

A totally funny and uplifting novel about having it all

Elizabeth Neep

NEVER

SAY

NO



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NEVER SAY NO

A totally funny and uplifting novel about having it all

ELIZABETH NEEP

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To Nick – for your enduring encouragement and steadfast support.

Prologue

THE MOMENT

Some moments split time in two. The moments where you experience something so monumental that for a brief period the past and the present cease to exist and all that remains is *before* and *after*.

I saw her bare shoulder before I saw her breast. Her cascading hair before I saw her face. Grey strands laced within expensive blonde fell onto the torso of a man half her age. A man who looked nothing like her husband, nothing like the man who had smiled beside her in every glossy feature in every magazine.

I knew I should look away. But the light escaping from her glass sanctuary through the gap in her blinds and out into the dark open-plan office kept beckoning me in, like a moth to a flame. I'd never seen anyone else have sex before. Not in real life. This looked nothing like I expected. Not loving and tender but hungry and hurried; not so much stealing a moment as mugging it, taking it for all it was worth.

The man laid beneath her had long brown hair that clashed against her own with every bite and kiss. The table they lay on was as transparent as the shard of glass I could see through, the blinds failing to block them from the empty office floor surrounding. The *almost* empty office. I looked down at the papers in my hand, the only reason I had passed by here in the first place, the heading on the document taking on new meaning right before my eyes: *confidential*. I needed to walk away, to forget about everything I'd just seen. She had a reputation to uphold. For herself, for the firm. For every young woman who had looked at her life and thought she had it all. Turned out she had more than that.

I took one last look at them, bodies fused together in frenzy, just to check I hadn't imagined it, and took a step back into the darkness. For a second, my heel caught on a cable underfoot, tripping me so I had to catch myself on the printer.

'*Shit.*' My whisper was no louder than the crash I had just made. I didn't want to look back, I didn't want to see them again, but I was desperate to check that they hadn't heard I was here. Looking through the blinds, it only took a moment to wish I hadn't.

ELIRE'S WOMAN OF THE YEAR 2019

Lifting the brass door knocker, I take a step back to gaze up at the freshly painted Pimlico townhouse, spring-pink blossom climbing its four stories. I expect to be greeted by a housekeeper or personal assistant, but no – a face as welcoming as the weather, fresher than a woman half her age, greets me at the door. ‘Come in, come in,’ beams Vivian Jones, Senior Partner at luxury family law firm, Taylor, Laters and Jones. Soon I am pulled into her force field of high ceilings, French pieces and artwork adding colour to every inch of the walls. Just like Jones’ outfit – an orange cashmere chunky knit by Amanda Wakeley atop Moto leather leggings from The Row – on anyone else this décor would look too much, but on Jones? It looks Goldilocks-just-right.

‘Green Tea? Cappuccino? Champagne?’ Jones offers in a flurry as she ushers me into another room, a vision of peach and gold. The floor-to-ceiling windows invite me to gaze upon a lush green garden that few in Central London would be lucky enough to afford. And yet, as Jones is about to tell me, luck has little to do with it. ‘Finally,’ she says, laughing, referring to her promotion as the first female senior partner at the firm almost a decade ago. ‘It’s a travesty that I’m still the only one.’ Jones looks into my eyes earnestly. ‘As a firm we pride ourselves on our progressive outlook, and yet there are so many hidden boundaries that hold us women back. That’s why I launched my initiative to support aspiring female lawyers.’

If anyone were qualified to do so, it would be Jones. A woman responsible for ending some of the most high-profile marriages in the country, Jones and her husband, Jason, a fund manager at Todd and

Morgan, have themselves just celebrated their fortieth wedding anniversary and raised three successful women of their own.

'My family make me proud every day,' Jones gushes. 'None of this was laid out on a table, just ours for the taking, we had to work for it. We had to win.' For a moment, ambition replaces the devotion on her face. And it is this blend of devotion and ambition that makes us proud to crown Vivian Jones our Woman of the Year for 2019.

Chapter 1

SIX WEEKS BEFORE THE MOMENT

There are many reasons people go into Law. The money, the prestige, the power. My own reason just looked straight through me.

‘Vivian Jones.’ Her voice cut from behind as I stashed my copy of *Elire* back in my bag before anyone could see it. I turned to glance at her, her iconic face seeming to scream: *Don’t you know who I am?* She slammed some papers down on the desk in front of a startled young man. His sheet-white face stared back at hers. I could bet my annual trainee wage the accused knew her name, the name of her husband, her children and her second cousin once removed; everyone did.

‘I don’t know if you can see my name on the document,’ she said, pointing a manicured nail to the papers in front of him, his eyes unable to look at anything but her. ‘But I’m the partner overseeing this case, so you’d better be looking after my client.’

My eyes darted to the other person in the reception area, who was waiting a couple of seats away from me. His eyes caught mine, but he didn’t smile, too busy hanging on her every word.

‘I appreciate your help, I really do.’ Vivian’s voice softened. It was this sharp but sweet persona for which she was known, the one that kept every man on his toes; that told every aspiring female lawyer: you can. You can get to the top without injecting yourself with testosterone. You can win every single case you take on and still make it home in time to make love to your husband. I studied her figure, slighter in person but carrying more presence than the image on the pages of the magazine I had just held in my hands.

‘Hailey Kidd?’

‘Yes?’ I turned to see a young woman standing before me, struggling to breathe in her pencil skirt, struggling to smile through her tiredness. In her defence, it was only eight a.m.

‘Good.’ She nodded, her grin looking more like a grimace. ‘Daniel?’ She turned to the other figure sat in the open-plan reception area. The man looked up at the mention of his name, managing to offer her a smile. ‘Welcome to Taylor, Laters and Jones.’ Her eyes darted from us to Vivian. ‘Follow me.’

Rising to my feet, I turned to the guy again – Daniel, apparently – to find his blue eyes fixed on me.

‘I’m Hailey,’ I said with a smile, pulling my new handbag closer to my chest.

‘She said,’ he muttered before proceeding to step in front of me, following the woman who had just welcomed us. I had clocked him as soon as he had walked in: long legs, broad shoulders, dark hair, mid-twenties. Despite being a good few years younger than me, I would have never guessed he’d be a trainee too. From his ensemble and entitlement, I’d guessed he was a client. Maybe he looked too young, or I felt too old? Either way, I knew I was missing *something*.

As we traced our way across the busy twelfth floor, London’s iconic skyline humbled us from all sides. An orange autumnal sunrise kissed Tower Bridge, the Tower of London, the Gherkin, the Cheese Grater, and glittered across the Thames below. I breathed deeply, bullying my imposter syndrome back into place. I had just as much right to be here as anyone.

‘Vivian’s office is just through here.’ The woman looked over her shoulder to smile at Daniel; for him, she managed a real one.

‘Great. This view is—’ I began

‘This view is *stunning*,’ he said, oozing over me, as the woman grinned all the more.

Moving across the floor as quickly as her pencil skirt would allow, she steered us past hyped-up hot-deskers and cornered-off glass offices full of partners and their clients. Only one or two heads bothered to look up: a rotund man dressed in a well-cut suit; a plastic-pumped blonde, diamonds dripping from every limb.

The sound of busy inboxes and hurried chatter clashed against the clean sweeping lines of the office’s minimalistic chic, all curving glass-topped desks and black leather chairs. The walls were bare, the windows high; but then, who needed art when London looked like *that*? As we were ushered to

the back of the floor, one or two more people looked our way: they all knew we were heading to the best room in the house.

Sliding a glass door open, she held out her arms to present two empty desks, the only desks in the anteroom to Vivian's office. As if our sitting at them wasn't self-explanatory. As if we hadn't already passed about thirty legal reasoning tests and an extensive online induction just to set foot in here. Getting my training contract at the firm was unbelievable in itself, spending my first placement – my first 'seat' – with the reason I had wanted to retrain as a lawyer in the first place, was a dream come true. Trainees would never usually work for senior partners straight away, but Vivian was notorious for her fresh approach.

'I'll take this one,' Daniel said, ditching his stuff atop the one marginally closer to Vivian.

'Oh, okay,' I replied, taking the other; passive, submissive. Damn it, Hailey, *be aggressive*. I couldn't help the *Bring It On* chant from drifting into my mind, the one Dom had sung to me from our bed this morning as I dressed to kill for my first day. Well, I *thought* I had dressed to kill, until I had seen Daniel in a suit that I'd bet my dress was designer.

Before visions of me sitting here naked could fill my mind – wasn't I supposed to imagine everyone *else* naked? – I looked around the space surrounding us, trying my hardest not to compare our two facing desks to the ones outside Meryl Streep's office in *The Devil Wears Prada*. Or to imagine which one of us would play Anne Hathaway, which one would be Emily Blunt.

'You alright?' Daniel grunted over his computer monitor as he caught me looking in his direction again.

'Yeah, thanks. Excited for our first day.' I smiled across my own.

'Sure,' he replied, a stupid little smile turning up the corners of his mouth.

Reaching into my bag to get out my notebook, my pens, my glasses case and line them up across my desk, I couldn't feel more *first day at school* if I tried. Daniel, on the other hand, looked entirely at ease, a smug raised eyebrow clocking my pencil case.

'You brought a—'

'Yes?' I shot down his question before he could finish, my cheeks flushing red. It was a thin black cylinder and almost a carbon copy of the one *Vogue* claimed was one of the 'Five Essentials' in Vivian's handbag. But it

was still a bloody pencil case.

‘It’s just...’ Daniel began, his eyes moving from my case to my pinned-back hair, an inquisitive look on his face. *Maybe the lucky scrunchy was overkill?* But this was Taylor, Laters and Jones. I’d need all the help I could get.

‘Never mind.’ Daniel shrugged his shoulders, failing to hide his smirk. I tried my best to hold his eye, as shame filled my stomach. I belonged here. I would belong here if it killed me. But he had already turned away and following his gaze, I understood why.

Floating across the floor, Vivian’s high-waisted, flared suit trousers billowed as her presence grew bigger and bigger with each step in our direction. I fixed a smile to my face, ready for her approach as she slid open the first glass door, nodding at Daniel and then to me, her new shiny guard dogs. Gliding past us and towards the second door, I gazed through to her luxurious office, all golds and creams with French paintings on the wall. For just a moment, Vivian stalled, hand still pressed to the glass door, to study the brass letters beside it: *Taylor, Laters and Jones*, and grinned as if knowing they’d saved the best until last.

‘You take care now.’

I looked up from my empty inbox to see Vivian emerge from her office, her fifth client of the day in tow. I tried not to stare but it was impossible not to, given that this latest client was about six foot five, wearing not one but *two* floor-length fur coats and carrying a cane; he couldn’t be a day over twenty.

‘Thanks Jones,’ he said cockily, leaning down to kiss her on one cheek and then the other. Out of the corner of my eye, I could see her rolling hers.

‘It’s *Mrs.* Jones,’ she corrected, smile unwavering, file clutched in her hands. I looked him up and down, mind whirling with reasons he could be here: he was adopted and trying to trace his birth parents? Under eighteen and wanting to be emancipated from his parents?

‘Oh right,’ he grunted, putting on his oversized sunglasses. Oh *please*, it was mid-September. He was *indoors*. ‘My wife makes me forget people actually like to be married.’

‘*Ex-wife*,’ Vivian assured him. He was married. He was getting *divorced*? But he was a child. I looked to Daniel to share in the surprise, but his gaze

was fixed on her.

As the client swaggered out of our office and across the floor outside, I tried to look busier than I was. Truth was, Vivian had been too busy to give us any *actual* work, emerging from her office only to welcome or see off her clients. But this time she lingered by her door, looking in my direction as I squeezed my legs tighter under the table. Two hours of sipping water at speed and I was in desperate need of a toilet, but Daniel hadn't moved an inch and my bladder was sure as hell not going to be my first sign of weakness. I looked up at Vivian: was she finally going to give us a tour? Wasn't *someone* supposed to give us a tour?

'Can one of you help me with something,' she said, looking down at the papers in her hand. It didn't need to be a question. I looked at the document, mind flicking through what it could be, wondering whether I'd actually be able to put my law degree into practice in the real world – not that the clients Taylor, Laters and Jones served resembled anything like the *real* world.

I shot a brief look at Daniel and his eyes caught mine for a moment, his mouth forming an answer before I could interrupt. Vivian Jones was notorious for wanting women to speak up.

'Of cour—'

'Of course.' My words sliced across Daniel's as his eyes narrowed in my direction.

'Wonderful.' Vivian smiled. 'I need you to get these.' She handed me the sheet of paper and I looked down at the list: *Skinny Cappuccino, Green Tea, Soy Cortado... A v Z (CA 2019)_Doc 7, ditto Doc 8-24, 56-78...*

'Order some, print the others and bring everything up to the meeting room on floor fourteen.'

I nodded, trying to mask any disappointment that the task was so trivial whilst racking my mind to remember *anything* about the firm's computer system from the induction. I was still working for the best woman in the business – doing her admin was like taking on the whole damn case at any other firm. Daniel's eyes burnt into the papers and I couldn't help but feel smug; it would take more than a designer suit to impress Vivian Jones.

'Daniel, come into my office,' Vivian said, as she began to walk away. Now it was his turn to look smug. 'I'd like to bring you up to speed on a case I want to get you working on.'

Vivian pulled open the glass partition to her Parisian-inspired space, beckoning him inside, my bulging bladder the only thing threatening to

displace my envy. My turn would come, but first I really needed to...

‘Vivian?’ I asked, as she turned her head to look at me. An inquisitive look spread across her perfectly proportioned features. ‘I was just wondering,’ I began, desperately searching for a more insightful question. ‘If you could show me where the bathrooms—’

‘Thanks Hailey, they need these in ten,’ she said with a nod, choosing to ignore my question as I tried my hardest to ignore my desperate bladder and even harder to block out my desperate need to make her like me, use me, *see me more*.

Twenty-five minutes, six coffees and three trees of printing later, I finally found the meeting room on floor fourteen, full of people desperate for their caffeine and their documents. I was just desperate. *Crap*, I really needed to pee. Where the *hell* was the ladies?

Running down the two flights of stairs back to Vivian’s floor, I cursed the company’s contemporary design. It was one thing to be as chic as a fashion brand, it was another for your minimalism to make everything so hidden – where the hell was the entrance to the lifts? And where on earth were the toilets?

I looked around desperately, trying and failing to find the iconic cape-wearing silhouette of the toilet woman on any of the doors lining the corridor, until I locked eyes on two brandishing the letter ‘T’. T for toilet, right? *Please God*. I pushed one open, peering in.

‘Oh, sorry.’ A dark head of hair looked up from washing his hands, his well-cut trouser legs leading my eye down to a pair of black shiny shoes more expensive than all of Dom’s put together. Hell, put together with all of *my* pairs.

‘You, sex.’ He grinned, the kind of smile that would steal your sentences just before it stole your mind. If his strong-jawed face wouldn’t do it, his last word certainly would. ‘Unisex,’ he repeated, as I stashed my confusion before he could clock it. ‘Gender neutral,’ he said, shrugging, and then a little louder over the hand dryer, ‘Turns out law firms are pretty hot on discrimination.’

I should have known anywhere Vivian worked wouldn’t stand for doors boasting a dress-wearing woman opposite a power-stance of a man. I looked up at the one stood before me, his black eyes on mine, a wrinkle or two of

wisdom etched around them. I'd guess early forties; distinguished, refined. I willed my mouth to open, my legs to move. Just do something, Hailey, say *anything*.

'You're new,' he added. It wasn't a question. I nodded, my words still held hostage as he held out a newly dry hand in my direction, a thick gold band around his fourth finger. He looked towards the stalls; yes, I was dying for the toilet, but no I wasn't going to let him listen to me pee. I'd only just mastered that with Dom in the next room. 'You're with...' he began, the intensity of his gaze melting me to the spot. I'm with Dom. Dom. My *boyfriend* Dom. 'Vivian, right?'

I nodded, all my sentences crumbling under his stare.

'She got you on any cases yet?'

'Kind of.' I lied, not knowing why I felt the need to. If delivering files and flat whites counted as working on a case... 'It's only my first day.' I shrugged, forcing a smile.

'Never too early to make a good impression.' He cast a brief wink my way. On anyone else it would have looked like they were trying too hard; on him it looked effortless. Make a good impression? That's what I was *trying* to do.

I pressed my legs further together, my mind searching for something clever to say, cheeks growing pinker still.

'And we like to throw people in at the deep end,' he pressed on.

That's what I wanted; I wanted to be thrown in at the deep end. I'd waited so long to be thrown in at the deep end.

'Actually, I think I have something interesting on the horizon. Billionaire marriage, multiple affairs.' He looked at me, passion oozing through every fibre of his 'big money' suit. 'Oh, and a really big trust issue...'

'Clearly.'

'No, offshore accounts,' he started to explain, before clocking my grin, noting my sarcasm. 'Quick.' He laughed. 'Very quick. If Vivian doesn't snap you up, I'll get you on something.'

My cheeks warmed again. So, he had the power to decide who worked where. I could *tell* he was senior here. But was I really ready? This is what I had trained for; to push myself out of my ordinary, everyday life, the one that had got so, well, *comfortable*. I might not be ready, but I wanted to be and wasn't intention ninety percent of the law? Or wait, maybe that was possession.

‘You’re not fresh out of uni, right? You’re what, twenty-six, twenty-seven?’ Senior at the firm and knew to guess low; this guy was smart in more ways than one.

‘Twenty-nine,’ I confirmed. ‘But you can’t ask that.’ I shook my head, letting a hint of a smile escape. ‘It’s *age* discrimination.’

‘Yes, but it’s *positive* discrimination. Most of the trainees who come in here are babies, they’re not nearly as—’

‘Mature?’ I grinned.

‘Sharp.’ He smiled down at me. ‘I was going to say sharp.’

‘I didn’t go straight into it after graduation.’ I shrugged; an answer not nearly as satisfying as he would have liked. I went through the motions, trained as a teacher because my best friends did, taught primary school for a while, was happy drifting along. Then suddenly it didn’t fit, like wearing clothes never meant for you in the first place. Not that I wanted him to know that. I wanted him to think I was decisive, in control. ‘Anyway, I really need...’ I gestured to the stalls, not knowing whether this particular *control* would last.

‘Sure, sure.’ He smiled, cocking his head to look at me, trying to work me out. ‘I should get back to work.’ He turned to pass me, pushing the door out into the office, turning around to look at me one last time. ‘See you around, Kidd.’

I smiled as the door shut behind him. I hadn’t even told him my name.

Chapter 2

My key caught in the lock as my eyes caught on my watch: 10.12 p.m. I guessed this was my new normal? I yanked the key left then right and kicked the bottom of the door, dented from its repeated abuse. That hadn't felt normal when we had first moved in two years ago either. Now the sticky lock was as familiar as the view that greeted me. Dom, beer in one hand, remote in the other, tired hair flopping in front of his thick-rimmed glasses, his tired eyes visible beneath. He smiled as I tottered across the wooden floor of our small apartment towards him, the formality of my attire all of a sudden clashing against the worn but welcoming green sofa that we had found on Gumtree – even though Dom still maintained that the sofa had *found us*. I sat down, both my outfit and my face much less fresh than the ones that had left for work this morning.

'You look nice.' His face creased at the eyes as he smiled, the way it always did; deeper with every passing year. I didn't, but he had a habit of seeing the best in me.

'Thanks.' I reached across him for an unopened beer can beckoning me from the coffee table. 'How was your day?'

Dom shook his head, still smiling. 'How was *your first* day? Take Taylor, Laters and Jones by storm?' He opened an arm as I snuggled beside him, savouring the hiss of a freshly opened can. Taking a sip, I placed it back on the stack of law and teaching books – our past, my future – that acted as a second table, bookending the arms of our sofa.

'Define storm?' I rolled my heavy eyes. 'If by storm you mean proofreading and photocopying then yeah, I was a real hurricane.'

‘Got to start somewhere Hayby.’ Dom squeezed my shoulder a little tighter.

