. It’s like he isn’t in there, and I’m holding the hand of an empty shell. I’ve been here for hours, praying, pleading with him to come back to me.

“My *amato*, Imogen. What are you doing out of bed?”

Tears gather in my eyes at Maria's presence. I'm the reason she almost lost a son. Her hair is no longer neatly pressed into an up-do. Her clothes have wrinkles, and she has dark circles under her eyes. She closes the door behind her.

"I needed to see him," I croak, my throat hoarse from all the crying.

She drops a bag on the floor at the end of the bed and comes to sit in the chair next to me. "I understand. I was tossing and turning all night before I finally gave in and came back. The kids are still sleeping."

"What time is it?" I croak out.

"Six thirty," she admits. "The nurse gave me a pity pass and let me through." She places her trembling hand on his shin, bowing her head. "I don't think my heart will ever recover."

"I'm so sorry," I choke out. I try to hold back the tears. I try to keep it together. But her heartbreak is more than I can take. "I'm so sorry he's here."

She runs her hand over my head and down my hair affectionately. "My love, this isn't your fault."

"But it is. I'm the reason Zach was so angry. I broke up with him, and looking back, I should have done it differently."

"The heart wants what the heart wants, dear. Women have been breaking up with men for millennia. How they react is out of your control."

"It's still my fault Ben is here," I whisper. "He would never have been at risk if he wasn't with me."

"My love, he would do anything for you," she reveals softly. She doesn't speak for a moment, and I begin to think she has nothing more to say, but then she continues. "I blamed myself for my husband's death."

The tears sting my cuts, and wiping them away does nothing to ease the pain. I didn't even think I could cry anymore. But having her comfort me has opened the

floodgates back up. I don't deserve it. I don't deserve anyone's comfort or kind words. "You did? But it wasn't your fault."

She arches an eyebrow, as if hoping for that reply. "Yet people with huge hearts take the blame anyway. It's how we are wired. It took me awhile to stop blaming myself. He would never have fought if I wasn't there. He would have given them what they wanted."

"He had something to fight for," I surmise, seeing where she is going. Ben had someone to fight for too.

Me.

"Yes. But that wasn't the only reason I blamed myself. I was the person who fired the dish collector. He only came back to get what he thought was owed to him. If I hadn't done that, we would never have been robbed."

"Ben didn't tell me that part," I whisper.

"Because he believes mentioning it gives an excuse for what they did. And there is no excuse for the crimes they committed. Just like breaking up with a boy isn't an excuse for him to chase you across the country to attack you."

I fiddle with the tie holding my gown together and lower my head. "I never thought this would happen. I didn't think Zach could do something like this."

"No one ever does," she whispers.

"None of it feels real. Even being here and seeing him in this condition, it still doesn't help me make sense of it all. I know it happened. I was there. But a part of me feels discombobulated, like it's all a mirage."

"Life is a journey that doesn't come with a map. We can overanalyse every little thing we do, worry over things that may never happen. But in the end, we need to find our own way. We can't control other people's paths. We can only grow stronger and become more resilient as we walk our own," she begins softly. "What happened has knocked you off your path. You're in shock. But everything will be okay now. I promise you. My boy is a fighter."

I jerk at the door being opened, and I grimace when I find my nurse standing there.

I hold my good arm up since my other hurts like a bitch. “I know. I know. I should be resting, but I needed to see him.”

“Um, that’s not why I’m here. There are two policemen here to see you.”

She steps to the side to let them through. “Miss Smith, we would like you to come with us down the hall to answer some questions.”

“But I already told you everything,” I answer, biting my lip. “I don’t know anything else.”

He hooks his hands into his vest, his expression unmoving. “Still, we would like to talk to you again.”

My heart begins to race. It’s six thirty in the morning, which means they’ve come here because it can’t wait until a decent hour. I know the rules. Warrants come around three or four in the morning because it’s when you least expect it. And at this ungodly hour, it means they want to catch you when you aren’t fully with it. And I’m not. Aside from the nap I took earlier, with my mum running her fingers through my hair, I haven’t slept. It’s catching up with me, but being here is where I need to be. I don’t want Ben to wake up alone.

“You can talk to her here. She’s already overexerted herself by walking here to see her loved one,” Maria voices. “She should be sleeping.”