‘Yeah,’ I said, hoping to God I wouldn’t be on the starting line for too long, visions of Daniel being called in and out of Vivian’s office all afternoon and the offer of the man in ‘T’ still ringing in my mind. ‘How was school?’ I deflected the attention away from me again.

‘Ella was a princess, Andy was a knobhead.’ I jabbed him in the ribs; they were eight, he shouldn’t say that. ‘Henrietta got all her sums right, Jacob got none of them.’ Dom disregarded my reprimand. He would help Jacob get it together eventually, he always did, always rooting for the underdog. It’s what we both did before I *became* the underdog. ‘You know, the usual.’ He shrugged. I knew the usual well, had worked alongside Dom for years. He moved his face closer to mine, breath lingering on my neck. And this, us, was pretty normal too. Dom had been my best friend for years until that one time we had kissed, and I’d decided I didn’t mind it. Then we’d kissed again, and I’d minded that even less. And now, somehow, over a decade had passed.

‘Vivian all you hoped she would be?’

‘Yes.’ I puffed up my chest in defiance, jabbing him in the sides. If he could idolise Alex Oxlade-Chamberlain, I could sure as hell appreciate a strong woman in power. ‘I mean, she looks forty for starters.’

‘Gutted if she’s thirty-three.’

‘She’s sixty-two!’

‘Bet her boobs are thirty-three.’ Dom laughed.

‘They can’t be older than ten.’

‘I prefer yours.’ Dom placed down his drink to return both hands to me, pinning me down on the sofa. ‘Not that I’ve seen hers,’ he added as my eyebrows soared.

‘Besides the breasts...’ I carried on talking, despite Dom’s failed attempts to kiss my mouth shut, trying to reclaim this morning’s excitement. ‘She’s so smart, and powerful—’

‘You’re smart and powerful,’ Dom interrupted with another kiss.

‘And, well, *on it.*’ I pressed on regardless. ‘Apparently she oscillates between being the last one to leave the office and the first.’

‘Slacker.’ Dom joked again, planting a tired kiss on my clavicle.

‘To prioritise her family, make time for mentoring. She really is a wonder woman.’

‘*You’re* a wonder woman.’ Dom kissed me again, his post-work

relaxation now in full swing whilst mine felt like it might never return again. ‘And God knows you always prioritise your family.’ We both knew who he was talking about. ‘But remember, Hailey’ – he donned his teacher voice. ‘Idols always break the hearts of those who love them...’

‘Huh?’ I pushed myself up to laugh at him, sure the words weren’t his own.

‘Did some C. S. Lewis with the kids today.’ He pulled me back into him. ‘I think it means don’t, like, build your heroes up too much because they might let you down...’

‘Is this all because your favourite footballer got injured?’ I laughed, but before he could answer, my phone buzzed to life in my pocket, making me shoot up straight. Dom returned to his beer, surrendering to the only buzz he’d be getting tonight. ‘Don’t tell me that’s work. They’ve already had you past ten. It’s your first day.’

‘You know who it is.’ I looked down at my phone, a mix of relief and disappointment that it wasn’t work calling with a crisis. Only important people got called in a crisis.

‘What’s Robson want this time?’ Dom asked again, rubbing his eyes. Seriously, you’d think it was half one in the morning, not half ten at night. Plus, he knew there wasn’t a *this time* when it came to Sophie; she could message, call or bloody turn up any time she liked.

‘Checking I’m still on for Monday,’ I replied, not needing to look up to see Dom rolling his eyes. He knew not even Vivian Jones would make me cancel on my best friend. ‘Fancy joining us for a 10k too?’ I asked, half annoyed. Dom pretended to look the same, but he was fooling no one; the only place he planned on running was to the shop when our month’s supply of Heineken ran dry.

‘I don’t know why you agreed to run a marathon in the first year of your training contract. Sure know how to make life difficult for yourself, Kidd.’

‘Sophie wanted to,’ I muttered, as if that was reason enough. ‘She’s struggling.’

‘I’m not surprised. You’re trying to run a bloody marathon. The longest I’ve seen Sophie commit to something is that time *You* came on Netflix and she binged it in a week.’

I narrowed my eyes in his direction. He knew that wasn’t fair. Sophie had her reasons for struggling with commitment, we both knew that. Plus, *You* was addictive.

‘No, I mean, *struggling*.’ I looked at him, seriousness lacing through my brows.

‘Oh really?’ Dom looked concerned.

‘Yeah.’ I sighed, gravitating closer to Dom’s side. He held me a little tighter.

‘Well, I know you want to be a good friend to Sophie,’ Dom began, stroking my arm a little, stalling the next part of his sentence. ‘But just make sure you don’t spread yourself too thinly. You’ve worked really hard to get this opportunity.’ As if I didn’t know that already.

‘I can handle it,’ I whispered into his chest. ‘If I have to squeeze in some runs before work so be it – I’ll just stay a little later.’

Dom cocked an eyebrow: *a little later than 10.12 p.m.?* I watched a hint of a smile begin to spread across his face.

‘What?’ I laughed, savouring one of the rare moments where I couldn’t read his mind.

‘Day one and you sound like a proper lawyer.’ He laughed, eyes flicking from my lips to his beer. ‘Already blurring the lines between work and pleasure.’

GIRLS WILL BE WOMEN - AN INTERVIEW WITH VIVIAN JONES

Equality starts in the home,' Vivian Jones tells The Custodian, as her eyes dart across the marble-topped islands of her vast kitchen and towards her husband, City banker Jason Jones, who is busy clattering crockery into the dishwasher. 'A well-placed display of domesticity?' I ask her, to which she laughs. 'I wish. Jason's a clean freak. He sometimes spends more time with that dishwasher than me – it's like he's having an affair.' 'I heard that,' Jason shouts across the room. 'I meant him to.' Jones turns to me with a devilish grin. This back and forth, push and pull between them is indicative of the equality Jones fights for. As is the way they have chosen to raise their three girls.

'They're women now,' Jones corrects me, not unkindly, tucking a loose strand of grey-blond hair behind her expensively hedged ear. 'When I was growing up, I was given dolls and taught to share my stickers. My brother was given building blocks and told to climb trees. I was taught to be friendly whereas a 'friendly' was the last thing my brother would want to play. He was taught to embrace competition, enjoy competition; I was told to watch it from the sidelines. Somehow, I learnt competitive boys were liked, were popular; competitive girls were, well, bitches.'

I think of a thousand questions to ask but don't want to interrupt Jones in full flow; it's notoriously where she operates best. 'I had to unlearn these misconceptions, to teach myself again to lean into competition, to let it make me better. I never wanted my children to have to unlearn the same things. I

taught them competition was not something to be scared of, but something to embrace.’ I nod along, encouraged afresh that there are people like Jones forging a better future. A future that is female.

‘We’ – her seemingly airbrushed face fixes on me as I ask her to repeat herself. ‘I should have said, “we”. We taught them; that’s the only way this is going to work. We need men and women to fight for equality together.’ So, what does this mean in practice? ‘It means men need to open the playing field, and women need to get some skin in the game. But we can’t just wait on the sidelines – we need to make ourselves known; look for opportunities, ask for a mentor, ask for a sponsor, notice who’s noticing you, investing in you and start to build your team.’ Jones smiles, eyes alight with warmth and fire.

As our interview draws to a close, she politely offers me another drink before I go and I know she has not lost the lessons she was brought up with, just refuses to be confined by them, realising the breadth and depth of all she can be. I get the sense that Vivian Jones would still share her stickers with you if you asked her nicely – only nowadays for a price.

Chapter 3

FIVE WEEKS BEFORE THE MOMENT

‘Is there anything I can help you with?’ I asked, as Daniel looked up from his stack of papers, dark circles around his eyes. Our first day was only a week ago but I wasn’t entirely sure Daniel had left the office since.

‘Haven’t you got any work to do?’ he replied, barely even bothering to look up. I looked down at the stack of papers on my own desk.

‘Well, yes...’ my sentence trailed off, the rest of my words left unsaid: *but it’s not as important as yours*. But no, there were no small jobs, just small people.

‘Mr Ruslan, Mr Ruslan!’ I watched as the receptionist from the lobby downstairs chased a client across our floor. *Speaking of small people*, I couldn’t help but think as my eyes traced the receptionist’s petite figure tottering in our direction, from her expensive stiletto heels up to a blouse gaping at her generous chest. Did everyone here have to be so hot? For some reason, that man from T forced his way into my mind.

‘What, darling?’ A low accent shocked me from the thought as I looked past the pretty receptionist to the man now standing at the door into our office. Around five foot eight, the strength of his features – from his strong nose to his thick brow – were only matched by the boldness of his suit in a bright blue paisley-print, with waistcoat and bowtie to match.

‘You can’t *park* there,’ the receptionist said, her cheeks pink with colour. Daniel and I followed her manicured finger out the widow to the street below, where a crowd of tourists had gathered around a bright red supercar pulled up by the Thames.

‘But I’m late for my meeting.’ The man pushed a hand through his floppy

grey hair, a fistful of rings gleaming in the late September sun.

‘An Aston Martin...’ Daniel whispered under his breath.

‘Can you move it?’ The man held out his keys to the receptionist, whose mouth hung open, her cheeks draining of colour.

‘Mr Ruslan.’ Our heads turned to see Vivian, her svelte figure now standing in the doorway into her office. ‘What on earth is going on?’

‘He... car... can’t...’ The receptionist spoke in single syllables.

‘Breathe.’ Vivian cut through her half-sentence with a smile, taking the keys. ‘Leave this with me.’ The receptionist smiled, thankful for someone to take control before turning to walk away.

‘Daniel, could you please go and move Mr Ruslan’s car?’

‘Are you kidding me?’ Daniel couldn’t help but grin. Vivian just smiled as if to say *do I look like I’m kidding?* before turning to me. ‘Hailey, could you grab us some coffees?’

ME: *Hey, how you doing today?*

SOPHIE: *I’m okay.*

ME: *Just okay?*

SOPHIE: *Just a lot on my mind.*

ME: *You can tell me all about it tonight.*

SOPHIE: *How’s the start of your second week going?*

ME: *Yeah, great.*

ME: *Loving it.*

I peered through the floor-to-ceiling glass of Vivian’s office for the thousandth time since that morning, my eyes lingering on her slender form as

it moved across the room. Her client was pacing, as frantic and forceful as when he had stormed past our desks this morning. Vivian, in contrast, was gliding, entirely in control. I looked to Daniel's empty chair; he'd caught my eyes drifting into her office so many times that I swear he'd think I had developed some sort of obsessive crush on her. But even he couldn't deny, whatever went on in there had a way of drawing the eye in. I just wished I had a better excuse to enter it than bringing in the coffee. Holding the takeaway cups in my hand, I walked slowly into the room, neither of its occupants looking up to greet me.

'Why did you marry?' Vivian asked, matter-of-factly.

'Why does anyone marry?' Mr Ruslan raised his eyebrows, putting one leg over the other, the red soles of his black, shiny shoes visible beneath. 'For love.'

'I've been in this game long enough to know to ask the question.'

'Look, Ms Jones...'

'You can call me Vivian,' she said, nodding me over to the table in the corner of her room, files stacked high upon it, ready to be dissected.

'Look *Vivian*, I'm not stupid,' her client began, whilst I tried my best not to smile: he had parked his car in the middle of a pedestrianised street; he was wearing a paisley bowtie. 'I know I'll have to settle, but I came to you because I know you're the best.'

Vivian silently dismissed me before I caught her reply. 'The best don't settle.'

Sitting back at my desk, I forced my attention to the bundle of papers before me, highlighter marks sweeping across key sentences, my eyes still drifting into Vivian's office, to her hand resting on her client's hunched shoulders. *For love*. I forced his words from my mind. I needed to grow a thicker skin if I was going to survive here. Divorce was never nice, but it could be handled nicely, leaving people with dignity and clean pieces from which to rebuild a life. I knew that too well.

'That was so cool.' I looked up to see Daniel, grinning from ear to ear, no doubt wishing for the hundredth time that I was some guy he could chat about supercars with. 'Do you know how *rare* red Aston Martins are?'

I shook my head, not meaning to look so sad as he took his seat. I didn't want to park some stupid car; I wanted to be in that corner office assisting the shit-hot partner inside.

I glanced across to the towering pile of duplicates to my side. My Everest.

It was somehow far less interesting and yet much more intimidating than mine and Dom's table of books back home. But this Everest was a step, a star-jump on the sidelines, a tiny tread towards a legal career I could be proud of. A legal career like...

'Liam!' Daniel jumped to his feet as I turned my head towards the object of his attention. The man from T grinned down at me, dimples etched into his distinguished face. He traced a hand through his dark hair, silver tints caught in the fierce office lights. His smile grew broader still, and for just a moment, I felt that I might be the reason why.

I had seen him around the office countless times since our first day run-in, but each time on the other side of the glass to where I was. It was taking all my strength to stop the loop of doom from running in my mind: *Why aren't you putting yourself forward? Why aren't you being seen? Why has she chosen Daniel over you when she's meant to mentor promising young women? Maybe you're just not that promising after all...*

'Liam,' Daniel repeated again, moving around to the space between our desks, with the kind of air I'd so far only seen reserved for Vivian. I tried my best not to roll my eyes. 'This is Hailey Kidd, Vivian's second trainee.' Daniel pressed on, as I tried to work out when we had been given numbers. I offered him my open palm and blankest expression.

'Pleasure,' he nodded as if it was the first time we'd met, though the glint in his eyes told me he was just playing with Daniel, and that he remembered our run-in, too.

'Liam Hartman,' he said with a grin, his hand still in mine.

'Liam.' Daniel's voice called from beside us even though it felt so far away. 'Vivian's expecting you now,' he said in a way that made me sure he had some sort of direct line to her, perhaps telepathic, one I desperately, undeniably, wanted to work my way into.

'Thanks Daniel.' Liam nodded a dismissal, as Daniel – almost bowing – backed away. 'I've got a moment or two.' He smiled again, and suddenly I felt like the only option in the room. 'How are you doing, Kiddo?' Liam lowered his voice a little, even though I knew Daniel would be hanging on our every word.

'Yeah, alright thanks.' I smiled up at him, still towering above me, not knowing whether to stand up or not. The intensity of his black stare was the same as before, but this time hinted at something warmer, more subtle, something else I didn't realise I was desperate for: kindness. Another lump

caught in my throat as I cursed it away: I'd only had one week here, I had time to make my mark. But didn't they like throwing trainees in at the deep end? So why was I still in the shallows? I looked at Daniel, pretending to busy himself with work, looking down at his phone and then glancing in our direction. 'I err...' I began, wanting to tell Liam everything: that so far, every bit of interesting, meaningful work had only gone one way. That somehow, I'd fallen to the bottom of the bundle. 'I think I'm ready for something a bit more...' my second sentence trailed off like my first, but Liam nodded.

'I'll see what I can do.'

For the hundredth time, I tried to place him, to work out what strings he had the power to pull here. I had tried to google him at home when Dom wasn't around. I'd even thought of risking a search on the firm's intranet during the day, sure I'd find my answers there, but also sure to be found out. Out of the corner of my eye I could see Vivian moving towards the door into her office, Daniel stirring to stand upon seeing her move.

'I'm so sorry for asking,' I began, knowing now was my only chance not to be overheard. 'But what is your official position here?'

Liam grinned widely, a twinkle of mischief escaping within it, but at what, I wasn't quite sure.

'That's okay.' His eyes fixed on me alone. 'I'm a senior associate here.'

'Soon to make partner,' Daniel chipped in, keen to tell both of us he knew precisely what was going on at the firm.

'How do you know that?' Liam turned on his heel.

'Heard it in *Laters*.' Daniel smiled again, as I tried not to let on that I had no idea what '*Laters*' meant. I thought I'd read all the legal journals since before I was born – or there about. I made a mental note to research it tonight, after my run with Sophie, the sinking feeling in my stomach reminding me that my spare time was already running away.

'Well don't believe everything you hear.'

The three of us turned our heads to follow the sound of Vivian's voice, as clear as the glass door now pushed open into her room. 'Daniel, can you come and take notes?'

She nodded as I forced my eagerness not to cover every inch of my face: *pick me, pick me*. 'Hailey, could you please do me a massive favour?'

'Of course,' I replied, almost too quickly.

She walked a few paces back into her office, and I stood up, hovering by the entrance, ready to follow. 'Could you please deliver these documents to

the address attached?’ Handing me a folder, she retraced her steps back onto the other side of the glass as my keenness shattered again. ‘And Liam, you were meant to be in this meeting ten minutes ago.’ She narrowed her eyes at him.

‘Sorry, I got...’ Liam shot me a wink so slight I might have dreamt it ‘... distracted.’

Walking out of the office, documents in my hands, I forced my heartbeat in line with the sound of my heels, striking the pavement in a familiar monotonous beat. But familiar and monotonous was not why I gave up a steady career in teaching, or why I had put my social life on hold for the last two years. It was not why I had pushed myself out of my comfort zone, forced myself into a world that felt so far away from my own. It had only been a week. But my seat with Vivian would only last four months before our rotation around the firm’s different departments would move on – the smallest amount of time, but the biggest opportunity – and it sure seemed like Daniel was managing to make his mark.

I weaved my way past the collection of lunchtime lovers and wrapped-up tourists wandering down the side of the Thames. I walked to the side of the water and looked left to Tower Bridge, more onlookers stopping beside me as the bridge began to open. I paused for a moment, sure I was visible from our offices, but I also didn’t care if anyone saw me. I had secured the first seat of my training contract with Vivian Jones but not a soul seemed to know who I was or even care I was there. Apart from Liam.

All along the river, people stopped, poised for the perfect photo. My eyes travelled further down the water: to the Tower of London and over to the maze of the metropolis, sure that people up at Sky Garden were in turn gazing down and looking at us. Somehow the city made us all feel like nobodies and yet together, a part of something so much bigger, more *promising*.

A hard knock to my ankle brought my attention back to the bankside beneath my feet.

‘Sorry,’ a young boy shouted, as a bunch of his friends laughed behind him. I looked down at the football, putting my heel on top of it as the boys looked at me as if to say, *She’s not going to kick it with them on, is she?* With my shoe on the ball, I couldn’t help but look up at the offices of Taylor,

Laters and Jones towering before me. I was on the sideline and it was time for me to get off it – wasn't that what Vivian would do? What she actually *did*? *Look for opportunities, ask for a mentor.* I recalled Vivian's words from one of the countless interviews with her I had read. *Ask for a sponsor, notice who's noticing you...*

My mind shot to the one man who had. With the documents still cradled in my hands and the boys with their eyes fixed on me, I kicked the ball with force. The perfect return. The boy looked up to me, startled and impressed, as I went on my way to Vivian's delivery address. It was time to get some skin in the game.

Chapter 4

‘Sorry I’m late, sorry I’m late.’ I thrust my hoodie-clad arms around Sophie. She looked every bit the part in her Lululemon Lycra twinset. I looked like I’d just changed in the office after a day of running around zones one to five, which to be fair, I kind of had.

‘It’s okay, I get it.’ Sophie sighed, rolling her eyes, but with no edge to her voice. ‘I guess I should get used to it, having a hot-shot lawyer for a best friend and all.’

‘Whatever.’ I narrowed my eyes in return but couldn’t help but smile. But we weren’t here for me, we were here for Soph. ‘Anyway, how are you? How was your day?’

‘How’s it all going? What’s she like?’ Sophie asked, completely ignoring my questions. She’d said she was excited for me but surely she’d endured enough Vivian talk already? I’d been messaging her all last week, though I’d left out a hefty dose of feeling overlooked and overwhelmed. Sophie didn’t really understand my decision to retrain as a lawyer in the first place. We’d all settled into teaching, she thought we’d all been happy there – we *had* all been happy there. Until I wasn’t. And after months of seeing me push down law-exam-induced panic every time we hung out, I can’t imagine she’d want to hear me moaning about it already.

‘She’s awesome Soph, like a proper powerhouse,’ I said, searching Sophie’s face for signs to stop. ‘Everyone comes to her for answers. No one knows the law better...’

‘I’m sure.’ Sophie laughed, before fixing her steel-blue eyes on mine. ‘But who was she *wearing*?’ Sophie had a way of cutting to the point.

‘She’s the first female named partner at the firm and all you care about...’

‘Just answer the question, Mrs Kidd.’ Sophie feigned seriousness.

‘I think you’ll find it’s Miss Kidd.’ I matched her tone.

‘Meh, you may as well be.’

‘Oh *please*, you know that’s not happening anytime soon,’ I said, trying to laugh off the suggestion. ‘Prada, Chanel, Mui Mui...’ I reeled off, much to her delight. ‘She’ll have them all.’

‘Floozy,’ Sophie muttered, eyes shooting to the mobile vibrating in her hands.

‘Speaking of floozies...’ I looked down at her phone.

‘Hey!’ Sophie hit the top of my arm.

‘Well, whose turn is it tonight?’ I smiled, pushing my own phone into my arm band; a present from Dom after I’d given him a hard time for saying no to the marathon in the first place. We were both meant to be on Team Sophie, but Dom drew the line at twenty-six miles.

‘Forty-seven.’ Sophie sighed. After over a year of first dates, Sophie’s guys were now given numbers not names.

‘Again?’ I couldn’t help but ask, but Sophie was already a beat ahead. I thought only first dates were acceptable to Sophie. Provided they stayed short, painless and didn’t lead to anything more serious. I felt the same way about runs. Now here I was, forcing one heavy foot in front of the other. I looked up at the Thames Path unfolding before us, the light of a hundred high-rises dancing across the water. ‘I thought you weren’t that bothered about him?’ I asked, heartbeat rising as my feet struck the pavement. Over the sound of my breathing, I could hear Sophie sigh. She sounded tired; not just exercise-tired, life-tired.

‘Yeah.’ She forced a smile, barely even breaking a sweat. ‘I guess I need to settle down sometime though, don’t I?’

I forced my burning legs to keep up with hers. Dom and I had always assumed that one day she would want to; that one of her many first dates would eventually lead to a second and then a third. That she’d finally enjoy so many with the same person that she’d eventually stop counting them.

‘I’m turning thirty in a couple of months.’

I won’t be far behind you, my mind objected, but my mouth knew better. Sophie saw me as the settled one, she always had. Plus, after a lifetime of having people skip over her December birthday in all the excitement of Christmas, there was no way I was fast-forwarding our conversation to

February.

‘Yeah, but that’s not something to panic about,’ I objected breathlessly. ‘You should be getting *excited*.’ Each year, Dom and I planned a huge party for her, slap bang in the middle of the season, not a Christmas tree or cracker in sight: just to make sure Sophie knew she was remembered and seen. This year would be no exception, and yet, somehow, I knew she felt differently about it, like thirty was the deadline for getting all her ducks in a row. It was the reason we were doing this bloody run: over twenty miles before her twenties were done.

‘I’ll give him one more go.’ Sophie pressed on, as I tried to press myself further forwards, my legs refusing and slowing to a walk, heart thumping as Sophie slowed beside me. ‘And if it doesn’t work, that’s fine, but I think I’m ready for something more steady, serious...’ her sentence floated off into the crisp night air. I looked up at the Houses of Parliament, almost glowing in the setting sun. ‘It’s worth it, right? Forsaking all others and all that crap?’ She turned to me, cocking an eyebrow at the thought. My mind cast to Dom, waiting at home, beer in hand, and for some reason struggled to feel settled by the thought.

‘Question,’ Sophie said suddenly, even though I thought she’d just asked me one. ‘Is there anyone fit at your work?’

I looked at her, heart still racing. My mind shot to Liam as I forced my face to say: *No, not really, why?*

‘We need to get serious about this running thing. Is there, like, a fitness club or running group or something we can join at the *luxurious* Taylor, Laters and Jones?’ she asked, elongating every syllable as I looked to the herd of high-vis runners who had just shot past us.

‘Oh, I don’t know.’ My mind scrambled to catch up with the change of direction. ‘I’ll look into it.’

‘Great, sorry, what was I saying?’ she asked and started to run again. ‘Oh yeah, serious relationships, are they all they’re cracked up to be?’ She knew as much about my relationship as me. Clearly, she was just looking for affirmation. I smiled, nodding, forcing thoughts of Liam and Vivian and the firm out of my mind and conjuring home.

‘It’s all I’ve ever known.’

Chapter 5

FOUR WEEKS BEFORE THE MOMENT

SOPHIE: *Solved your first case yet?*

ME: *I'm not a detective.*

SOPHIE: *I bet there's all sorts of crime going on at the firm.*

ME: *This isn't a John Grisham novel, you know.*

ME: *Aren't you at work?*

SOPHIE: *Yeah, the kids are reading though.*

ME: *I've got to get back to work too, but how are you feeling today?
Honestly.*

SOPHIE: *Still a bit anxious. I know thirty is just a number, but it's
like, a big one.*

ME: *Yes, but you've got a lot to show for your thirty years on this
planet Soph.*

SOPHIE: *Not as much as every fucker on Instagram.*

ME: *Language.*

ME: *Plus, it's just a highlights reel, remember?*

SOPHIE: *Easy for you to say, what with your fancy new job and fancy new flat.*

ME: *Soph we've been in the same flat for two years. Plus, it's a shithole.*

SOPHIE: *Language.*

ME: *Chin up, Ms R. You got this.*

SOPHIE: *Thanks H. Not sure what I'd do without you. See you later x*

Walking into the downstairs lobby of Taylor, Laters and Jones, I stalled at the main reception desk. I knew I should just walk past and take the lift up to our floor but one question kept burning in my mind: I needed to ask Liam to be my sponsor. Turned out that was pretty hard to do, when he had been in and out of the office all week.

My legs slowed, mindlessly steering me to stand behind a couple of figures queuing up at the desk. I'd just ask whether he was in today. That wasn't desperate, was it?

'I *need* to speak with her now,' said an incredibly tall woman, towering even higher in her heels, wearing a bright green trench coat that clashed against her severe red bob. Her voice trembled with the rest of her. 'Fiona Fielding, *The Legal Chirp*.' Now *she* sounded desperate.

'I know who you are,' said the receptionist, smiling. It didn't sound like a compliment. 'Vivian Jones is busy, she has very important clients to attend to.'

'Yes, and I'm one of them,' a second woman said and I swear I could see the pretty receptionist roll her eyes. The client was stick-thin with legs for

days, barely covered in what was essentially a crochet catsuit – with a very wide knit. Thankfully, her bottom-length hair extensions managed to cover half of her.

‘Please, Ms Laurent,’ the receptionist said, caught between pity and pleading. ‘You are not one of Vivian Jones’ clients. Please take a seat.’

‘She’s representing my case.’ Ms Laurent tapped her long fingernails on top of the desk. ‘She knows when I last had sex with my husband, for goodness’ sake.’

‘She’s representing your *ex*-husband,’ the receptionist said, I imagined taking a small bit of pleasure in accentuating the *ex*. ‘Now please take a seat and I’ll call up to her now.’

The reporter surrendered, followed by the Karlie Kloss doppelgänger, until only I was left.

‘Yes,’ said the receptionist, exasperated. It wasn’t even nine a.m. ‘How can I help?’

Shit. This was stupid. *Desperate*. But Liam had noticed me. Told me he’d use me if Vivian didn’t. And now I hadn’t seen him in the office all week.

‘I was wondering if Liam Hartman was going to be in today?’ I tried to sound nonchalant. The receptionist’s mouth twitched before she recovered her smile.

‘Why?’ she asked, deadpan.

Because I need to ask him to be my sponsor.

‘He’s from my floor,’ I spluttered; it didn’t even answer her question.

‘He’ll be back in tomorrow.’ She forced another smile, her body stiff.

‘Great, thanks. I’ll let her know,’ I muttered, as if I was asking for someone else; as if I had an important job to do. It wasn’t that I wasn’t enjoying my first few weeks at Taylor, Laters and Jones, but after the hope of being thrust right in the middle of the action, somehow researching precedents in a database three times the size of the universe was hard to get excited about. I walked past the two women the receptionist had just turned away, holding my shoulders back, my head up high, as if walking to my next client meeting. I guess faux-Kloss wasn’t the only person pretending to be someone she’s not.

Emerging onto our floor, I made my way towards Vivian’s office, just in time to see her and Daniel emerging from within it. I took a seat at my desk and began sifting through papers, pretending I was busier than I was.

‘Thanks again.’ Vivian smiled before turning back inside. My eyes

followed her as I struggled to find one reason to justify why I wasn't with Dom and Sophie marking Year 2 mental arithmetic, cursing myself for thinking it would be easy to start again.

I looked from my computer to Daniel, too busy looking down at his phone to notice, mouth twisted in confusion and lines of concern stretching across his face. I watched as he reached for another sip of coffee. No fewer than four empty Starbucks cups and two KeepCups (which seemed pretty redundant given the former) were sprawled lifelessly across his paper-covered desk, fallen soldiers taking one for the team. I hated to think how long he'd stayed in the office last night. Maybe that was why he was her golden boy?

I forced my eyes back to the inbox before me, willing something exciting to ping into it. Liam would be back soon, then I'd be able to ask him my question and get something exciting to work on. *Billion-pound marriage, multiple affairs*. My eyes scanned the skyline, before a broad figure advancing towards us brought my attention back into the room.

'Mr Jones.' Daniel forced himself to stand, thrusting a shaky hand in our guest's direction. I'd seen countless pictures of him, but never once seen him in person: Jason Jones. He happily obliged, shaking Daniel's hand before turning to give me a smile which, to be fair, was more than his wife had given me this past week. Daniel ushered him in to Vivian's office and I watched as Jason wrapped his arms around her, tilting her face to kiss him, her back resting along his torso. I knew I should look away, but it wasn't like they were trying to protect their privacy. I'd read about their marriage countless times. Plus, they hadn't even closed the door.

'Did Rose get off to Cambridge okay?' Jason's words floated out of the room.

'I-I was with a client,' Vivian stammered; I'd never heard her caught off guard before. Out of the corner of my eye I could see Daniel was listening in, too.

'But I thought one of us ought to see her to the station?'

'And by "one of us" you mean me?' Vivian retorted as she pushed herself away from resting on his chest, her tone as playful as her movements.

'I had a meeting with a...'

Jason began, before noting Vivian's raised eyebrow. 'Nicely played, Jones.' I could see him put his hands in the air in a battle-of-the-sexes surrender. This was why he loved her, this was why

everyone loved her.

I glanced towards Daniel, his brows knitted together in concern, his tired eyes moving between Vivian and Jason and his work, before picking up his phone for the countless time that day. He looked at the screen before sighing deeply and turning it face down on the desk.

‘Who is she?’ I couldn’t help but smile as Daniel looked up, just about to turn his screen around once again.

‘What?’ He set his steely eyes on me, hands still shaking a little. It was only then that I noticed his face was a little white. Was he *hungover*?

‘The girl you’re messaging.’ I looked down at his phone, now cradled in his hands. Clearly, someone wasn’t messaging him back.

‘There’s no girl.’ He shook his head as I tried to stare him out. I might not have known how to get into Vivian’s inner circle, but I knew a crush when I saw one. ‘It’s this case.’

‘Oh yeah?’ I risked another smile.

‘Yeah.’ His shoulders seemed to soften. ‘Vivian asked me to look at precedents that might help this client. The appellant is arguing for a higher stake in the house they owned together than Vivian wants to give.’

‘What was the mortgage agreement?’ I asked, as Daniel softened a little more.

‘Fifty-fifty,’ he said, sighing.

‘How about starting with *Jones v Kernott*? The courts departed from fifty-fifty mortgage shares for cohabitantes in that one.’ I smiled, softening myself. It was good to remind myself I could do this. *I could do this*. ‘I know it’s a decade old, but the old ones are the...’

‘...best ones.’ Daniel finished my sentence and scribbled down the case.

‘Well, at least for building on the basics.’ I grinned again.

‘Thanks Hailey.’ He smiled, genuinely, before picking up his phone again.

‘You’re welcome,’ I said, looking back down to the documents in front of me, marking up figures I knew Vivian didn’t need before I heard Daniel sigh again.

‘So, there’s this girl...’ he said slowly.

‘I *knew* there was a girl, I just knew it!’

‘Hailey.’ He stopped me in my tracks, narrowing his eyes as if to say: *let’s not get ahead of ourselves*, but he still smiled.

‘Sorry.’ I feigned nonchalance. ‘You were saying?’

‘There’s this girl, well, *woman*,’ Daniel went on, eyes darting to Vivian and Jason, just to check they weren’t looking; that they wouldn’t see him anything other than wired. ‘She’s a little older than me, maybe that’s the problem...’

‘What problem?’ I probed, feeling the tension between us starting to dissolve.

‘We went on this date last night,’ he said, picking up one of his many coffee cups and downing the dregs. ‘It was amazing, like, *really* good. And as we said goodbye this morning, I asked to see her again and she got all weird and said she’d message me later once she’d checked her diary and now I’ve messaged her again and she’s seen it and... she’s still not messaging back...’ Daniel sighed, as I tried to reclaim my serious expression though all I wanted to do was laugh; it turned out even the coolest of men were putty in the hands of a woman.

‘Daniel, breathe,’ I said, feeling a rush of warmth as he laughed too. ‘First date?’

‘Second,’ he said, obviously concerned about what I might say next.

‘Fine, second. It’s early days, you’ve still got it all to play for. Maybe this *woman* just wants a bit of old-fashioned romance, the chase, a little bit of cat and mouse.’

‘Hailey.’ Daniel rested his elbows on his desk, head in his hands. ‘I’m hungover as hell, please go slowly...’

I laughed again: maybe he was human after all? ‘Okay. I’ll keep it simple.’

‘It’s all I ask.’ He grinned, brushing a hand through his floppy brown hair.

‘Stop texting, pull back. She’ll start to realise you’re not that easy,’ I went on, as a smirk turned up the corners of his mouth. ‘Then when she’s on her toes, surprise her – and *please*, with something better than just sliding into her DMs.’

‘Thanks Hailey.’ Daniel rose to his feet. He wasn’t going to *hug* me, was he? ‘I really appreciate it. Man, I need another Starbucks. Want one?’

‘Haven’t you had enough caffeine?’

‘Today, Hailey,’ he said with a sigh, still on the edge of sickness, ‘there ain’t no such thing.’

‘Aleksander Ruslan? *The* Aleksander Ruslan?’ With Daniel gone, it didn’t take much for Jason and Vivian’s voices to grab my attention again.

‘The very same,’ Vivian replied, moving over to meet her husband on the sofa. The door to her office was still wide open but I was almost certain they didn’t want me to hear this.

‘Pre-nup?’ he asked.

‘Nope.’ I could see Vivian shaking her head, smiling at the thought.

‘With *that* much on the table?’

‘They thought they were in love,’ Vivian objected. ‘Plus, they didn’t actually know there was going to be that much on the table, even when they split up.’ Over my stacks of paper, I strained to hear, but Vivian’s voice had lowered to a whisper.

‘Shit.’ Jason’s curse was the next thing I could catch. ‘That could be huge... really put the firm on the map...’

‘We’re already *on the map*,’ Vivian cut in, louder now. ‘But if this goes to court and we win... it will sure as hell keep us at the top.’

‘Who’s on the team?’

‘Still building it.’

‘Surely, Hartman?’ Jason pressed on, as Vivian stiffened at his name. ‘Viv, I know you don’t see eye to eye, but you know Liam is the best man for the job.’

‘Sounds like my cue,’ said a deep voice from behind, as I jumped out of my skin. *Crap*. I turned around to see Liam beside me. ‘Eavesdropping, Kiddo?’ He grinned mischievously, his voice still hushed so as to not attract attention.

‘I didn’t think you were in today,’ I said, before I could stop myself.

‘Checking up on me?’ Liam laughed again, fixing his kind eyes on mine. He looked to Jason and Vivian, eyebrow raised, and then back to me. ‘They talking ’bout me?’ I looked at him, unsure how to answer. *Why didn’t they see eye to eye?*

‘A little,’ I admitted. He’d just overheard Jason say his name anyway.

‘Jason wants me on *the case*.’ Liam smiled, nothing getting past him. I for one, had no idea what was going on. ‘Good man, Jason,’ he said and grinned again. ‘Hell of a serve.’ So Liam and Jason played tennis together? Yep, *still* none the wiser. I needed an in, something to get me working on something serious before my time with Vivian came to an end.

‘Liam, I erm... was wondering...’ I stuttered.

‘About *the* case?’ Liam asked. ‘Yeah, loads of rumours flying round ’bout that one. Happy to clear anything up for you, Kiddo. Let’s grab a drink in Later’s tonight. This should only take a minute. Shall we say eight p.m.?’

So, Later’s was a bar? And Liam Hartman was asking me for a drink? Wasn’t that a bit – *unorthodox*? Or was that just something that happened at a firm like this? I looked from his handsome face, laughter lines drawing his dimples up, down to the phone in my hands, new notifications from Dom and Sophie still demanding to be read. I was meant to be going for dinner with them tonight. I looked back up at Liam, now gazing into Vivian’s room, preparing to head in. In his world, the only answer to an offer of drinks with him was *yes*.

‘I err...’ I stalled. Wasn’t this my chance, the one I’d been waiting for? Dom and Sophie would understand. But then I’d been so determined that me not working with them wouldn’t change anything. ‘I’m afraid I’ve got plans tonight.’ I sighed. For a moment, Liam looked disappointed, his eyes lingering on mine for a second that seemed to stretch for minutes.

‘Too bad.’ He forced a grin, placing his hand on the doorframe into Vivian’s room, covering part of the brass lettering lining its way along the wall: Taylor, Later’s and...

‘Hartman!’ Jason’s face lit up as he saw his friend approaching the door.

‘Oh.’ Liam turned around for a moment to look at me. ‘What were you wondering, before?’

I looked at him, a deer caught in the headlights, as Jason made his way to greet Liam at the door. With no lies scrambling to save me, I could only answer with the truth.

‘Will you be my sponsor?’ The words hung between us as I longed to scoop them back in. They sounded like the ‘will you be my friend?’ I used to hear in the playground.

‘After a rejection like that?’ He raised his eyebrow, cheeky grin beckoning me in, a part of me wanting nothing more than to join him for a drink in Later’s after all. ‘Sure thing, Kidd.’ Liam turned to embrace Jason, as Vivian sat stiffly on the sofa, looking at me through the glass. The door swung shut behind him, blocking me out, but at least now, I had an *in*.

Chapter 6

Leaving the office behind, I held my head up high as I stepped into the flow of people along London's busy streets. Not one of these strangers knew my role there, knew that I was the lowest of the low working for the highest of the high: trainee number two. For all they knew, I could be a senior associate – *soon to make partner*.

I turned a corner, shaking away the thought. What did Daniel know, anyway? Though I guessed, after our moment of something like friendship, maybe I could start to find out. My heels picked up pace on the pavement, partly because navigating the crowds outside London Bridge station demanded it, mostly because once again I was really, *really* late.

Running as fast as I could down the stone steps towards the bustle of Borough, I tried to push past groups of tourists, meandering in impenetrable lines. At least the market itself had been packed up by now, but that didn't mean it was less busy. Christmas was still a couple of months away, but in Borough it felt like the festive season was just around the corner, with twinkling lights hanging from every balcony, including the one my best friend and boyfriend were necking their second glass of wine on right now.

'Sorry I'm late, sorry I'm late,' I almost cried from the top of the stairs to the balcony, as both of them looked up, startled to see me blustering in.

'Is *sorry I'm late* just law-talk for hello?' Sophie rose to give me a light peck on the cheek, before I moved to Dom, kissing him lightly on the lips.

'I think so,' he replied, smiling at Sophie, his hand still resting on my back. 'It's how she always greets me now anyway, so I guess it must be.'