The taller officer pulls out his notebook. “Yesterday, you told our colleague that you didn’t know Mr Armstrong had planned to come to the lodge. Is that correct?”

My brows pinch together. “Yes. Like I told them, it was a surprise to see him there.”

“Miss Smith, we recovered Mr Armstrong’s phone. Is your email address ImogenSmith at outlook.com?”

I gulp, my hand clenching around Ben’s. “That’s correct.”

“Mr Armstrong received an email from you yesterday afternoon asking him to come to the lodge. In it you state you

were scared of Mr Donovan, that you had to make up lies about a game being stolen, and that you were sorry.”

“Nonsense,” Maria hisses. “None of that is true.”

“We have the email. We’ve been caught up with the charges filed against Mr Armstrong.”

I let out the breath I was holding. My body begins to tremble, and I shake my head like it will give me clarity. “That isn’t true. I haven’t logged into my email address since we left. I haven’t had a reason to. You must be mistaken. You must be. I would never invite him. He wasn’t even invited before we broke up. He and my family do not get along.”

“He planted it.”

My head spins so fast, I become dizzy. I’ve been watching Ben for so long, pleading for him to wake so I can hear his voice, that it almost feels like a dream. He’s awake, his eyelids fluttering like he’s trying to focus.

“You’re awake,” I choke out. “Oh my god, you’re awake.”

His mum joins me. “Oh, blessed be. It is so good to see those beautiful eyes, and hear your voice.”

He’s really okay. I prayed. I hoped. I bargained. But the more time passed without him stirring or moving at all, the more I feared he would never wake up again.

He grips my hand with what little strength he has and turns to the policemen. “Zach... he planted it.”

The policeman lets go of his vest and moves further into the room. “I’m sorry, I’m not following.”

Ben wheezes, and the nurse begins to mess with the machines he’s hooked up to. “This should wait,” she declares.

“No, they need to know,” Ben heaves before turning to me. “Zach planned it. He broke into your home, hacked your account, and planted evidence.”

“What? How?” I ask, recovering from my shock. “Why?”

He turns to the policemen. “If you get access to her laptop, you will find internet searches for where to stab someone to kill them. He planned to stab himself and pin the blame onto Imogen. You will also find the I.P address he sent the email from matches her laptop. She’s been with me the entire time. She didn’t do this. Zach did. And her security footage will prove it.” He stops, struggling to take a breath. “I tried to stop him from going over the cliff, but I couldn’t. He pulled, taking us both down.”

The policeman finishes writing up his notes and nods, but before he can ask any more, the nurse steps in. “Now it’s time for you to go. He should be resting,” she softly scolds.

“We will leave you to rest. We’ll be back later this afternoon to take an official statement.”

When they leave, I stand. I struggle to keep upright as I reach down, cupping his jaw. “I shouldn’t have left you.”

“Miss Smith, he needs to rest.”

“She’s fine,” he wheezes. “Please, just give us a moment.”

“Five minutes, then she needs to go back to her room.”

“Room?” he questions, then finally takes note of my face. “What happened? Did he do this?”

“I fell down the hill. I couldn’t get help. If it wasn’t for my cousins, you wouldn’t have been found in time. You died, Ben. You died.”

“Love, it’s okay. I’m okay.”

“No, *mio figlio*, you are not okay. They had to repair your heart. You died, and it’s a sheer miracle you’re alive.”

He turns to me, his eyes watering. “Do not blame yourself for this. It’s what he wanted. I can’t bear the thought of you blaming yourself.”

“All I care about right now is you, and that you’re okay. I love you, Ben. I love you so much.”

“I love you too,” he declares, stealing my breath.

I love you too.

I never thought I'd hear those words from him.

I want to hold him, to kiss him, but I know if I do, I'll cause him pain. His face is just as busted up as mine.

"Oh, this is beautiful. Just beautiful," Maria cries. "I'm going to call your brother and sisters."

When she leaves, I run my fingers through his sandy blonde hair, a sob catching in my throat. "Never ask me to run again. I can't. *I won't.*"

"Never again," he whispers. "Are you okay?"

"Better than you," I rasp. "We're never going hiking again."

"Deal," he replies, his voice filled with sleep. "Is Zach here?"