I tried to join in their laughter, but after a day of paperwork and

conversations about cases I could only hope to work out, I struggled to see the upside of leaving the office so late. But then I was making some progress with Liam and Daniel at least. I took a seat in between them as Dom poured me the rest of the bottle of wine.

‘So what have I missed?’ I asked. ‘Other than a bottle of Malbec.’

‘I had another second date...’ Sophie looked up, lips already a little stained. Dom smiled knowingly, like Sophie had just told him all about it already.

‘Forty-seven?’ I asked, feeling the buzz of my work phone in my bag, but choosing to ignore it. I was here now, with my friends. Back where I belonged.

‘Fifty,’ Sophie said, taking another sip.

‘Fifty?!’ I couldn’t help but exclaim. ‘And you’re on your second, so you’ve had...’ I tried to do the maths, hating the fact that the firm wasn’t the only place I felt behind. ‘Five dates in less than two weeks? I don’t know where you find time.’ I laughed, as Dom squeezed my leg under the table; it felt like a warning. ‘And with all your running as well.’ Sophie’s productivity usually shot into overdrive when she was trying to run away from her feelings. It was textbook, but I didn’t want to launch into that now, not whilst she seemed okay. I’d already rocked our boat enough already. ‘But you’ll be proud, I’ve made progress on the running front too!’

‘20k?’ she asked, hopefully.

‘Well, not *that* much progress,’ I admitted. When she thought I had the time to train was beyond me, but I knew better than to say that. Teachers were busy, worked really bloody hard too. ‘Found us a running club.’

‘Taylor, Laters and Jones have one?’

‘Yeah, runs round Central London, seems pretty established.’ I smiled, proud to have kept my word; Sophie definitely needed me to be the organised one.

‘Amazing.’ She smiled, glad to see I wasn’t backing out even though everything in me wanted to. ‘And now I get to meet all the fit guys at your work.’

Dom rolled his eyes as Sophie laughed. I watched as Sophie giggled with Dom, pushing her hair out of her beaming face. She didn’t seem as sad any more. I guess something with Fifty was working.

‘They’re all married, I’m afraid,’ I said, as my mind shot to Liam before I forced it into place.

‘Ironic for a divorce firm,’ Dom said, as I mentally corrected him: *family law firm*.

‘All of them?’ Sophie looked surprised; concerned again at the thought of everyone coupling up, even the people that up until two second ago she hadn’t even known existed.

‘Well... I’m pretty sure trainee number one is still dating...’

‘Trainee number one?’ Sophie looked confused.

‘It’s how my office-mate Daniel introduced himself to Liam.’

‘Who’s Daniel? Who’s Liam?’ Sophie put her palms in the air dramatically. ‘See, I told you there were guys.’ She looked relieved that she wasn’t the only person in her late twenties yet to find *the one*. Until a few weeks ago she didn’t think *the one* existed.

‘Hey! Don’t get any ideas.’ I laughed. ‘I’m already struggling to separate work and pleasure, isn’t that right Dom?’ I nudged him in the side, cursing myself for mentioning Liam. It was just because of today; it was just because I’d managed to get myself a sponsor.

‘You’re not still hung up about turning thirty, are you?’ I turned to Sophie, forcing the conversation away from work. ‘We’ve all got to grow old sometime.’

‘Yes, but you get to grow old *together*,’ Sophie almost snapped, before looking apologetic. Dom clutched my leg below the table again. I glanced at his jumper and the faded tomato stain sponged down after yesterday’s spaghetti. He could have at least put a fresh one on. ‘Everyone else does.’

‘That’s not true,’ I said, shaking my head.

‘Look at this.’ Sophie reached for her phone and swiped to a profile of a person we hadn’t seen since high school who was pressing her left hand into the chest of a man, a blinder of a diamond sparkling on her fourth finger. ‘Francesca got engaged last weekend.’

‘Who?’ Dom and I asked in unison, always in sync.

‘You know, Francesca Winter?’ We looked from Sophie to the photo back to Sophie, panic written on her face. She’d never been like this before, never wanted a serious relationship. At least, that was what she’d told us anyway.

‘You know... Francesca. Had about four boyfriends at any given time, wanted to go into the adult film industry, gave all the boys hand jobs behind the bike sheds...’

‘Oh, Wanky Frankie?’ Dom beamed, penny dropping, as Sophie nodded

in approval.

‘How do *you* know about Wanky Frankie?’ I raised my eyebrows in fake disdain. Dom hadn’t given me reason to be jealous, well, *ever*. He had tomato sauce on his jumper, for goodness’ sake.

‘And now she’s engaged,’ Sophie went on, eyes pleading with me to make her anxiety retreat, the way I usually could.

‘Sophie, since when have you been bothered about what everyone else is doing?’

‘Since everyone started buying houses and getting engaged and married.’

‘Not everyone is getting married.’ I tried to object.

‘And you guys will get engaged soon and our throuple can’t last forever, can it?’

I looked from Sophie’s anxious expression back to Dom’s dimpled cheeks. I guess I assumed we would get engaged one day. My scarf started to itch at my neck as my eyes caught on the tomato stain again. Why did it bother me so much? But after a day of staring at ambitious men in suits it didn’t take a genius to work out the root of my comparison. It had just been a long day. I was just adjusting is all, and so was Sophie.

‘Sophie, you’ve literally only just lifted your one-date rule.’ I reached to take her phone, lowering it to the table in surrender. ‘Give yourself time to adjust to that first. You’re starting to feel ready for more... it’s meant to be exciting,’ I said as I tried to adjust my rising temperature, my hammering heartbeat. This feeling would pass and I’d adjust to home mode, a million miles away from the goings-on of Taylor, Laters and Jones, a million miles closer to Dom. ‘I know you don’t feel like you’ve arrived yet.’ I squeezed her hand a little tighter. ‘But I promise you’re going in the right direction.’ I looked at Dom, nodding in agreement, and wordlessly reminded myself the same.

Chapter 7

Turning the corner onto Lough Grove, Dom's fingers laced into mine as I tried to remember the first time we came to see our flat. After a half-term of viewings, we were a little despondent and more than a little drunk, finding solace in some scummy local pub.

'Can you remember swiping through Right Move when we found this place?' I asked him as we walked closer to ours, hoping to prompt some nostalgia.

'Only time I've glimpsed what Tinder must feel like,' he joked and squeezed my hand in his. I looked at Dom; his eyes fixed before him. Not quite the trip down memory lane I was hoping for, but I still remembered it well. We had found a listing less than five minutes away from the pub, pretty basic but the rent was cheap. Plus, we had half an hour to kill before our buses back to our separate house shares. Little did I know then that I was minutes away from moving from one 'ours' – mine and Sophie's – to another 'ours'. Now here we were, two years of living together later; sometimes it felt like just yesterday.

'Welcome home,' Dom said as if I hadn't been there all week.

I kicked off my heels, letting my bare feet rest against our wooden floor. Dom bent down to kiss me as I tried to focus on his lips pressed to mine, finally present, finally home on the right side of ten p.m.

'What do you fancy now, Netflix and chill?' Dom asked, eyes darting to the TV. I knew better than to think it was a euphemism. Dom and I fell for each other way before a romance could be started by the swipe of a screen. I moved past him into the kitchen, grabbing two beers from the fridge,

returning to our routine. I studied his smile for a second, wondering for the first time in a long time whether we had *fallen* in love or simply grown into it and whether that even mattered.

‘What?’ He laughed as my eyes lingered on his.

‘Nothing.’ I shrugged, taking a sip.

‘What do you want to watch, Hayby?’ Dom put his feet up on the table.

‘I don’t mind,’ I replied, pretty sure I wouldn’t last out for a whole episode. ‘I guess if nothing’s on we could just talk?’ I looked up at him, my mind flicking to images of Vivian and Jason chatting on her sofa for hours after more than forty years together.

‘What do you want to talk about?’

‘Well, nothing, but...’ I trailed off, I didn’t know talking needed to be transactional. ‘It would just be nice to not have the TV on all the time, right?’

‘Oh I...’ Dom began, trying to stifle a yawn. I felt guilty; I knew for a fact how exhausting kids could be. ‘You’re right.’ He smiled, not needing to play the perfect boyfriend. He already was, always so willing to do what I wanted to do, just, I guess, sometimes needing to be told. ‘How about we play a game or something?’

‘I thought you didn’t play games, Dominic?’ I joked, recalling his words from our first proper date, trying not to contrast them with my advice to Daniel earlier today: the push and pull, the thrill of the chase, silence, guessing, surprises...

‘Well you thought wrong, Kidd.’ He raised an eyebrow. Okay, this could be fun. It would give us a head start before the Kidd Christmas showdown anyway. Plus, it would stop me thinking about work; boardrooms to board games. ‘I tell you what, you go grab a game and I’ll make you a Dom Thomas Tower.’

I grinned, feeling the warmth of Dom’s famous hot chocolate filling my stomach before the liquid had even touched my lips.

‘I love you.’ I beamed as he stood to his feet and offered me a hand to pull me up out of the sofa and right into his arms; he knew chocolate was the way to my heart.

‘You know I love you too.’

Walking into our bedroom, I opened our wardrobe. No less than four shirts and three dresses jumped off their hangers as I tried to push them to one side. I was sure the games were in here somewhere; though to be fair it was around this time last year since we’d actually played one. There were

loads of things we used to do when we first got together that we struggled to find the time for now, but I guessed that was normal. We were, what, like sixteen or seventeen when our friendship had drifted into more? We could be forgiven for letting some things slide. I dreaded to think what Vivian and her husband were doing now, sure it would be a lot more exciting than this. And here I was, on my hands and knees, trying to find out where the hell we'd hidden the board games.

I reached up to the top of the wardrobe, to one of the many storage spots we'd drunkenly got so excited about when we'd looked around the flat in the first place. Now half of them were filled with things we should really just throw away. Did this old patchwork quilt really 'spark joy'? I think not.

Bingo. I managed to hook open another cupboard to reveal a whole host of boxes. Pushing along the chair from my dressing table, I stood on top of it, hearing clatters of pans and a crashing noise from the kitchen. I pushed past Articulate! – not enough players, Monopoly – not enough hours, Monogamy – a naughty game we'd bought to spice things up only to laugh at some suggestions and wet ourselves at others – *definitely* not at a time or in a manner one of cards had suggested. Then, I stumbled on an old shoebox I didn't recognise.

Opening it up, I couldn't make sense the contents: a small jiffy bag, an old Nokia and sheets and sheets of print-outs. *What the hell?* My mind ran through what it could be, scenes of *Dr Foster* and her cheating husband's double life with Jodie Comer hurtling through my mind. Was Dom... *cheating* on me?

My legs felt like jelly beneath me, as my hands started to shake. Lifting the papers from the box and unfolding them I started to flick through: it was a transcript of messages back and forth. From Dom. And Sophie. For a moment my mind stalled, breath caught in my chest: *no*. Sophie never would; I trusted her with my life. But then I saw the format, the ridiculous MSN names, and started to read them properly, recalling the first time Dom had slipped into my new best friend's DMs, before 'DMs' were even a thing.

DomTom101: Hi

GroovyChickSoph: Hey

DomTom101: Wuu2?

GroovyChickSoph: Ignoring homework with my bestie

DomTom101: Ur in my math class ryt?

GroovyChickSoph: We both are.

DomTom101: Whos ur m8?

GroovyChickSoph: Hailey Kidd. Know her?

DomTom101: Not yet.

DomTom101: Brb.

DomTom101: Crap. Mum needs the phone. Maybe see you girls in maths.

GroovyChickSoph: If ur lucky lol.

For a moment, I smiled, a lump caught in my throat. That was a lifetime ago. I turned the papers over in my hands, the scripts going on and on. It was from Year 7. The first time we had all met. It was the start of our story. But why the hell was it here, now? Printed out afresh? I put the papers back and turned the phone over in my hands. It wasn't a burner phone, it was Dom's first mobile, a relic from the past. The one that had messaged me and Sophie late into the night. I reached into the jiffy bag looking for more messages, only to pull out another box: small, black, velvet. With shaking hands I prised it open to find a thin gold band nestled into its cushion and a single diamond, shining a light on a future that hadn't felt real until now.

IS THIS THE COSTLIEST DIVORCE YET?

Partners at renowned family law firm, Taylor, Laters and Jones have this morning announced that they will be representing the respondent in a potentially landmark case for the firm, The Legal Chirp reports. The team will be headed by their only female senior partner to date, Vivian Jones. The respondent is Aleksander Ruslan (64), a Russian-born tech tycoon and founder of the Net-A-Porter of the Art World: Acclaim. The applicant is Talia Ruslan née Laurent (35), a British runway model, currently residing in Paris. The circumstances surrounding the end of their ten-year marriage have the potential to change the landscape of divorce law for good, should this case go to court and a new precedent be established.

The couple met in 2006, whilst Laurent (then 21) was studying at Paris College of Art. Ruslan (then 50) was a visiting lecturer at the university. The two fell in love quickly, a source at the firm who wishes to remain anonymous tells The Chirp: ‘Apparently he said that between her looks and her ambition, he didn’t stand a chance.’

They married in 2010 when Laurent was pregnant with their only child together – Ruslan has one child from his previous marriages – until 2017 when they separated after Ruslan found out his wife was having an affair with a mutual friend. Laurent filed for divorce in 2019 and is now seeking a fair settlement of the assets, which she claims is fifty:fifty. In this case timing is of the essence. Where Laurent thinks the marital wealth should be calculated as of the divorce application in 2019, Ruslan argues that it should be calculated at the time of the affair in 2017. And there are almost two

billion reasons why this distinction matters as, between their separation and divorce, Ruslan sold his company for £1.567 billion.

The appellant will argue that divorce papers are the only way to dissolve a marriage. Jones for the respondent will argue that the wife's affair and their subsequent separation was a clear indication that she no longer considered their marriage vows binding and didn't consider their lives 'married' at the time of the company's sale.

So, what signals the end of this marriage: infidelity and separation or a divorce application? Will the letter of the law or the spirit of the law prevail?

Chapter 8

THREE WEEKS BEFORE THE MOMENT

‘Right, you ready?’ I didn’t need to look up to know who was asking; I could see his hand on my desk, right next to my laptop, his thick wedding band hugging his finger as I tried to imagine one around my own. Dom hadn’t said anything since I’d found the box with his old phone and *the box within the box* hidden inside it. Why would he? He had no idea I’d seen it yet. And who knew how long I had to decide what my answer would be? Not that I could change my mind now. It had always been yes. Yes, I’ll be your friend. Yes, I’ll be your girlfriend. Yes, I’ll move to London with you. Yes, I’ll move in with you. Yes, yes, yes.

‘Yes.’ I looked up to see Liam smiling down at me, eyes as dark and mischievous as the day we first met, back when taking Taylor, Laters and Jones by storm didn’t feel as unrealistic as chasing a rainbow. Back when I thought I could change my career, and nothing would change around me. But nothing had, yet. Outside of this place my life was completely the same. Maybe that was the problem?

‘Sorry, I’m late.’ Liam smiled, teeth shining, white and straight. I was so used to saying those words that it kind of felt nice to hear them from someone else. ‘Things have been mad, ever since the announcement.’

I nodded, we had all read the legal media about the firm announcing the Ruslan case, almost sure that one of the nationals would pick the story up soon: after all, this was Vivian Jones, redefining what it meant to be married. People had been in and out of her office all morning: legal partners, marriage partners, *soon to be partners*. I stood up to follow Liam, casting an eye back to Daniel, who gave me a curious smile; he wasn’t used to not being invited

too. Though after a few more conversations about his mystery woman during our trips out for coffee together, I was pretty sure he was more likely to have my back than stab me in it.

Following Liam out of the office, down to the firm's grandiose entrance hall and over to the staircase, I realised I had no idea where we were actually going.

'The bar?' Liam turned on his heel, a glimpse of excitement lighting up his eyes.

'The bar?' *The bar* could mean a number of things in legal circles.

'I fancy a proper drink.' Liam smiled again as my stomach flipped. I should have known Liam wouldn't agree to our first sponsorship session over something as flat as coffee.

'I don't think, that's... will people not think...' I spluttered, not sure why I suddenly felt so exposed; wasn't this what I wanted? To be seen. But not disappearing to a bar with a married man as the day drifted into the evening.

'I mean the firm bar, in the basement. Later's. Everyone meets there past five.'

Later's was in the building? Was that something people should just *know* here? I nodded again, not letting Liam know this was news to me as I followed him down the staircase to the left of the reception desk. As we turned a corner down the stairwell, the harsh office lights dimmed and there was a pink neon sign on the wall, spelling out 'Later's' in twisting letters. I grinned up at it and then to Liam, the neon lights reflecting in his eyes.

'First time?' Liam continued to lead me down the next block of stairs, as I cursed my face for being so damn easy to read. *Chill, Hailey, just chill*. I'd been telling myself that ever since I found the ring, ever since I'd let Dom kiss me over our board game and I tried to get my head around the fact that he was the only guy this side of sixteen that I'd ever kissed. I was *still* trying to get my head around it now. 'You need a membership card to get in...'

'Oh I...' I began, feeling further and further outside the 'club'.

'Don't worry, Kidd.' Liam smiled again. 'Leave it with me.'

I followed Liam across a room of dimly lit round tables with an illuminated back bar popping against the relaxed jazz décor. No sooner had Liam slipped into one of the leather-quilted booths than a waitress was at his side taking our orders.

'The usual?' She grinned, flirtatiously as he smiled back at her. 'And for you?'

‘Just a Coke please,’ I said.

‘Kidd.’ Liam said my name like I was in trouble.

‘A white wine please,’ I corrected to the waitress, Liam’s eyes still on me. ‘*Very small.*’ She gave me a hard stare before turning to leave. It was like she was jealous, but of what I wasn’t sure. I was meant to be spending some quality time with Dom after work tonight, but with the ring burning a hole in my mind every time I saw him, it was getting harder just to *chill*.

‘So, Kiddo. Tell me how this is going to work.’ Liam took a sip of his Old Fashioned, all his attention now back on me as the background music, along with everybody else, seemed to fade into the distance. *How what is going to work?* I looked at him, startled for a second before he carried on. ‘This sponsorship thing. It’s my first time,’ he said sheepishly, flirtatiously. Why on earth would he say yes without knowing what he was saying yes to? Though something told me Liam was just that kind of guy. Unlike Dom, who seemed to do a mental risk assessment every time we ventured as far as Richmond.

‘Well, I guess it’s a little like having a mentor,’ I breathed, watching his eyes scan across the room, smiling at one or two people nodding in his direction, before returning back to me. He may not be as notorious as Vivian, but people sure seemed to like him around here. ‘But it’s a bit more than just talking.’ I swear I saw Liam smile over the rim of his glass. ‘A sponsor looks for opportunities, ways to move you forwards, bring you in, lift you up...’

‘Hartman!’ A hand slapping Liam on the back stole the end of my sentence. I looked up to see one of the male partners from our floor grinning down at Liam, drink in his hand.

‘Robert.’ Liam forced a smile, like the interruption was unwelcome.

‘I was wondering whether I could pick your brain about something.’ The portly partner slurred a little, cheeks ruddy and tie undone.

‘We were actually just in the middle—’ Liam began, before the man cut him off.

‘It’s this case with Harley Niall.’ He furrowed his brow, as Liam looked to me and rolled his eyes. I tried to smile back, all the while thinking Harley Niall, *the* Harley Niall, *Hollywood actor* Harley Niall? My cheeks flushed almost as rosy as Robert at the thought. ‘Got him the best divorce settlement money can buy and he still won’t sign the damn thing.’

‘Think he wants to take it before a judge?’ Liam took a sip of his freshly materialised Old Fashioned. ‘Fancies himself an extra bit of media attention?’

‘That’s the thing; he doesn’t want that either.’ Robert shook his head, sloshing his drink in the process. ‘Proper stalemate.’

‘Sounds like he doesn’t actually want a divorce,’ I said reluctantly over my wine.