I lower my head. "He didn't make it. They aren't sure what killed him yet. It could be the pills he took with the alcohol, the stab wound, or the fall. They don't know."

"I'm sorry," he remarks.

I meet his gaze. "He did it to himself. I'm sad it had to end like this, but I cannot find it in me to mourn who he was. Not after what he's done to you. What he nearly took from me, from your family."

"You would have been okay."

I shake my head, my tears falling onto his hand cupping my cheek. "No, I wouldn't have. That ten minutes of thinking you were dead were the worst moments of my life. The pain was unbearable. I didn't want to go on without you."

He gazes up at me with those green eyes, and I get lost. So lost, I never want to be found. "I love you, Imogen. I'm sorry I didn't get to say it sooner, but I love you."

"I love you too," I rasp, tilting my head into his hand.

"Come on, it's time for him to rest," the nurse announces.

Ben lowers his hand, his eyes already drooping. "Just think, if we can get through this, we can make it through

telling your dad.”

“About that...” I bite my lip, hoping he isn’t upset that he wasn’t there to tell him. “He already knows.”

He winces. “Should I go into hiding?”

Before I can stop myself, I laugh. It almost feels foreign to do. “No, he’s happy for us.”

The nurse pushes something into his IV. “What was that?” I question. “Is something wrong?”

“It’s some more pain relief.”

I watch as his eyes droop, and seconds later, he falls back to sleep. My heart stops for a moment. I don’t think I’ll ever not feel this pang of pain when he sleeps.

“Is this real? Is he really okay?”

“It’s real. He’s not out of the woods, but he is stable. The surgeons are optimistic he will make a full recovery.”

“He saved me,” I whisper.

“You need to rest too, Imogen,” she tells me.

“I can’t leave him,” I admit, my voice shaky as I move back into the chair. “I can’t. I’m afraid to go to sleep in case he’s not here when I wake up.”

The nurse lets out a sigh. “Let me see if we can bring your bed in here for tonight, but you need to promise me you will try to get some sleep.”

“Thank you,” I whisper.

My thoughts drift to Zach when she steps out. Knowing he has tried to frame me, knowing his plan all along was to die, feels worse than thinking he was there to kill me. My mind is struggling to understand how we got to this place. I go over every argument and conversation and come up with nothing. No matter how hurt he was over the break up, I don’t understand this outrageous reaction and outcome. I don’t understand how he could claim to love me, but then easily treat me with so much malice and resentment.

I ward off those thoughts, knowing I'll only give myself a headache. My focus is drawn back to Ben, and the words he said to me.

He loves me.

He really loves me.

I glance up at the ceiling and whisper, "Thank you for bringing him back to me."

I don't plan on ever letting him go.

Epilogue

Imogen

I'm lost in my own little bubble, gazing at the houses as we pass them by. It's been three and a half weeks since the incident happened, and so much has happened. Ben got transferred three days after his surgery, where he then stayed at our local hospital for another week. Then he came home—to our home. Neither of us wanted to be apart, and since he rented, we decided to move in together at mine. I thought it would be weird to suddenly move in together. I've never lived with anyone but family. I loved my privacy too much. But it doesn't feel like Ben's intruding on it. He feels a part of it.

Following his discharge, he had psychical therapy, learning to do things for himself once again. He's out of the woods now, but his recovery could take another eight weeks.

Yet the doctor feels he's ready for light duties in another week. I don't know how to feel about that. I don't want to be the person who gives him an ultimatum, but I also don't want to be the girl who sits by whilst he puts himself at risk. I want us to stay in our bubble. I love it there. We're happy. We're safe. And that's all I want right now.

He takes my hand, holding it in my lap as we near our home. “Are you okay? I thought you would be happy about me getting the all clear. But you seem sad. You've barely said anything.”

“I'm sorry. My head is all over the place today,” I admit. “But I am happy. I'm over the moon.”

“Is it about Zach and what today is?”

I gaze back out the window. Today is Zach's funeral. His parents sent me a text to invite me to his funeral, but I couldn't bring myself to go. Not even to comfort two people I was once close with. I've not been able to speak to them and they asked my dad if they could see me when I was at the hospital. At first, it was to confront me for taking their son's life, as they'd

only heard one side of the story. But after the police confirmed Ben's statement, they wanted to talk to me for other reasons. I couldn't face them though.

Zach nearly ruined my life. If it wasn't for the cameras Ben installed, I would be going to court right now, fighting for my freedom.

He ruined his parents' lives doing what he did, and tried to ruin Ben's. It's unforgivable. My emotions have been all over the place. I want to be able to grieve for the loss of a person who I spent most of my childhood and adulthood with. Yet all I can picture when I think of him, is him standing on that bluff with a knife tucked into his trousers. All I feel when I think of him is anger and hurt. As much as I try to deny it, he took a piece of me that day. All the stuff he pulled, all the unnecessary words he said, I can't get past it. Maybe one day I will look back on this and forgive him, but not today. And probably not anytime soon.

"No," I answer quietly. "I just didn't think you wanted to go back to work so soon."

"I'm not," he replies.

I turn back to him, my lips parting. "But you said..."

"I asked so I knew what timeframe I was looking at, not because I'm itching to go back. I'm good to stay home and recover properly."

"I'm sorry. I just assumed you would want to because you love doing it."

"I do. But I found someone I love more," he admits, making me melt. "I've spoken with Evan. He's agreed to let me do light work instead of assignments. I don't want to tempt Death for a third time. He might actually take me."

"Please don't joke about it. Not yet," I whisper.

"My point is, I'm happy as I am. I might be able, but I'm not ready to go back. Not mentally or physically. Being unable to feed yourself gives you a new perspective on life."

“Okay,” I reply. “If that is what you want to do. Just don’t do it because of me.”

He pulls up outside the bungalow and puts the car in park. “I love you, Imogen. I’m in this. Which means I’m thinking of you too when I make these decisions. Watching you hurt during my recovery made me realise this isn’t just about me anymore. But I think I would have done the same if you weren’t in the picture. My mum isn’t sleeping. Stefania said she wakes up in the night crying. I want to ease her troubles too.”

I reach over, tucking his sandy blonde hair behind his ear. It’s grown in the past few weeks. It’s longer, with a hint of a curl. “You’re a good man, Ben Donovan.”

He grins and leans over to pull me in for a kiss. My god, he tastes good. We’ve not been able to be intimate, and going another two weeks is going to kill me. “I think we should spend the day in bed,” he requests, brushing the back of his fingers across my cheek.

I pull back, my cheeks hurting from smiling. It’s like he read my mind. “You heard what the doctor said.”

“Yeah, but you could do all the work,” he suggests, wiggling his brows.

I laugh before leaning over to kiss his lips once more. “As fun as that would be, you just said you didn’t want to tempt death. So, let’s keep it PG.”

“You wound my heart,” he teases.

“Plus, we have company,” I tell him, clucking my tongue. “You are dropping the ball, Mr Donovan.”

He turns to the house, and his eyes widen when he spots Hayden letting herself in. “What?”

“It’s our TV debut, remember?” I remind him. “Sabrina sent over the DVD copy.”

He groans as his mum makes her way up the path holding trays of food. “You invited my mum?”

“And sisters,” I admit, struggling not to laugh when they follow, holding their own trays.

“I’m too vulnerable to be around this many people,” he lies.

Unable to keep away, I kiss him again. “Suck it up. They want to give us a welcome home party and this is the calmest they could do.”

“How are they all going to fit in there?”

“We’ve made it work before,” I admit.

“We could just sneak away and get a hotel room together. That would be a great welcome home.”

“Suck it up,” I order and push open my door. “Come on before I call them out to assist you again.”

He narrows his eyes. “You wouldn’t.”

I laugh as I slide out, closing the door behind me. I wait for him to exit before answering. “I would. It was funny the first time.”

“It would have hurt less walking in myself,” he growls.

On the day of us returning home, the guys met us here. They didn’t wait for Ben to get out of the car. Maddox took his arm and pulled him up. Once he was free of the car door, Liam moved to his other side, and together they each hooked one arm around his torso and their other under his thigh and carried him like he was sitting on a throne. And at one point, Liam’s arm slipped and had squished Ben’s balls.

“It could have been worse. They could have thrown you on the sofa,” I splutter out. Hayden has the whole thing on video and I’ve lost count of how many times I’ve replayed it. Ben cried out in pain, and Liam got grossed out from being that close to another man’s ball bag.