‘What was that?’ Robert turned to me with a look that screamed: *And you are?*

‘Yeah, what was that?’ Liam asked, although more softly, encouraging me on.

‘I mean, I don’t know the facts, the situation...’ I began, looking between them, heart beating all the more. ‘But when was the last time you checked to see whether he actually still wants to go through with the divorce? Maybe he started proceedings thinking his marriage was over but after months of meetings and negotiations, he’s fallen for his wife all over again?’ Robert looked at me as though I was insane, but Liam looked impressed.

‘Great idea.’ Liam grinned. ‘What she said.’ He turned to Robert, who walked away shaking his head, like the thought of someone falling for his wife *again* was impossible.

‘Oh God, sorry if I...’ I began, sure I’d overstepped the mark.

‘No.’ Liam took a sip of his drink, pointing in my direction. ‘No apologising.’

‘Okay, sorry.’

‘What did I just say?’ He laughed, putting a hand to his softly lined forehead. I stared back at him, lips pursed, holding my mouth closed. ‘You’re a smart one, Kidd.’

‘I was just...’ I began, before he stared my excuse away. ‘Thanks.’

‘And this sponsorship thing sounds genius,’ he said. ‘*Another* great idea.’

‘It was actually Vivian’s.’ I grinned back at him. ‘I read it in an interview she did, all about her mentoring scheme, how she loves to lift women up...’ my words faded away.

‘What’s the matter?’

‘It’s nothing.’ I took another gulp of wine, letting it soothe me.

‘Come on Kiddo.’ Liam’s eyes twinkled. ‘You can tell me.’

‘No seriously, it doesn’t matter.’

‘If I’m going to be your sponsor,’ Liam said, like he’d done it a thousand times before, ‘you’re going to have to trust me.’

‘Well, it’s just, Vivian’s this huge champion of women,’ I began, not knowing whether I should go on but feeling like Liam’s kind eyes were

cracking me open. ‘But she’s hardly given me a look in. I’ve been here three weeks now and all she’s given me is admin.’ I went on. Now that I’d started I didn’t know how to stop. ‘And not even on her active cases – all of that keeps going to Daniel.’

Liam gave me a long look and I forced my mouth shut.

‘Hailey.’ He reached a hand across the table to rest it on mine before thinking better of it. It was the first time he’d called me by my first name since we’d met. ‘I know Vivian comes across like she has it all together, that she is at the top of her game...’

‘She *is* at the top of her game,’ I objected, draining my drink as Liam somehow managed to wordlessly order another.

‘And what does it mean when you’re at the top?’ he asked, as if I should know the answer. ‘There’s a long way to fall.’

‘What does that have to do with me though?’

‘Vivian may act like she wants to pave the way for other women – and I’m not saying she doesn’t – but it must be quite nice to be the only female senior partner at the firm.’

‘Surely, Vivian doesn’t feel threatened by *me*, though?’ I looked at him, unable to hide my incredulosity: there was absolutely no way. To her, I was a nobody. And Vivian Jones was praised by *everybody*.

‘A gorgeous woman, less than half her age?’ he said as I tried not to smile at the compliment. ‘Yeah, can’t see why she wouldn’t want you in every meeting.’ Liam rolled his eyes. ‘It’s why she didn’t want me working on the case at first too.’

‘Because you’re a gorgeous woman less than half her age too?’

‘We both know that’s not true, on either count.’ He laughed out loud, pushing a hand through his salt and pepper hair. ‘No, because she’s threatened. She knows if I do a good job on this case, I’ll make partner – her dissenting vote be damned.’

‘But why doesn’t she want that?’ I asked, searching his expression.

‘Because she had to fight pretty damn hard to get to where she is, and now she has to defend it. The more partners there are, the younger they are, the less it *means* something.’

‘So why did she put you on the case in the end?’ I asked, my phone buzzing to life on the table. It was Dom asking when I’d be home. I turned my screen face down on the table, watching Liam recline, savouring the question, swirling his answer around his mouth.

‘Because she needs the best to win.’

Chapter 9

Dom shot up straight as I walked into the living room, shocking him awake.

‘I was not asleep, you can’t prove anything,’ he objected, getting to his feet and walking across the room, pressing a tired kiss to my wine-laced lips. ‘I was just resting my eyes.’

‘I’m not sure that would stand up in court, Dominic.’ I looked up at his sleepy eyes, my gaze drifting towards his discarded glasses and the two empty wine glasses gathered on our paper-stack side table. I must just have been a blur to him right now. Though to be fair, after three glasses of wine in Laters, Dom looked a little blurry to me, too.

‘You would know,’ he said, pulling out his phone to check the time – 10.49 p.m. – all of his messages to me still shamefully unanswered. ‘Not running the place yet?’

‘I’ve only been there three weeks, give me chance.’

‘Yeah but in normal people hours, that’s like...’ Dom’s sentence trailed off as he looked at my lips with confusion. ‘Have you been drinking?’

‘A little,’ I lied. Dom knew three glasses of wine could get me drunk.

‘I’m not sure that would stand up in court, Hailey,’ Dom echoed back to me. It wasn’t an issue, was it? ‘You said you were working.’

I looked down at the blanket across the sofa, where Dom had waited, not knowing when I’d walk through the door. For a moment I felt horrible. But I *was* working, wasn’t I? We were talking about work, anyway, mostly.

‘I was working.’ I kissed him again, and Dom relaxed into me reluctantly.

‘Who were you with?’

‘Just colleagues.’ I shrugged. Technically, there was only one.

‘I waited up for you,’ Dom said again as my eyes drifted to the slumped sofa: *barely*.

‘Well, I’m here now.’ I kissed him harder, trying to kiss away Dom’s disappointment, Liam’s words about Vivian and all thought of the future. I was here, now. With Dom.

‘Babe, I’m tired.’ He pulled away, as I saw Sophie’s hoodie mixed in with the blankets slung across the back of the sofa. ‘I just wanted to know you were home safe.’

‘Was Soph here?’ I looked towards Dom, who was already heading to the bathroom.

‘Yeah, she popped round after her date earlier,’ he shouted back.

‘She doing okay?’ I followed him, leaning on the doorframe as he started to run a bath. It was one of the perks of this small apartment.

‘I think so, still seems in two minds about getting serious with anyone.’

‘Can you blame her?’

‘Not really,’ Dom replied over the sound of running water.

‘Do you think we should suggest a double date yet?’ I asked, searching Dom’s expression, struggling to think about when we’d have the time.

‘Let’s not put any more pressure on her than she’s already putting on herself.’ Dom’s eyes filled with empathy. ‘You need to start planning her birthday soon.’ Clearly, he didn’t mind putting extra pressure on me. ‘Sorry, we do,’ he corrected with a grin as I bit my tongue. He was just trying to be a good friend. And a good boyfriend. *And he’s going to make a wonderful husband.* My mind stalled at the thought; I didn’t know how long I had left until he was going to pop the question. And I had no idea why, after so many years of knowing this day would come, the answer felt like it was in doubt.

I lay on my side of the bed, hearing the sound of Dom’s bath running as my mind ran a mile a minute: Dom was going to propose. Surely, the thought should fill me with warmth, not make me feel hot under the collar? But it was a big commitment, and I’d just started working for a firm famous for *ending* marriages.

I looked up at the cupboard, where that ring was silently sparkling away in its box. Dom and I had a spark. I was sure we did. Rolling over, I tried to forget I’d ever found the ring. But I also felt like reading through the messages, printed and stashed in that box, might help me find my answer.

With Dom still safely in the bath, I pushed the chair across the room and reached for the shoebox, pulling out the papers, desperate to make sense of

why I was here and what I should do next.

DomTom101: Wots evry1 up 2 2nite? Movie at mine?

GroovyChickSoph: I'm in. If my mum stops being a psycho.

Hailey_Cool_Kidd: Me 2. I'll ask my sister to drop me off. Could get u 2, Soph?

GroovyChickSoph: gr8. I'll tell mum now. Brb

DomTom101: Wot are the odds of us not watching a chick flick?

Hailey_Cool_Kidd: Slim.

Hailey_Cool_Kidd: Very.

DomTom101: Damn it.

DomTom101: Need to trade you in for some guy friends.

Hailey_Cool_Kidd: You wudn't dare.

DomTom101: Try me.

Hailey_Cool_Kidd: cba.

DomTom101: Knew it.

DomTom101: You know I'd miss you too much, Kidd ;)

Hailey_Cool_Kidd: I'm just missing Sophie right now ha.

Hailey_Cool_Kidd: Soph?

GroovyChickSoph: Sorry guys. I can't come tonight.

DomTom101: Let down.

Hailey_Cool_Kidd: Why? Wots up?

GroovyChickSoph: It's my mum. They've had a fight about something.

Hailey_Cool_Kidd: They're always fighting.

GroovyChickSoph: Not like this. Dad's gone and mum's crying.

Hailey_Cool_Kidd: Oh shit, Soph. Want us 2 come over?

GroovyChickSoph: No it's cool. I'll message later.

Hailey_Cool_Kidd: Promise?

GroovyChickSoph: Promise.

I turned the paper over in my hand, tears beginning to fill my eyes at the thought of that night, remembering again why Sophie found it so difficult to even entertain a long-term commitment. Why would Dom keep these messages? Especially considering the ring they were next to. Reluctant to read on, I scanned to the bottom, drawn to a latter part of the chat. I guess you couldn't tell our story without hers.

DomTom101: Come to mine still.

Hailey_Cool_Kidd: Why?

DomTom101: I have an idea.

Hearing the bathroom door swing open, I stashed the box and reclined on the bed, still fully clothed as Dom entered the room in nothing but a towel.

‘She rests!’ He grinned as I remembered how I’d gone round to his house that night and he’d suggested we stage a break-out. How he’d used his fake ID in the local corner shop, and somehow got away with it. How we’d walked the two miles to Sophie’s, backpacks full of cider, arms brushing against each other as we’d walked closer together.

‘She does.’ I smiled back at him, remembering how we’d called on her house, trying to convince her to sneak out but knowing that even though she would say no, because she wanted to stay with her mum, it was worth it just to watch her smile. And I remember that as we retraced our steps to the other side of town, Dom had reached his hand out for mine and I had felt happy to know that I’d met someone who would always go the extra mile for our friend.

Chapter 10

TWO WEEKS BEFORE THE MOMENT

‘Good morning, Hailey.’ I turned to see the blonde receptionist smiling in my direction amidst a flurry of the usual diamond-dripping clients hovering around the main desk. It was the first time one of the receptionists had used my name in the four weeks I had been there. Maybe it was the sheer amount they’d seen me, but something told me my association with the firm’s hottest senior associate wasn’t doing my visibility any harm. Walking across our floor, I wasn’t surprised to see Daniel already shoving coffee at his desk. I was a little surprised, however, to find the firm’s hottest senior associate grinning up from mine.

‘Liam.’ I looked down at him, revelling in the role reversal.

‘Kidd.’ He grinned, rising to his feet. ‘Duty calls.’ He rolled his eyes. ‘I’ll try and put in a good word for you,’ he said and saluted before heading in to see Vivian. Although, coming from him, I didn’t know whether it would do much good. After Liam’s explanation of the tension between them, Daniel and I had witnessed no end of raised voices spilling from her room.

‘Ding, ding.’ Daniel arrived at my desk, perching on the side of it, phone clutched in his hand. He knew Vivian wouldn’t bother to look up at us when her opponent was in the room. ‘Ladies and gentlemen, I give you round *two billion* in the landmark case between Jones and Hartman.’ Daniel laughed. ‘We all know he’ll be a partner by the end of the year.’

‘I wouldn’t be so sure.’ I looked through to Vivian, with her Armani-clad arms crossed and her face even crosser, Liam’s words still ringing in my ears.

‘From what people have said, Liam always gets what he wants.’ Daniel shrugged, lowering his voice a little and adding. ‘Everything is cool between

you two, right?’

‘Between me and Vivian?’ I asked, mind catching on the question. ‘Yeah, things are going good. *Great* even,’ I corrected myself, as Daniel looked a little taken aback by my need to convince him; he must have seen the kind of work I had been landed with all month.

‘*Okay*,’ he said slowly, hands in the air in surrender, ‘I believe you.’ He laughed. ‘I actually meant with you and Liam...’

‘*Liam?*’

‘He seems to have taken a bit of a shine to...’ Daniel’s hushed voice became inaudible, apparently uncertain whether it was his place to say anything.

‘I asked him to be my sponsor, that’s all.’ I shut his questioning down.

‘Sounds good,’ he surrendered. ‘But you would tell me if he was bothering you?’

I nodded, unsure as to what Daniel was insinuating.

‘Because from what people have said,’ he repeated, ‘Liam always gets what he wants.’

My eyes drifted from the melee of workers gossiping about *The Legal Chirp*’s latest article on the Ruslan case on the other side of the glass and past them to the skyline outside. It was dark by now, London’s evenings drawing in closer as the year drew to an end. Dom was right, we really should start planning Sophie’s birthday party. My mind shot back to the messages, stored away in the shoebox. We would always be Sophie’s family, regardless of what happened with us, wouldn’t we?

‘Hailey?’ I looked up to see Vivian standing by the doorway as Liam swanned past her. I forced my eyes not to follow him as he disappeared out of Vivian’s anteroom and into the fray. ‘Hailey?’ Vivian repeated. Focus Hailey, *focus*. I fixed my eyes on hers, hopeful that now was the time for me to be trusted with more responsibility. Was this the power of a good sponsor? Even if Vivian didn’t *like* Liam, she sure seemed to respect him. ‘How are you getting on?’ she asked.

‘Yeah, alright thanks.’ I grinned. *No, be better than alright*. ‘Good, thank you.’

‘I’m glad.’ Her tone softened and she suddenly looked a little tired. I knew the Ruslan case was testing everyone. Maybe she was finally going to

ask for my help?

‘Have you got plans this evening?’

I shook my head. ‘No, nothing.’ Daniel had already gone to one evening meeting with her, plus two networking events, now it was my turn. Wherever she wanted me to go, the answer was going to be yes.

‘Great, I err...’ It wasn’t like Vivian to second-guess her sentences, but since taking on the Ruslan case, she’d been even more non-stop than usual. Surely, even superhuman Vivian felt fatigued and forgot things? ‘I forgot to pick something up from home, and I need it in the office tomorrow... I’m not going to be able to make it home tonight.’ She wasn’t going to be working that late, surely? I looked at her, stunned, but still nodding. ‘Great, thanks Hailey. It’s just...’ she paused again ‘...I really appreciate it.’

I looked down at the map on my phone. It told me I had reached my destination, though I still felt pretty lost. Dom and Sophie’s messages burned in my pocket and I quickly shot off a reply to both: Sophie had spent another night with Fifty and was now categorically freaking out, ready to run a mile. I responded: *Hold tight, let’s run together soon and we’ll go through everything.* Dom was asking when I’d be home. *Really soon, I promise* I replied. *Just got one last errand to run.*

I gazed up at the Pimlico town house, the one I had seen in the pages of *Elire*, the kind of property that would make a woman like Vivian feel at home. What didn’t make sense was the fact she’d given me a set of keys. That said, who the hell would try to cheat Jason and Vivian Jones out of anything? A CCTV camera clocked me as I ascended their pristine stone steps. She had given me the directions: into the hallway, through the kitchen at the back, up a spiral staircase (who in London has a spiral staircase?), then right, and right again onto another landing, up another flight of stairs (who in London has *staircases*, multiple) and into the study, where the file would be on her desk in a blue folder. The house should be empty, except for maybe ‘the help’.

As I turned the key in her door, it pushed open with ease. No creaks or kicks needed. Stepping into the vast hallway, I looked up to see a main stairway hugging the large curved wall to my left. The décor was British heritage meets French chic, the minimalism of the cream walls and sparse furniture contrasting with the clash of colours on the patterned carpet and

grandiose paintings lining the walls.

I slipped off my heels, placing them carefully by the side of the door. I was taking no risks. Walking through to the kitchen, I felt like I was journeying into the countryside; the multiple cupboards and plentiful worktops were every bit as cosy as a suburban cottage – though five times the size. My stockinged feet skidded across the marble floor as I made my way to the twisting iron staircase at the back of the room. I climbed up the other staircase and took in the view that greeted me. Vivian's bookcase-lined office oozed prestige, the bare wooden flooring a holy ground. On the desk in the centre of the room stood a gold photo frame, housing a picture of a young Jason holding Vivian, who hadn't aged a bit, in a lace gown almost as white as the teeth smiling up at me.

I grabbed the file and began to retrace my steps. As I was just about to leave the kitchen, I heard footsteps on the other side of the door. Gently pushing it ajar to peer out onto the hall. I saw the, by now, very familiar shoulders I had seen swivelling in my seat just this morning. The same tie he had been wearing earlier was now undone around his neck. I watched him pause at the door, looking down at my discarded heels. Had he known I was here? Was he following me? But if he was, why was I always one step behind?

Chapter 11

ONE WEEK BEFORE THE MOMENT

The pounding of my feet against the pavement failed to keep up with the pounding in my chest as I tried to keep up with Sophie several paces ahead of me already. I looked across to the other side of the river to where I could see our offices. Little black silhouettes were tapping away at their desks and walking from window to window to speak to one another. But a fair few seemed to be here at the running club, although thankfully no one I recognised from my floor. But every time I talked about the only case that seemed to matter right now, I still lowered my voice. Sadly, Sophie hadn't got that memo.

'So, let me get this straight, your firm is arguing that an affair can end a marriage?'

'Not exactly,' I said. Sophie was trying her best to keep up with me, whilst I tried my best to keep up with her. Neither of us were succeeding. 'We're saying an affair and a mutual decision to separate, live in separate houses, begin to move on' – I lowered my voice again – 'is enough to show that the couple didn't consider their lives or *finances* shared when they split.'

'Well, you know my vote,' Sophie said, whilst I willed her to be quiet again. 'The cheat shouldn't get a penny. So, you're finally working on a case then?'

'Not exactly.' Over a quarter of my time working with the legendary Vivian Jones had already passed and I had little more than nothing to show for it. Apart from a part-time sponsor whose attempts to put me forward had only seen me fall further behind – what was he even doing at Vivian's that night? He had left before I had chance to ask him and I'd not found a moment

to probe him about it since. I wanted to tell Sophie everything, that I was underused and yet out of my depth, that I'd pushed myself out of my comfort zone only to find myself on the edge of whatever was next, neither in nor out, a little like how I was feeling with Dom. But Sophie didn't need my drama right now, she was already anxious enough.

'Anyway, enough about me. How are things with Fifty? When do I get to meet him?'

'I don't think it's going to work.' Sophie looked sad for a second, before resuming her usual smile and slowing to a walk.

'What, why?' I asked, breathless.

'It's complicated.' She sighed. 'I just can't do it.'

'Do what?' I asked, as runner after runner flew past us.

'I don't know.' She shrugged. 'Invest in just one person, put all my eggs in one basket, it's just too risky.'

I looked at her, caught between wanting to move forwards, before everyone else left her behind, and her fear of making the wrong choice. I looked at my feet, feeling like a fraud. If only she knew Dom and I weren't a done deal; that I didn't feel sorted either.

'My parents kind of screwed that up for me, I guess,' she said, pressing on as I tried my best to keep walking forwards. 'But you guys...' Sophie paused for a second. 'Give me hope.' She sighed again, hooking an arm around mine. 'How are things on Love Road anyway?'

'It's *Lough* Grove, but you know that.' I looked at her, wondering in this moment of vulnerability whether she'd be able to handle mine. 'We're good, I guess.'

'You guess?' Sophie sounded concerned.

'Just a lot's changed, you know. Different jobs and all that...'

'Thank *God*.' Sophie laughed, relieved. 'For a moment, I thought... well, I don't know.' She put a hand to her heart.

'What?' I tried to laugh away my nervousness, not knowing if I wanted her to go on.

'I thought you were going to say that you were having doubts about Dom or something.' She laughed at the absurdity. 'I swear, the day you guys break up is the day I stop believing in love.'

My legs felt heavy as I looked at my friend, suddenly aware of the weight I'd had to carry, being one half of someone's reason to hope.

Hailey ☺ : It's over.

Dom Mob: Huh?

Hailey ☺ : Soph's dad. He's left.

Dom Mob: For good?

Hailey ☺ : Think so. For another woman, another family.

Dom Mob: Shit. How is she?

Hailey ☺ : Devastated. Sedated.

Dom Mob: Poison?

Hailey ☺ : Pinot. She's passed out now.

Dom Mob: Want me to come round?

Hailey ☺ : No it's okay. I guess I should be on sick-watch.

Dom Mob: Okay if you're sure.

Hailey ☺ : Someone's got to look out for her.

...

Dom Mob: How's she doing?

Hailey ☺ : Been asleep this whole time.

Hailey ☺ : I know I told you not to come, but I kinda wish you were here.

Dom Mob: Good job I'm outside then isn't it.

Hailey ☺: No you're not.

Dom Mob: Try me.

Hailey ☺: How did you know I'd change my mind?

Dom Mob: Because I know you, Hailey Kidd.

Dom Mob: And someone's got to look out for you too.

Chapter 12

ONE DAY BEFORE THE MOMENT

‘You’re late.’ Dom was waiting, arms folded, beside one of the picturesque flower beds leading the way into the grand entrance of Taylor, Laters and Jones.

‘And you’re going to have to get used to it some time,’ I joked, a hard edge of seriousness making the words sound snappier than I intended. I stood before him, my heels making me almost his height, my most expensive coat clashing against his black puffer jacket. It wasn’t his fault I was so in my head. He’d done nothing wrong; he never did. Dom pulled away to study my hard edges, his light green eyes worlds away from Liam’s dark black stare. I preferred Dom’s. I had to prefer Dom’s.

‘Bad day?’ he asked, steering us away from the river and further into London Bridge’s frantic post-work scene, hordes of suits and business-bods spilling into the streets.

‘Not really, just normal.’ I sighed as he squeezed my hand a little tighter. ‘Why? How was your day?’ I deflected. It was easier when I concentrated on everyone else.

‘Right, that’s it.’ Dom stopped in the middle of the pavement, spinning me around to look at him, commuters and tourists tutting at him for falling out of rank. ‘What’s up?’

‘Nothing.’ I stared back. He cocked an eyebrow, far from convinced. Had he been back into the box above the wardrobe? Had he noticed something different, out of place? ‘Okay, I’m just a little disappointed is all...’

‘With me?’

‘No, not with you.’ I held his arms tighter, hordes of people dodging

around us. ‘It’s just, I’m getting further and further through my time with Vivian and it’s just not what I expected it to be. She’s brilliant, *iconic* but—’

‘I did wonder how your office crush was going,’ Dom interrupted.

‘I don’t have an office crush,’ I clipped in return. I didn’t. I *couldn’t*.

‘Bet you wouldn’t kick her out of bed.’

‘Not much I wouldn’t give her for a promotion, I guess.’ I tried to laugh. ‘It’s just, well, I thought I’d be further along with everything by now.’ In work, in *life*.

‘Oh Hayby, I get it,’ he said, in a way that made me sure he didn’t. ‘And we can chat about it all soon.’ He was the one who had asked *me* whether everything was okay. ‘But maybe tonight, we can just keep things off the topic of new jobs and new decades and moving forwards. It might make Sophie feel a bit behind.’

I nodded, not knowing how to tell him that she might not be the only one struggling to keep up.

We arrived at the restaurant, decked in fairy lights, and I pushed open the thick wooden door, engraved with Thai symbols. Thai’d Up. Sophie loved this place and the food was much better than the pun. Maybe we could go Thai-themed for her birthday? But it was up to Dom to plan it, too. Sophie was already there and she wasn’t alone. I snuck a glance at Dom, who was beaming back at them, trying to work out if I was the only one who didn’t know Sophie was bringing someone or whether she’d told me and I had forgotten to let him know.

‘Pete.’ The guy held out a hand, and I looked down at it before remembering how normal people were supposed to act and shook it. ‘I was just heading to the bar; can I get you something?’

‘I’ll help you, mate.’ Dom gave him a man-slap on the back. ‘Give these two a chance to chat about you anyway.’ He winked in our direction, failing to pull it off, unlike Liam. I turned to Sophie.

‘We’re finally meeting Fifty?’ I asked.

She shook her head, taking a seat opposite me. ‘Nope.’ She smiled. ‘This one’s new...’

‘So, you didn’t give Fifty another chance?’

‘No, I still am,’ she said, looking a little shifty. ‘I’m just not sure where he’s at. Pete’s just an insurance policy.’ I looked over to him, gathering our

drinks in his hands.

‘Very nice.’ I couldn’t help but roll my eyes. Sophie could be as careful with her own heart as she wanted, but it didn’t mean she had to play with everyone else’s.

‘Not everyone can be as perfect as you, Hailey,’ Sophie quipped. I knew she was feeling anxious again, but that didn’t mean she had to take it out on me.

‘Sophie, I...’ I began, before two large glasses of pinot were plonked on the table before us. I took a massive gulp and then another. I should really be in the office right now, but I was making the effort for her, for *them*.

‘What’s good?’ Pete pulled out a fourth chair at our table and picked up a menu. I couldn’t remember the last time we were an even number. So why did everything feel so odd? Dom was busy reading the menu, but I knew what we’d order: chicken pad thai, vegetable green curry, jasmine rice, prawn crackers on the side. We weren’t stuck in a rut. We just knew what we wanted. *Except when you don’t*, a voice in my head niggled. I took another gulp of wine.

‘I want everything.’ Sophie smiled back at Pete, her partner – for one night only? She was only doing this because she was scared, scared of something serious. *What, unlike you?* The voice taunted me again, as Dom’s hand weighed on my leg, heavy and hot.

‘Everything?’ Our favourite waiter had appeared by our side.

‘And still fit into these jeans?’ Sophie laughed, flirtatiously. ‘I’ll have the green curry please, extra spicy.’ To be honest her jeans had room to spare; the weight was melting off her with every run I was too busy to join her on.

‘Sophie says you’re both teachers too?’ Pete looked between Dom and me, taking control of the conversation, trying to put everyone at ease in a way I usually would.

‘Well, I used to be,’ I said and looked from Dom to Sophie, feeling more than a little left out. But I wasn’t content there, was I? Always longing for more. *A little like now...* I forced my wine to my lips, hoping if I drank quickly enough it would make its way to my brain.

‘I am, mate.’ Dom nodded, proud enough for both of us. ‘Year 4.’

‘Ah man, does it make you broody?’

‘More like the opposite.’ I laughed, stories of naughty Andy still burnt into my brain.

‘Actually,’ Dom began, as I looked at him in confusion, ‘it does

sometimes. I mean – they can be twits.’ For the first time in a long time I didn’t give him a kick under the table for bad-mouthing them. Surely, he wasn’t ready? ‘But I can’t wait to be a dad.’ I couldn’t help my eyes widening in shock as we all laughed the moment away.

‘I get it.’ Pete smiled. Did he? Since when did I start to be surrounded by men, not boys? ‘I’ve got a little niece and I melt every time my brother sends me a new photo of her.’ He clutched his phone as if expecting one to ping into it now. ‘Sorry I keep checking my phone.’ He turned it face down on the table before picking it straight back up again. ‘My brother’s planning to pop the question to my niece’s mum *tonight*.’

My mind flashed to the ring in our wardrobe before I beckoned for our waiter friend to get us another bottle. *Chill*, Hailey. It will be okay; this will all be okay.

This was what I’d always wanted. Although, I’m not sure I’d really *thought* about it. I’d just drifted along and the flow had landed me here. But I didn’t have to stay here. After years of doing things because everyone else had, I had got myself a brand-new career. Not that that was working out that well either.

I looked at Sophie, laughing with her latest man, dating to fill the dread. At Dom, eating his pad thai, content with the same old, same old. I looked at my wine. It wouldn’t change anything but for just a moment maybe it could freeze time, or at least free me from feeling the pressure of it. Tomorrow’s Hailey would hate me, but tonight’s needed a release.

GOING FOR GOLD: AN INTERVIEW WITH VIVIAN AND JASON JONES

A Monet hangs from the high ceilings of the Parisian apartment I have just been welcomed into. And yet, it's nothing compared to the family before me: notorious power-couple, Vivian and Jason Jones, and their three daughters. They pose for photos, wearing Jean Paul Gaultier, Yves Saint Laurent and Christian Dior. Vivian and Jason Jones have just celebrated a new milestone and we at Belle are fortunate enough to sit down with them just days after their fortieth wedding anniversary. It is an accolade fewer and fewer people are managing to reach these days, but the Joneses make it look easy.

'What's the secret?' I ask, to which the two of them look to one another and smile. 'I'm not sure there's any secrets.' Vivian fixes her eyes on mine. 'Maybe that's the point?' Jason muses. 'We're a team,' he explains, looking from his wife to his girls.

Family is the thing for the Joneses, with Vivian now a named partner at luxury family law firm, Taylor, Laters and Jones. I wonder whether she finds it disheartening, ending so many marriages in her work? 'That's my job, I don't let that affect my personal life,' she replies. To which Jason adds, 'she did at the beginning,' before telling me how the two of them met as interns in the first law firm they worked at. 'It's just what you did back then,' Vivian reminds me. 'We didn't have apps.' She nods to her daughters, all three on their phones. 'You just met people at work.'

She's less distracted now, she tells me, winning celebrity clients for the firm on a weekly basis. But is retirement on the cards now that she has paved

the way for so many aspiring young women? 'I have no intention of slowing down. I'm always looking for what's next.' 'Thankfully not in relationships.' Jason laughs, leaning across to kiss his wife on the cheek. No, this couple is in it for the long haul, celebrating their ruby anniversary, but going for gold.

Chapter 13

THE MOMENT

Reaching for my phone, every muscle in my arm ached. I lifted my head to look at the angry, attention-seeking alarm on my screen. My head hurt even more. How much did I drink last night? Then I saw the time.

‘Shit.’ I shot up in bed, sending blood rushing to my otherwise grey cheeks. Dom groaned, snuggling further into my side. I had slept through my alarm.

‘I’m late.’ I shrugged Dom awake. ‘I’m late for everything,’ I raged, before I could stop myself, bowing my head in my hands, ever the dramatic, fears flooding my blurry brain.

Everyone’s arriving into adulthood and you’re just bloody late.

‘Are you okay?’ Dom rubbed his sleepy eyes, reaching to his bedside table to put on his glasses and trying not to recoil upon seeing his girlfriend green in the face; still, he smiled.

‘Of course, I’m not okay!’ I snapped back. ‘Look at me!’ I opened my shaking hands to gesture down at my back-to-front pyjama top. ‘And I have to be at work in an hour.’

‘We were celebrating.’ Dom sat up, as if that were a valid excuse. I looked at him with an expression that made him damn sure it wasn’t. ‘The engagement.’ He beamed. *The what?* Dom held my hand tightly in his as I tried to recall something, anything, from last night. It was Sophie, Pete, me and Dom and the rest was just a blur.

‘Pete’s brother?’ Dom pressed on, as my cheeks failed to reclaim their colour. ‘Got engaged to his girlfriend, last night... remember?’ Once again my eyes gave him the answer, so my dry mouth didn’t have to: *Does this look*

like the face of someone who remembers? ‘You used to love romantic stuff like that.’

‘I’m so late.’ I deflected the thought. And not in the *sorry I’m late* way I’d said a thousand times over the past few weeks, but really bloody late. I turned my back towards Dom who, without speaking, knew to undo my back-to-front buttons. How the hell did I get myself into this? ‘Why did you let me drink so much when you knew I had to work the next day?’

‘We all have work,’ Dom said, as I tried to hide my disdain. ‘Hailey, you do know your new job isn’t the only thing that matters, right? Just because you decided you didn’t want to be a teacher any more...’ I looked at him, blood and alcohol rushing through my veins. Of course, I knew my new job wasn’t the *only* thing that mattered, but after years of sharing every part of our lives together maybe it was the only thing that mattered to me, exclusively.

‘I don’t have time for this right now,’ I snapped, fearful of what I might say next. I didn’t want to hurt Dom. I’d never wanted to hurt Dom, or Sophie, or *anyone*.

‘Okay.’ Dom looked deflated; I was so fed up of making him feel like he’d done something wrong. Why couldn’t I just get my shit together? Work out what I wanted before somebody got hurt.

‘Why don’t we go out for dinner later, just the two of us and have a chat about everything?’ he asked. The classic, *we need to talk*. I couldn’t do this right now. I didn’t even know what I wanted to say. Maybe, *I love you and I think we should be married and have babies soon but for some reason I’m not sure if I want all of that*. Or worse, *I’m not sure I want all of that with you*. The room began to spin as I forced myself towards the wardrobe, trying to forget what I knew for a fact was inside. I had to get to work, I just had to concentrate on work – that had to be the priority right now.

‘Dom, I can’t tonight. I just have too much work to do,’ I half lied, but it was a good one and it would *stay* at one lie: I just needed some time.

‘Okay, maybe tomorrow?’ he asked. Maybe. But work was the priority. At least I was moving forwards there, I had to keep moving forwards. I nodded.

‘Hop in the shower, I’ll drive you to work.’ Dom’s school was on the outskirts of London and so it had made sense to bring his old banger with us. He called her Daisy, his other woman.

‘No, you can’t,’ I objected, pushing off my pyjama bottoms and removing

my top, looking around for a towel. Dom's eyes absorbed my body like a temple, not the broken, alcohol-fuelled mess I'd turned it into last night. 'It's so far out of your way and it will take you ages to get back to work.'

'Look at you.' He smiled at my nakedness. 'How could you not be a priority for me?'

Midday, how the hell was it still midday? I looked up from the clock, taunting me from the bottom of my computer monitor, to Vivian's office.

I didn't need to see the faces of the two men sitting across from her to know what their expressions would be. Aleksander would be red-cheeked and incredulous, pretending to be devastated by his divorce, like that wasn't how all his marriages ended. Liam would look confident, collected, cool. He always did, especially when Vivian was around.

'He still needs her vote to make partner,' Daniel said, looking up from his phone and catching me looking in their direction. Clearly, he'd been looking, too.

'Pardon?'

'The other partners are holding off making it official until Vivian gives them to go-ahead.' He smiled through the glass to her as she looked down at her own phone and smiled. Well, his best pal Vivian might have told him that, but if Liam was to be believed, her time for stalling his partnership was running out.

Daniel shrugged, returning his attention to his screen, his smile speaking volumes. I didn't need to ask this time to know his on and off dating dilemmas were a thing of the past – at least for today. I wished I could say the same. I glanced at my phone, face down on my desk, knowing I had to reply to Dom at some point. *Hope you're coping, Hayby. Dinner tonight? I've got a surprise for you.* God, I felt sick, again. Forcing my heavy legs to stand, I turned to leave the room only to be trapped in the doorway by one of the receptionists carrying the hugest bouquet of flowers I had ever seen. She turned to me and forced a smile, laced with something like envy, before placing them in the centre of my desk. All the oranges, pinks and yellows clashed against an otherwise grey day, the yellow ribbon stretching across the paperwork on my desk – my favourite colour. But who would know that? *Hope you're coping... I've got a surprise for you.*

Shit, shit, shit. Please don't be from Dom. *Please* don't be from Dom. My

heart beat faster as I looked at Daniel, his mouth cocked in surprise, then across at Vivian's office, where she, Liam and the client turned to look through the glass, their attention now on me. My cheeks flushed as my heart hammered with red-hot embarrassment: Dom had no idea how to act in this environment, what was appropriate in my world... Liam, his smile warm and cheeky, seemed somewhat amused. I guessed he knew I had a boyfriend now.

'Who are they from?' Daniel asked as, with shaking hands, I reached for the note nestled within them. 'No wonder you're so good at the romance advice.'

I turned the envelope over in my hand, feeling the burn of Liam's eyes on my neck, my hungover stomach churning all the more.

'They're not for me.' I sighed, relief and disappointment amalgamating in my voice. Relief because, well, of course Dom wouldn't do that. Disappointment because, well, of course Dom wouldn't do that... 'They're for Vivian.' I returned the envelope brandishing a golden 'V' back between the flowers. Right on cue, Vivian swanned out of her office, reaching for the flowers before returning to her room. Unlike me, she didn't need to question who they were from. She didn't need to question who loved her, who she loved. Unlike me, she didn't have to question herself.

DOM: *So, dinner tonight?*

ME: *I'll be here quite late I reckon.*

DOM: *It's Friday, Hailey.*

ME: *And?*

DOM: *We said we'd have dinner tonight.*

DOM: *I thought you were just too hungover this morning to stomach the thought.*

ME: *When?*

DOM: *This morning.*

ME: *No, when did we say we'd have dinner?*

DOM: *Last night. I said that we needed to talk properly.*

ME: *And you think I can remember anything that happened last night?*

DOM: *You're really not coming back this evening?*

ME: *I have to work, Dom. I'm sorry. You know I hate letting people down.*

DOM: *Could have fooled me.*

'That's it.'

I looked from the messages to the clock on my phone – 7.23 p.m. – and swivelled round at the sound of Daniel's hands hitting the top of his desk.

'I'm calling it. It's time to go home,' he said.

'Big date?' I asked, though the answer was pretty obvious.

'Something like that.' He beamed back at me. 'And you?'

I looked at my phone again, back to our messages, alive with angst. This wasn't like us. We were steady as anything, never in doubt. *Until now.* Whatever was stacked up against me here felt a thousand times simpler than whatever was waiting for me at home.

'No, I'm going to get ahead on some of this work, I think.'

'You do know that stuff can wait?' He looked at my mountain of meaningless admin.

'Yes,' I snapped back, as Daniel recoiled, a little like Dom had this morning. 'But right now, it's the only work I have and maybe if I finally get through it, I'll get to...' I tried to stop my eyes from filling with tears. What the hell was wrong with me? This was just the hangover talking. Daniel

looked guilty for a second, like it wasn't just me who realised he was the chosen one, but then his phone buzzed again: he'd been chosen by *her* too – whoever he was messaging and meeting late into the evening. And yet, looking at his face, his smile shining from ear to ear, it didn't look like he'd chosen anything; it looked like surrender, the inevitable, undeniable infatuation of lust. My stomach churned as I tried to remember what that felt like, before the pressure began piling up in the back of our wardrobe back home.

'Okay, okay.' Daniel threw his hands up in surrender. 'But you can't stay here.'

'Of course, I can.' He stayed later than me most nights. He didn't have a live-in partner, a near-live-in best friend, a twenty-six-mile run to train for or a thirtieth birthday to plan.

'Didn't you get the memo?' he asked, as I wondered again what company-wide mailing list I seemed to be cut off from. 'Carpet cleaners are due in, the floor needs to be vacant from ten p.m.'

'Fine,' I said as I watched Daniel leave for his weekend, trying desperately not to question why I was reluctant to do the same.

DOM: *Fine.*

DOM: *I'm going for a drink with Nick in central.*

DOM: *Call me if you want to join or travel home together.*

DOM: *Or if you decide to take a break.*

Taking a break was the last thing I wanted to do. My hangover lingered as I thought of joining Dom. Our tension, our questions rumbling underneath the surface seemed to almost be bursting at the seams. I couldn't stomach them tonight. Not until I'd decided what I was going to do next. What we were going to do. This was momentary; I was just adjusting to the novelty of my new life. It would pass. I looked at the same clock that had taunted me earlier: now ten to ten. With nowhere better to go, nowhere else to hide, I thought of *Later's*. Then I thought of Liam.

Wandering into the dimly lit room, my breath caught in my chest as I pulled up a stool by the bar, stashing the membership card Liam had sorted out for me in my pocket. I scanned the room for sight of him, almost sure that if Liam was in here his eyes would be burning into me, the same way they had when the flowers had arrived at my desk like a secret yet to be told. But they weren't a secret, were they? And they weren't my surprise from Dom; that was still to come. Checking the bar again, I exhaled deeply; he wasn't here.