“Imogen,” is called.

I lose my smile and spin around, causing myself to go dizzy. Lindy and Colin walk towards me, and I begin to shake. Lindy is in a black nylon dress that falls to her knees, and her

husband is in a black suit with a black shirt. Their eyes are red and puffy, the swelling visible, along with the heartbreak they've been carrying for the past three and a half weeks.

"Now isn't a good time," Ben announces softly as he comes to my side. "Maybe we can do this another day."

Lindy's gaze meets mine, and my lower lip trembles at the sight of her. "Only close family came to his funeral. None of his friends turned up," she announces, her voice breaking.

"I'm sorry, Mrs Armstrong," I whisper.

I can't take my eyes off her. Her grief is like an item of clothing on her, and it has me in a chokehold.

"He had loads of friends," she continues.

Unable to bear her pain any longer, I step forward. "He did."

"They didn't come to say their goodbyes. Neither did you."

"This isn't appropriate," Ben softly points out.

"It's okay," I assure him, then turn to Lindy, taking her hand. "I'm so sorry for your loss, but I couldn't be there. I couldn't forget the things that happened, and I'm sorry if that has hurt you. But being there would have been fake. My presence would have reminded you of what he did, and you needed to remember him as *you* saw him."

"We know," Colin replies gruffly. "It was just hard to say goodbye and have the room empty. He was our son."

I don't know what else to say. It feels cruel to tell them their son pushed everyone away, or that he treated his friends so poorly, they didn't want to say goodbye. "I really am sorry for your loss."

"I wanted to blame you," Lindy mewls. "I wanted to blame the world. But instead, I blame myself."

"This isn't your fault, Lindy. It's neither of yours. You loved him and cared for him. His actions aren't a reflection of your love for him or his behaviour. It's a tragedy that this

happened, and my heart hurts for you. No one should have to bury their child.”

She whimpers as she clings to her husband. “I knew something was wrong with him.”

I cuddle up to Ben, not understanding her words. “I’m not following.”

Colin clears his throat. “When you were in high school, me and Lindy found pictures of you in a notebook.”

I gulp. “Pictures?”

“Of you at school, or hanging out at the park. There were tons of them. Then we found a T-shirt that didn’t belong to Zach. He said it belonged to his girlfriend. You. But you weren’t together. We knew that because we asked his friend about you. He told us you were kind of friends, but that you weren’t his girlfriend. We should have confronted him about it. But back then, we thought it was just a crush and he was embarrassed to tell us. Then you ended up together and we thought maybe his friend was mistaken.”

A shiver races down my spine at their news. I didn’t know. I had no clue he did those things. “I didn’t know,” I rasp.

“You’re telling me your son showed signs of obsessive behaviour, and you did nothing?” Ben grits out.

“Ben, they’re grieving,” I remark. “Please. It’s okay.”

“No, this is bullshit. You come here, make her feel worse than she already does, and then drop a bomb like that? No. This is out of order.”

Lindy begins to sob. “We didn’t know. He is our son and we love him. We know now it wasn’t normal. The police went through his things and found diaries from before you were together. We didn’t know how obsessed he was with you.”

“It’s okay, Lindy. You didn’t know it would end up like this.”

“But maybe if we got him help, we would still have our son with us,” she chokes out. “Now he’s gone and we’ll never

get to see him grow. He'll never get to make up for the things he did wrong."

"I don't think he planned to make up for the things he did wrong," Ben admits. "But it doesn't make it okay for you to turn up like this. Imogen cared for your son. She loved him at one point in time. But he did some terrible, cruel things to her. She spent so many nights wondering what she did wrong or how she could make things better for him. He tormented her and planned to ruin her. His plan wasn't just to pin his death on her, but to destroy her soul. He wanted her to live with the guilt that she is the reason he isn't here. When that plan failed with me being in the picture, he decided to push it onto me, knowing she would never forgive herself for me being in jail. Your son had the capability to do all of that, and take his life." He pauses, waiting for them to acknowledge his words for a moment before continuing. "I can only imagine the pain and grief you're going through right now. I know what it's like to lose someone who means everything to you. Which is why I understand you've come to the one person who makes you feel closer to your son. This isn't fair on Imogen, though. She won't tell you because she has a huge heart, but she doesn't want to take on your grief because she's dealing with her own stuff. She's still coming to terms with what he has done."