'What do you want?' a well-dressed barman asked, distracting me from my thoughts.

'A small wine,' I muttered, not used to doing this alone.

'Coming right up...'

'Actually, I'll take an Old Fashioned.'

'Good choice.' The barman smiled as I marvelled at the fact that I was the kind of girl to order Old Fashioneds now. Then, an hour later, I marvelled at the fact I was the kind to order two more. Classic hair of the dog. But this, sat in a swanky bar, welcoming my weekend alone, this was new. And with every sip of my Old Fashioned and every message swiped away from my screen, I was starting to like the taste.

DANIEL: *Are you home yet?*

I looked at my screen, tired eyes rolling at Dom's latest message, already checking up on me, before I realised Dom hadn't sent it. *Daniel?* Then I noticed the time. It was way past eleven. And I had two missed calls from Dom. Shit, how had the time gone so fast? I looked from my drained drink around the noisy bar and down to the message, writing my response.

DANIEL: *Thank God.*

DANIEL: *I left some sensitive files on our printer.*

DANIEL: *Could you go and grab them?*

DANIEL: *Enjoy the carpets.*

I could almost hear Daniel's relief as I told him I would. And Dom's as I finally replied to his message: *Hey sorry. Today's been mad. Still want to travel home together?* Home. Back to *ours*. I looked down at his instant reply – *Just tell me where to meet you and I'll be there* – and smiled; he always was. And with the warmth of my third drink drowning out my dread, I finally felt ready to go home. But first, I just needed to grab Daniel's printing.

Arriving back up at our floor, I looked across the dark, open-plan space. The carpet cleaners had gone. And for the first time since I had started working here, so had everyone else. The hive of activity had slowed to a halt: the office was ghostly quiet. As I headed into the darkness, the city lights from outside trickled through the windows, illuminating my way. I walked past abandoned hot desks and unwanted coffee cups, until my hands were feeling for the glass door into the space outside Vivian's office, protected by mine and Daniel's desks on either side. Her room looked empty, darker than usual, until I realised there was no skyline shining through from the other side. The blinds were shut.

Maybe Vivian was back in the office, putting in the hours. You didn't become a senior partner at one of the city's leading family law firms without working for it.

Moving towards the printers, I tried to be quiet. I'd had more than my share of cocktails and we were all meant to have gone home hours ago. Arriving at the printer, I searched the paper trays for Daniel's documents, noticing a shard of light flooding out of the haphazardly closed blinds into her office. I couldn't help but look through the gap, towards the glass table that sat in the centre of her room. The flowers that had stood proud upon it were long gone, and Vivian was nowhere to be seen.

Fumbling with the paper tray, I picked up a pile of documents all headed with the reason Daniel had wanted to protect them: confidential. *Got them.*

Looking up again, I froze. Vivian was in there. And she wasn't alone. Through the gap in the blinds, I could see her svelte body now stretched across the glass table, her loose hair falling down as she moved on top of a man with long brown hair.

'Shit.' My hands landed on the printer with a thump as I tried to balance myself. Looking through the gap in the blinds once more, I knew she could see me. Vivian's eyes pierced through my own, as she pushed herself further up from the man she was kissing, her pert chest displayed for me and her lover to see.

Shit, shit, shit. My heart started to pound, as I forced a step back into the darkness, their bare bodies imprinted in my mind. This wasn't right. Vivian was married, happily married, famously so.

Moving as fast as my shaking legs could carry me back to my office, I ditched the papers and ran out of the building into the cool winter night, gulping down the air like water. She had seen me, seeing her. She had seen me; staring, spying, snooping.

The sound of footsteps behind me would have shocked me, were I not already shocked to the core: Dom. He was here, waiting for me, duffle coat zipped up to the top, arms folded. It was the same place I had sat just days after finding out I had got the position at Taylor, Laters and Jones, daydreaming about becoming a lawyer just like her. The woman who had smashed glass ceilings whilst maintaining a marriage, building a home. My heart pounded in my chest. This couldn't be right. Vivian's marriage was known to be strong and her morals even stronger. And she had taken on case after case to defend family values, to protect the sanctity of marriage. If that was fake, what else could be?

'You okay?' Dom asked, tired, four beers deep. 'Looks like you've seen a ghost.'

I hugged him tightly, knowing for sure that whatever I'd just seen had been real.

Chapter 14

ONE HOUR AFTER THE MOMENT

I didn't let go of his hand the entire way home, mine held in his as we made our way to the underground, as we sat side by side on the tube, as we emerged from our station and walked the thirteen minutes to our apartment. My fingers clung so tightly around his that I felt sure they'd become one. Dom had asked me what was wrong a thousand times, but I couldn't tell him, a lump catching in my throat every time I went to explain: *she had seen me*.

As we walked into our apartment, for the first time since I had found Dom's ring, I wasn't hit with nostalgia for who we once were. Instead, my mind raced with the memories that had led me to this moment. So much of my career change had been prompted by her, by the incredible influence she was, the reputation she had. I looked at Dom now and tried to remind myself that none of that had changed, but who was I kidding?

'Don't you dare,' Dom said from the living room as I drifted into our bedroom. 'Hailey Kidd?' My full name was laced with kindness. I ignored it, sitting on our double bed, removing my shoes one by one, everything now in slow motion. I laid across Dom's side of the bed, dress, tights and coat still on. This was so stupid, a mountain out of a molehill, no big deal. So what if Vivian wasn't the woman I thought she was? It would be fine. None of my business. She might not have even seen me. But I was sure she had. And I had seen her. Lots of her. And for the last time. It wasn't like she could keep me working for her now. Come Monday morning, my training contract at the firm would be over. Legally, it would be unfair dismissal. But who would care when Vivian's word was law?

'Hailey?' I felt Dom's body sit at the foot of the bed beside me. 'What's

wrong?’

‘It’s nothing,’ I lied, trying to stop the tears escaping from behind my closed eyelids. I had known working for the infamous Vivian Jones was too good to be true.

‘Doesn’t look like nothing.’ He moved to lie down alongside me. I could smell the soft scent of beer on his breath and wondered if he could smell the whisky on mine. He placed the back of his hand on my forehead. ‘You’re burning up.’ He started to take off my coat, flinging it to the side of the bed. He should have put it on a hanger, but right now I didn’t care. There was no controlling this. I reached over to switch the light off.

‘I’m just knackered,’ I said. It wasn’t even a lie.

‘You do know you don’t need to be strong all the time, Hailey?’ Dom sighed. In the darkness, he reached across to the light switch on the other side of the bed and clicked it back on. I reached to my side and switched it back to black. We had loved that we both had our own switches when we had got the place; that neither of us had to make the ultimate sacrifice and get out of bed first. Now it felt inconvenient, a tool for displaying our differences. He switched the light on again and then before I could move, grabbed my hands in his. ‘Now listen, we’re not going to sleep like this. Not on an argument, and not fully clothed. The Bible says so.’

‘The Bible says we shouldn’t be fully clothed?’

‘Well, no, not that bit.’ He smiled at finally getting something out of me. ‘The argument bit. It says we shouldn’t go to sleep on an argument.’

‘We’re not arguing.’

‘Aren’t we?’ Dom asked again. ‘You’ve been avoiding me all week; you’ve not been yourself and now you come home crying. Is there something I should know about?’

Well, when he put it like that.

‘It’s everything,’ I said, sounding dramatic. ‘I just feel so worried about so many things.’ Like, am I being a good enough girlfriend, a good enough friend, a good enough trainee, a good enough grown-up, just *good enough*.

‘And when did you stop feeling you could talk to me about them?’ Dom asked, stroking my arm as my body softened to his touch. I shook my head, more tears spilling down my cheeks. This was mad; he was my best friend. Why was it so hard to imagine every day of our future like this? Why was the thought of drifting along just as we were so scary?

Then there was Liam. And Vivian. And now this one stupid moment that

may have cost me my career.

‘Let’s break it down,’ Dom began, the same way he’d talk to his class of eight-year-olds. ‘What happened today? Something’s happened at work?’

I nodded.

‘With Vivian?’

I nodded again. He knew I’d been upset about her ignoring me; now I wished I was actually invisible.

‘Yes,’ I confessed, seeing my reflection in his big green eyes. ‘But if I tell you, you can’t tell anyone.’ My own tear-filled eyes pleaded with him. Would he support me come Monday when I arrived at work just to be asked to leave? Would he be able to? My trainee wage was bringing in more than he was now. Not that we liked to talk about that.

Would the school give me my job back? I turned over in the bed, my stomach turning at the thought. But I didn’t want to go back. My training contract hadn’t started as I’d expected, but it was still what I wanted, it was still Taylor, Laters and Jones. Now that I’d started, I couldn’t stop crying. She was a bloody named partner, there was no way I hadn’t seen my last day at the place I’d spent so many just longing to be at. ‘You can’t tell *anyone*.’

‘Who am I going to tell?’ he asked. It was a good question; he didn’t really move in my circles, much as I’d like him to, much as part of me wished he was smarter, more ambitious, more like... ‘You can trust me.’ I knew I could, that had never been our problem. Through sobs, I told him. About Vivian, about the man, about her eyes on mine.

‘Everything’s going to be okay, Hailey,’ Dom whispered into my hair. I sobbed even more into his T-shirt, leaving wet stains around its collar. I longed for a time when I believed every word he said, where I looked to the future and knew that to be true. Where I believed Vivian Jones was everything I wanted to be. Now I didn’t want what was coming: Vivian firing me, Sophie’s anxiety, Dom and our home and our life and our future drifting away, out of reach.

‘Everything’s going to be okay,’ he whispered again.

‘She saw me, Dom. Saw me see her,’ I cried. ‘There’s no way she’s going to let me work with her now.’

‘She can’t get rid of you for *her* mistake,’ he said earnestly.

‘I think we both know that Vivian Jones can do whatever the fuck she likes.’

Chapter 15

THREE DAYS AFTER THE MOMENT

19 Jun 2006

SR: I'm never dating again.

HK: That bad?

SR: Worse.

SR: He has a girlfriend.

HK: Since when?

SR: Since three years before we met.

HK: *Shit.*

SR: Why are all men dicks?

DT: I promise you we're not.

SR: Well you all seem to think with them.

SR: I think it should be illegal to cheat.

SR: But that would mean every man would be locked up.

HK: Doesn't sound so bad.

SR: I think we'd be fine.

HK: We'd get more done.

DT: You'd struggle to procreate though.

SR: Yeah, but least we'd die happy.

DT: Should I get some new friends yet?

SR: Sure.

SR: Go and cheat on us too.

SR: Inevitable.

DT: Look. I know your date is a dick, Robson.

DT: Your dad is one too btw.

HK: Categorically.

SR: Undeniably.

DT: But don't just tar us with the same brush.

DT: I promise you, there is a guy out there who will be great for you.

DT: And he won't even look at another girl.

SR: Since when did you become such a romantic?

DT: Since I fell in love with your best friend.

SR: You better mean Hailey or I'm giving up on you too.

DT: Course I mean Hailey.

HK: You love me?

DT: Yep.

DT: Appreciate BBM group chat isn't the most romantic place to tell you for the first time.

DT: But you are never bloody alone.

SR: Sorry.

DT: No you're not.

DT: Nor am I btw.

HK: Package deal.

DT: I know.

DT: And I know I love you, Hailey.

DT: I also know you're going to find a man who treats you like a princess, Robson.

SR: What if I don't want someone to treat me like a princess?

SR: What if I want to be treated like a naughty, naughty...

DT: Okay, that's it.

DT: I'm getting some new friends.

I looked up at the Taylor, Laters and Jones building before me. Even my favourite chat, snapped and stored in my photos, the one I loved, the one where Dom first told me he loved me, wasn't enough to stop my legs from shaking. I had to go in there sometime.

Dom had offered to give me a lift and to walk me to the door. Possibly just because I had been surgically attached to him for the entire weekend. Turned out the best thing to scare away one anxiety was to momentarily displace it with another: like losing your job and being blacklisted in your industry before you'd even been able to get your foot in the door. I swallowed the thought, forcing my legs forward. I'd have to face Vivian alone.

As I traced my way across the open-plan floor, not a single soul looked up. Not the seemingly identical twins raising their voices at one another, looking like they were fighting with themselves in the mirror. Not the red-head reporter from *The Legal Chirp* hanging around the lobby like a bad smell. Why would they? As far as they were concerned it was just another day. For me it was a day where at best, I'd lose my job. At worst, I'd be brandished a liar and have to kiss goodbye to law completely. Approaching my desk, I tried to force all thought of kissing from my mind. Vivian's kisses hot and heavy on him; his kisses down her neck. My kisses goodbye to...

'Liam?'

He swivelled round in my desk chair to face me.

'Kiddo!' He grinned, holding my pencil case in his hands, my lucky yellow scrunchy wrapped around it. 'I'll never understand you young'uns.' He shook his head, ping-ponging my lucky scrunchy to make his point. I wasn't that much younger than him. And something told me I needed a bit of luck

today.

‘You’re in my seat.’ I wanted to sound defiant, but it came out like an observation. Had I already been fired? Was my stuff waiting in boxes, ready to be shipped away?

‘Nothing gets past you.’ He laughed, those stupid attractive lines lighting up his face. ‘You won’t need it for another thirty minutes or so.’

‘Oh, and why is that?’ I asked, surprised to find the banter was soothing my anxiety.

‘Vivian wants to see you in her office.’ And the anxiety was back again.

‘What? Why?’ I snapped, my head shooting towards her room, her blinds open, her dark-clothed figure moving within it, door now closed.

‘Chill out, Kidd.’ Liam looked startled. ‘You’ve not done anything wrong.’

‘No,’ I croaked again as my cheeks drained of any colour they had recently acquired. Should I tell him now? Take him in for back-up; an eyewitness to a career suicide. Or was it career murder?

‘Now?’ I hoped more than one-syllable words would come to mind once I was sitting across from her. Liam uncrossed his legs, smile confident, secure.

‘Remember to listen more than you speak,’ Liam said, donning full sponsor-mode. I nodded, turning my shaking body towards Vivian’s room. My sponsor shouldn’t worry. Something told me Vivian wasn’t going to let me speak at all.

‘Take a seat.’ Vivian nodded towards the sofa in the centre of the room and I obeyed. It was all I could do, all I’d have to do to, whatever she said next. I looked from Vivian in her high-neck shift dress up to the cityscape surrounding. I wanted to savour it, bottle it and drink it in this one last time.

Placing my hands in my lap, I tried to stop shaking as Vivian took a seat behind her desk. *That* desk. She crossed one slender leg over the other, her spiked heels as eye-catching as the top of her thigh-high boots now visible through the split in her shift. My mind shot to the split in her blinds.

‘How are you?’ Vivian asked, her smile kind. It sounded like a trick question.

‘Okay, thank you,’ I replied, deciding it was best to remain vague, to pretend like nothing out of the ordinary had happened. But we both knew me being in her office, sat on her sofa like this, was far from our everyday

routine.

‘Do you know why I’ve asked to meet with you today?’ she asked, brushing a loose strand of grey-blond hair behind her ear, the rest of it pinned tight in an elegant chignon.

‘I think so,’ I said, trying and failing to hold her gaze. Holding her gaze was what had got me into this mess in the first place. That and Daniel’s stupid late-night message. Whatever was on those documents had better be worth it.

‘I noticed you...’ Vivian began as I held my breath, my palms pressing together, my teeth beginning to chatter at the thought. *Keep it together, Kidd.* But this was my dream job, the one I’d put so much on the line for, and now it was all being taken away from me. I tried to swallow the lump in my throat, angry tears threatening to fill my eyes. ‘...were interested in the Ruslan-Laurent case?’

‘Sorry?’ What did this have to do with the Ruslan case? Unless... no, there was no way.

‘The Ruslan-Laurent case?’ she repeated. But it couldn’t have been Ruslan. The man I had seen her with had long, dark hair, looked almost half her age. ‘You have heard of it?’

‘Of course,’ I assured her hurriedly. ‘I’ve read every piece printed on it.’

‘I know.’ She smiled. But how? Liam must have told her. Unless maybe she simply knew that everyone was talking about it, that all eyes were on her? ‘I was wondering whether you would like to join me on a client meeting coming up?’

‘A client meeting?’

‘Yes, with Ruslan.’ Vivian looked amused by my confusion, like nothing out of the ordinary had ever happened between us. Maybe it hadn’t? I had stayed so late, been reading about the case all evening, I’d had three Old Fashioneds, Dom was always saying I had an over-active imagination. The more I looked at her in front of me, every inch the woman I’d read about, the more I began to doubt my own reality.

‘I have to be honest...’ she continued, as I waited for the words I was expecting to hear. ‘I would usually be looking for someone with a lot more experience but given the *exposure* you’ve been able to witness on the case already...’ Her blood-red mouth lingered on the word, my heart thumping double-time in my chest, ‘I thought I would make an exception.’ She leaned back, arms folded, as if all of my Christmases had come at once.

‘What do you think?’ she asked again, as I struggled to keep up. I’d seen her having sex on the very desk she was sitting behind now, with someone who wasn’t her husband. And she had seen me see her. How could she act so normal? ‘I’m going to be honest,’ she said again, so far being anything but: *this was it*. ‘Opportunities like this don’t come around for trainees every day but you seem to see things that lots of others in your position would overlook.’

I knew what she was doing. Buying my silence. But what else could I do? It would get me out of the office with a named partner and in front of a huge client sooner than any trainee could hope for. I looked at Vivian, knowing in my gut that hers was an offer I couldn’t possibly refuse. Slowly, I nodded, forcing myself to say the only answer I could.

‘Yes,’ I whispered before clearing my throat and repeating. ‘Yes, that sounds great.’

Chapter 16

ONE WEEK AFTER THE MOMENT

‘Just be careful, okay?’ I could hear Dom say, muffled through a mouth full of toothpaste.

‘I’m *always* careful,’ I called over the running water and tired-sounding shower radio. Early morning privacy was a thing of the past, our apartment too small for that luxury.

‘I know,’ he said as I watched his blurred figure walk closer towards the steamed-up glass. ‘Can I join you?’

I turned around to see the shower door ajar, not sure whether he was trying to be sexy or efficient. Either way, I had lather in my hair, soap in my eyes and somewhere important to be.

‘Another time?’ I tilted my head back to wash away the suds.

‘Later?’ Dom asked, his voice so casual I began to question whether he was bothered.

‘I’m meant to be meeting Sophie after work, but if you’re still up when I get back?’ I knew live-in relationships were nothing like the movies, but did real-life romance need to be so scheduled? Just sometimes I wanted to lose myself in the moment, just feel, not think.

‘She still freaking out about getting married?’

‘Huh?’ I turned off the water and opened the door. Dom was sitting on the edge of the bath but stood to his feet as I brushed past him. ‘Who said anything about getting married?’ My stomach lurched. I’d been so thrown off guard by Vivian’s attention, by real work coming my way, that I’d almost forgotten about the ring.

‘Well, that’s what she was talking about the other night when you were

stuck at work. Marriage, mortgage, marathon... and whatever else is on her sub-thirty list?' Dom continued, too distracted by my nakedness to see the worry on my face.

'Oh yeah...' I said. 'Kind of.' The last she'd told me was that she was still dating Pete and Fifty, biding her time until she could decide which one to choose. I could tell she was putting pressure on herself, but then, wasn't everyone our age doing that? 'She needs to stop messing them about and pick one.'

'Well... I guess.' Dom looked at me, eyes a little shifty. I'd never been snappy before – before this job, before this age, before that *ring*.

'She can't be in limbo land forever.' I was well aware of the irony as I reached for my toothbrush. 'We're not getting any younger,' I said.

'Speaking of which, we *really* need to start planning her party.'

'Yes, we do,' I mumbled through toothpaste. Why did 'we' sometimes feel like 'me'?