"We're sorry. Our intentions weren't to come here and hurt you. We will leave in a moment," Colin promises. "We just wanted to come by to say we're sorry. We're sorry for everything our son has done. And sorry we couldn't do more. We hope that one day, you can find it in yourself to forgive him. Forgive us."

"This has been hard for us too," Lindy whispers. "We don't know the person who did those things to you. That wasn't our son. And like you, we are still coming to terms with the fact it was the same person."

I step forward, startling her, and pull her in for a hug. "Please don't apologise for him." I pull back, not bothering to hide the tears. "There was a time when he made me laugh, when he was my best friend. There was good in him, Lindy.

And he loved you both so much. I hope you find comfort from that.”

She places her hand on Colin’s arm. “Thank you, Imogen,” she whispers brokenly. “Honey, I’m going back to the car.”

She begins to trek back to her car, her movements sluggish. Colin stays behind and waits for her to get further away before talking. “Thank you for giving her that. One day, when you have kids of your own, you will understand just how hard this has been for us. We love our son unconditionally, and hearing people say these things... it’s not been easy. But we are sorry he’s hurt you.”

“It’s okay, Colin,” I assure him. “But just so you know, I really am sorry for your loss.”

He warily watches Ben as he moves forward to kiss me on the cheek. “Take care.”

“You too.”

Ben wraps his arm around me, whilst his free hand tilts my head back. “Are you okay?”

I clear my throat. “That was painful.”

“It was,” he agrees. “But just so we’re clear, you don’t need to hold it in. You can grieve for the friend you lost.”

“I can’t grieve for him. It would be easier if I could but I can’t. I understand why they say you can’t speak ill of the dead. It will only make it difficult for those who cared for him, and prolong the grief for those who loved him. But I also couldn’t fake it. Zach wasn’t a good person to me. He hurt me in a way no one else ever has, and painting him out to be a saint wouldn’t have done me any good. Maybe one day I will feel differently, but right now, I just want to forget. I want to live in the moment. I want to be with you, and fill our days with laughter and love. I choose to move forward.”

“And what does moving forward look like?” he questions, pulling me against him.

“It means moving in with the man I love and hopefully spending the rest of my life with him.”

“I like the sound of that,” he muses.

I nod, because I knew he would. “It means having someone to share my life with. To play video games with. It means taking back the job Zach took from me. It means being happy. And I am happy with you.”

“Good, because I plan to move forward with you,” he rasps, leaning in close.

“And have lots and lots of sex,” I add as his lips brush against mine.

“Then I promise to sleep next to you for always and forever—even when you snore. I promise to always be the person you confide in, and who you can share the good and the bad with. I promise to make sure you always have your favourite foods. I swear to treat your family as my own. I will always be your backup in a game or in life. I’ll never make you feel like a secret or less than. And I promise to love you and make you happy. I love you, Imogen, and I’m moving forward with you.”

Tears well up in my eyes as I wrap my arms around his neck. “I love you too.”

“Bitch! Come on before we start without you,” Hayden yells.

I drop my head back and laugh at the groan Ben lets out. “Okay, I may be pushed to break my oath about treating your family as my own. For Hayden anyway.”

I reach up and kiss him. “Let’s go celebrate moving forward.”

He snags my hand as we begin to make our way to the house. My cheeks ache from smiling, but nothing could wipe it away.

At seventeen years old, I thought I would never be happy again after Ben rejected me. People make fun of those who

believe in love at first sight, but it does exist. A mother loves when they hold their baby for a first time.

I spent so long mourning the fact I would never feel what I did for Ben with anyone else, I began to come to terms with it.

But I think him rejecting me happened for a reason. I believe it made me grow as a person and as a woman. It gave me a chance to experience other things. But mostly, it made me cherish what we have now. It made me realise what we have is rare and special and should never be taken for granted.

Now, years later, we get to begin our life together. We get a second chance, and we get to do it together.

And it couldn't get more beautiful than that.

We might not be guaranteed tomorrow, but we always have today.

And we'll always have each other.

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If you enjoyed Imogen, please leave a review on the appropriate platform. They're so helpful to authors and we appreciate them more than you know.

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