'Great.' Dom smiled, ignoring or not noticing any tension between us. 'Talking about break-ups...' Dom came to rest his hands on my shoulders, meeting my eyes in the mirror.

'Were we?' My heart picked up pace.

'Yeah, Sophie breaking up with Pete...'

'Or Fifty,' I added quickly. I kind of liked Pete, at least I *think* I did. Dom gently steered my towel-covered body around to face his.

'You better get going if you're going to make this meeting, just be...'

'*Careful*, I know.' I accepted Dom's minty kiss.

'What? Clearly, she can't be trusted.'

ME: *Hey lovey.*

ME: *How are you feeling?*

SOPHIE: *Good thanks. You?*

ME: *No, really. Like how are you really feeling – anxiety wise?*

SOPHIE: *Yeah, okay today. It's usually manageable in the daytime*

anyway.

SOPHIE: *It's just late at night when I'm falling off to sleep.*

SOPHIE: *I'll just get this panic like, I'm actually turning thirty and I've literally not done any of the things I thought I would have done by now.*

SOPHIE: *I sometimes feel like I'm getting this adulting thing all wrong.*

ME: *Yeah.*

ME: *I know the feeling.*

SOPHIE: *Do you?*

ME: *typing...*

Walking through the office, my feet threatened to slip out of my heels. I was nervous, but I wouldn't let her see that. Vivian had invited me to a client meeting with her, on the Ruslan case everyone was talking about. And, as far as anyone else around here knew, I deserved it. I *did* deserve it. Circumstances be damned, I'd worked really hard to get here.

'Daniel?'

He looked up from his phone, clutching his third coffee of the day.

'Hey Hailes.' His smile was forced, his acting not nearly as good as his legal game. He may be fresh out of his studies, but it was hard to deny he worked really hard as well.

'Everything okay?' I asked. I was used to trying to look out for everyone else's feelings anyway. Dom said it was what I did best. 'Is it Katy?'

'You do know that's not her name, don't you?' He forced a laugh. After hearing a bit about Daniel's lady friend and her sporadic behaviour over the

past month or so, she'd won herself a nickname: Katy Perry, always 'Hot N Cold'. 'But yes, this week she's gone cold...'

'Maybe she's just busy?' I suggested, eyes darting from Daniel to the stack of documents we needed to run through with Aleksander today piled high on my desk.

'You sure seem to be,' Daniel said, casting a look to where I was furiously trying to organise the paperwork.

'Yeah sorry, it's just...' I began, as Daniel turned his full attention to me. Would he care? Freak out about being overlooked the same way I had with him? But honesty was the best policy. 'Vivian's asked me to go to a client meeting with her today.'

'Oh.' Daniel's face fell as he looked in Vivian's direction. She looked smart as usual, poised and powerful – not to mention gorgeous – no wonder I caught Daniel's gaze drifting into her office as much as mine. Well, almost as much.

'Yeah, should be interesting.' I pushed on through any awkwardness. I'd had almost two months of being overlooked for him. Surely, I didn't need to downplay my own success just for Daniel to feel more secure. Slowly, he forced his eyes back to me.

'Nice one, Hailey.' He gave me a sad smile and my stomach churned with guilt; I was only getting the work because I'd gone back for his stupid documents, the ones he didn't want anyone to see. And more importantly, the one thing – or *person* – Vivian didn't want anyone to see her with either.

'Hailey.' Vivian smiled upon seeing me arrive at the door into her office. 'There's a car waiting for us.' She got to her feet, but instead of moving to the door, she picked up some documents from her desk and glided across the floor, coming to sit on her sofa.

'Oh, err...' I began, just wanting to say the right thing. 'Great, shall I...'

'Take a seat.' She gestured to the empty space beside her without looking up.

'Should I go and tell the car —'

'It can wait,' she said. Vivian Jones never had to rush. With shaking legs, I walked across the room and perched precariously on the sofa beside her. Was this the moment? The one where she was going to tell me to leave and never come back?

‘Unmarried mother, two children with long-term partner,’ Vivian began. *What?* My legs started to shake, as my mind scrambled to understand the words. ‘Victim of domestic violence, concerned for safety – physically and financially.’

I looked from Vivian to the document she was reading.

‘Her partner is not prepared to make provision for the children voluntarily,’ she continued as I stared on; why was she telling me this?

‘Where would you go next?’ *As far away from the partner as possible?* I stared on, mouth hanging open, entirely mute.

‘Sorry?’ I muttered, not sure why but pretty confident I should be.

‘What would you do next?’ Vivian fixed her eyes on me. ‘As a lawyer.’ Oh, that’s right, I was a lawyer. Well, a trainee one at least. Was she *testing* me?

‘The partner is,’ I began, searching my mind for solutions, a buzz running through my body. ‘Violent, right? A threat to the mother and children.’

Vivian gave a nod so slight I could have missed it.

‘In that case, I’d deal with that before anything else, advising the client to seek a court order protecting her from the abuse and excluding him from the home.’

‘Even though he owns it?’ Vivian raised an eyebrow and I started to second-guess myself.

‘Even though he owns it.’ I nodded, and I swear I saw Vivian smile. ‘Then I’d want to look seriously into the violent partner’s assets. *Can* he provide for them? Then I’d negotiate for him to make provisions for the children, at least until they get through secondary school. I’d advise they apply for an order for financial provision...’ I went on, mind racing, adrenaline surging. Oh God, she started scribbling something down on the papers. ‘Then I’d advise the client in relation to her application for child maintenance.’

Vivian’s face stretched into a smile, not a dimple or wrinkle about it.

‘Very good, Hailey.’ She nodded again. ‘Very good.’

I held her gaze, but as she stood to her feet, I exhaled in relief. She moved across the room, grabbing one of her many coats off her clothes rail, a rail that may as well be backstage at Prada’s latest show.

‘I always promised myself I’d commit to working on at least one pro bono case at a time, but it’s so hard to justify when we need to keep winning business for the firm.’ She sighed, reminding me of that interview I had read

in *Belle*. It must be hard to validate providing work for free when you could find clients willing to spend a fortune for it. 'But I made that promise with good intentions.'

As I followed Vivian down to the lobby, I felt like she was an *à la mode* Moses, as people parted before her. And they looked at me differently too, like they were really seeing me for the first time.

'Bye, Vivian.' That same pretty receptionist called, as I turned around to see her smiling behind the desk. 'Hailey.' She nodded at me, the same look of envy in her eyes as when she had handed me that bouquet of flowers. I looked at Vivian, striding with purpose across the lobby, every eye on her as I followed behind. I guessed this time, the receptionist had a reason to be envious; Vivian had chosen me.

Outside, the driver opened her door as I clambered into the other side.

'Miss Jones, you look beautiful today.' A thick London accent rang from the driver's seat as I looked to see a portly man grinning back at us, chuffed to be driving her.

'It's Mrs Jones,' Vivian corrected. 'But thank you, are you well?'

'Right as rain, sweet'art,' he chimed again, and Vivian couldn't help but grin.

'Glad to hear it. I hope you don't mind,' she said sweetly, the driver's cheeks blushing all the more; her charm undeniable. 'But we've got some work to do,' she added, not a hint of apology in her voice as the driver nodded and a black divider rose to isolate us in the back of the car. 'Sometimes' – she turned to look at me, her voice a whisper – 'you just need a bit of privacy.' We were completely alone, less and less oxygen occupying the space between us. This would be the moment she would talk about it, finally tell me to forget everything I'd seen and move far, far away.

'Hailey?' She began to speak, as my heart raced even faster.

'Yes?' I forced myself to hold her eye.

'Just sit there and listen today.' She smiled. 'It's sometimes good to simply observe.'

After what felt like an age, the car slowed to a halt. Through my blacked-out window I could just make out our driver leaning out of his own and towards an intercom. Moments later, we drove through thick iron gates. I knew we were in Surrey, but somehow it felt like LA. Light flooded into the car as the driver pulled open Vivian's door, offering a gloved hand. I fumbled my way out the other side. The sandstone building before us looked like old

money, the ivy climbing its sides doing nothing to hide its size. This must be the client's country club.

'This is Aleksander's house.' Vivian nodded, as if confirming what I already knew. It was his *house*? 'His UK base, at least,' she added, as if one wasn't enough.

Vivian climbed the stone stairs leading to a large oak double-door, which opened before she even needed to knock. I expected to see a housekeeper or PA, or *someone* open the door, but Aleksander himself greeted her there. His grey hair flopped in front of his eyes, but his beard was trimmed to perfection. Gone was the blue paisley suit from the first time I had seen him and, in its place, a red velvet robe that tumbled to the floor, stopping just short of his velour paisley slippers. If only he could be as committed to his partners as his prints.

'Ms Jones, come in, come in.' He opened his arms theatrically.

'It's *Mrs* Jones,' Vivian insisted again, the same way she had in the taxi, as she stepped forward into his house. 'But you know you can call me Vivian.' She grinned, as if remembering the reason why we were all so nice to Mr Ruslan. The two billion reasons why. Before Vivian could object, Aleksander was pulling her into an embrace, kissing her on one cheek, then the other, then one more for good luck as Vivian stiffened in his embrace, hands hanging by her sides to protect her Prada. God, I hoped he was wearing something under that robe. Finally released, Vivian turned to me with comically stunned eyes and I couldn't help but smile, stifling a laugh as a warmth ran through my body at the thought of sharing a private joke with her. Stepping forwards into the building, Aleksander looked me up and down and nodded, no kisses left for me.

'And this is...' Aleksander's eyes took in my high-waisted trousers as if he just *knew* they weren't on brand – *any brand* – before gazing at my face.

'I'm Hailey.' I thrust a hand in his direction. He studied my open palm, unsure what to do with it. The decadence of his entrance hall wasn't dissimilar to Vivian's town house, although on an infinitely bigger scale, Surrey laughing at London's expense. Aleksander steered us into some sort of drawing room at the front of the house with large bay windows. He took a seat on one side of a large sofa as Vivian perched herself on the edge of a gilded armchair. If I pulled out my phone to take a photo, I was pretty sure I could sell it to *OK!* for a couple of hundred thousand. Maybe that would tide us over when Vivian finally sent me packing? I looked at our client, my

anxieties diminishing against the size of his ego, as he spread his legs a little too far apart. I forced myself to look around the room, clocking the red velvet hanging from the sky-high windows, matching the client's robe. *Dammit. I looked again.*

'Aleksander,' Vivian began, signalling at me to sit. With all other chairs lost in the vast corners of the room, I perched on the other side of the sofa, sandwiched between them.

'You know you can call me Alek.'

'Alek,' she said, a new assertiveness in her voice. I swear I saw him cast a quick wink in her direction, but she didn't move an inch, trying to keep this meeting professional despite the fact that he was only wearing a robe. 'As you know, we are here to go over the facts of your case in more detail, make sure we're all on the same page.'

Alek nodded and for a brief moment he looked a little sad. But this was marriage number four or five. She was twenty-nine years younger than him. Surely, this was just about money?

'Our position is...' Vivian turned to me, as if just remembering I was there. 'Can you record this?' She reached into her handbag, flicking through three different phones before she could locate the right one: *one for her husband, one for her boyfriend, one for work?* 'Do you mind?' She turned to Alek, as my eyes darted between them, like I was watching the best-dressed game of tennis ever seen.

'Do I have a choice?' Alek's asked, his voice a little strained before he puffed out his shoulders and resumed his smile.

'Our position,' she said again, ignoring his question. 'is that the marital wealth should be split as of 2017, when your wife's affairs came to light and you decided to separate. We will argue that your wife's breach of the marital contract was a clear signal that she considered the marriage had ceased to be meaningful and your promises to one another had therefore come to an end.' She sure sounded convincing, even if Alek's face looked less than. I felt like he was holding onto something, holding something back.

'I don't know that...' Aleksander glanced to the phone in my hands before fixing his eyes back on Vivian. 'Are you sure this has to go to court? I've already been through...' He looked down at his hands, studying the heavy gold signet rings on all fingers but one.

'Aleksander,' Vivian said. 'Your wife had an affair, with your best friend.'

‘He wasn’t my *best* friend,’ Aleksander grumbled. Well, not any more.

‘I’ve told you.’ Vivian looked at him sincerely. ‘You shouldn’t have to settle. Remember what we agreed?’ Vivian’s eyes widened, as Aleksander puffed his chest out even more, Vivian egging him on. ‘We are going to argue that your ex-wife...’ I swear I saw his face flinch at the term. ‘... considered the marriage had ceased to be *meaningful* and your *promises* to one another had therefore come to an end...’

‘Way before he sold his company.’ My head swung around to follow the deep voice that had said it all the way back to its owner, standing by the entrance into the room. A tall, slender man moved effortlessly across the wooden floor, pushing a clearly expensive chair towards the three of us, its bronze feet screeching along the timber. Sitting down, legs wide apart, he leant his elbows upon his chino-covered knees.

‘Yes, Marcus,’ Vivian replied. ‘Before your father sold his company.’

I looked between the two gentlemen, seeing the resemblance in their handsome features. My hand loosened around the phone as I studied Marcus’s striking jawline and furrowed brow. He was older than me, mid-thirties I guessed, I imagined the result of one of Alek’s previous relationships given that Laurent wasn’t much older than me.

‘Good.’ Marcus nodded, holding Vivian’s eye for a little too long.

‘Now if you could just give us a moment with your father?’ Vivian asked, smiling sweetly, though I could read between the lines: she wanted this guy to piss off. He crossed his legs, showing off his shiny shoes while making it known he wasn’t going anywhere.

‘Anything you say to my father, you can certainly say to me.’ He folded his arms to emphasise his point.

‘Now, I know this is a sensitive situation.’ Vivian softened towards him though I could tell her kindness was wearing thin. ‘And we are going to try everything in our power to see that your stepmother doesn’t get your father’s money.’ *Doesn’t get your inheritance*, I had to stop myself muttering under my breath.

‘I’d prefer it if you didn’t call her that,’ Marcus snapped, child-like despite his age. Vivian couldn’t help but shake her head; it was hard enough dealing with clients, never mind their collateral baggage. ‘She was young enough to be my sister.’

I quickly remembered the only time I’d seen Ms Laurent, her willowy figure towering in her barely there outfit down in the lobby of Taylor, Laters

and Jones.

‘Sorry,’ Vivian apologised, sounding anything but. ‘Your father and your’ – she searched for another word before deciding she didn’t mind pissing him off – ‘*step-mother* were still *legally* married at the time your father’s company was sold.’

‘Yes, but not *morally*,’ Marcus quipped back. ‘And if we’re talking about legality, *she* breached that contract the second she hopped on someone else’s dick.’

I gripped the phone in my hands, careful not to hit ‘pause’ though everything in me wanted to hit pause on this whole scenario, just to give my mind time to catch up. I wasn’t sure what was worse: Marcus talking about his father’s sex life in front of him or Vivian sat here masquerading as the model for marriage, when she was anything but.

‘Yes, I understand all that,’ Vivian said, her irritation mounting all the more. ‘I know how your stepmother’s affairs hurt you.’ Her affairs were hurting nothing but his wallet. ‘And my team and I feel pretty confident we have a good chance at convincing a judge that the marriage was over when she and your father separated,’ she continued, eyes fixed on Marcus. ‘But you really must leave this with us now.’ Vivian turned her attention back to Alek. ‘So, let’s go back to New Year’s Day 2017, the day you found out about your wife’s affair. Tell me about the time leading up to it, how was your relationship?’

He ran a hand through his hair, crossing one leg over the other. Damn it, Hailey. *Stop looking* at his thighs.

I saw the sadness fall across his face before he replaced it with an expression of rage. ‘We were great,’ he said, through gritted teeth. ‘Never better.’

‘Was the age gap ever an issue?’ Vivian pressed on; it clearly wasn’t for her.

‘Not for me,’ Alek answered, eyes glaring in his son’s direction.

‘And you had no reason to suspect your wife was being unfaithful?’

‘Unless you think being gorgeous, ambitious and sociable are reasons to suspect that.’

‘I shouldn’t think so,’ Vivian said with angelic sincerity. ‘So, then what happened?’

‘Nothing,’ Alek said, as I let out an audible sigh. ‘We were due to go to the Cotswolds for a friend’s party that evening when she started feeling

unwell,' he explained, rubbing his lined forehead. 'She insisted I still go, that there was no point us both staying in bed all night.'

Marcus snorted, rolling his eyes.

'So, I went, saw in the New Year without her. I started to feel bad about her being home alone.'

Marcus snorted again.

'I drove through the night and snuck into one of our spare rooms, deciding I'd surprise her with breakfast in the morning, but when I came down the following day, the breakfast bar was...'

'Occupied.' Marcus filled in the obvious blank, as his father pursed his lips.

'I found her laying on top of someone else,' Alek said, studying his tea in his shaking hands, as Vivian tried to look concerned. She met Marcus's narrowed gaze before placing her gaze back on Alek's again, her expression brimming with empathy, every inch of her body seeming to scream, *What kind of person would do such a thing?*

Chapter 17

SOPHIE: *How did it go?*

ME: *It was intense.*

SOPHIE: *But exciting?*

ME: *So exciting.*

SOPHIE: *Is the older client a creep?*

ME: *Well, he's got more supercars than any man should have.*

ME: *And more paisley slippers.*

SOPHIE: *I'm not sure a man should have any paisley slippers.*

ME: *And his wives are getting younger.*

SOPHIE: *Yeah, wasn't this one almost our whole lives younger than him?*

ME: *Yeah.*

SOPHIE: *Ew.*

SOPHIE: *Think he really loved her?*

ME: *Not sure.*

ME: *He has this façade and then sometimes looks a little sad.*

ME: *Then it's like all Vivian's fight reminds him to be angry again.*

SOPHIE: *It's easier to win when you're angry.*

ME: *I guess.*

SOPHIE: *Well, I'm proud of you, H.*

SOPHIE: *Your hard work is paying off.*

SOPHIE: *Speaking of hard work...*

SOPHIE: *12k tonight?*

SOPHIE: *We need to up the ante.*

'You did well in there today,' Vivian said, cutting through the silence filling the car on the way back to the office. I absorbed the suburban views flashing by, houses once so idyllic now seeming to burst with secrets.

'I didn't say anything.' I looked at Vivian, who was flicking through her phone.

'Exactly.' Her response could barely be heard over the sound of traffic. 'What are you doing tonight?' She looked up from her phone. I was meant to be meeting Sophie for a run; the miles between me and the marathon were

closing in. Then I was supposed to be spending quality time with Dom, though given how tired we'd both be, I was already doubting the quality.

'Not a lot,' I said, not wanting to say the wrong thing. Vivian looked up at me for a moment with a look that suggested she hadn't done 'not a lot' since she was a child.

'A young woman like you?' she said, as I remembered Liam's comments from the bar. *A gorgeous woman, less than half her age.* 'No one begging to take you out?' Why would Vivian Jones want to know about my private life? Though I guessed I knew a little about hers. 'I have a table booked at The Bloomsbury for seven p.m. for some of the partners and associates at the firm. Given that you're already in the loop, I thought you may like to join?' A warm smile spread across her face; it surprised me that it could still make me feel wanted. She could charm anyone, drop you down or draw you in with nothing but a nod.

'Oh thanks,' I said, my mind racing: first a client meeting and now my first dinner? I couldn't help but feel excited until I remembered...

'I was meant to be...' I began before I paused. Wouldn't it look bad to say no? The table was booked for seven p.m.? I could stay for dinner and then leave after that, ask if Sophie minded a nine p.m. start instead. Thank God for Taylor, Laters and Jones' late-night runners making it feel okay to set off so late. Although, given some of the clocking-out times my colleagues had clocked up since I'd been there, a nine p.m. start didn't *feel* quite so late.

'Meant to be what?' Vivian asked, tapping her nails against the back of her phone, almost anxious for my response. She wanted me to say yes. I thought of Daniel back in the office, working late into the night. Sophie, warming up for our run. Dom, watching the clock at home, waiting for me. Vivian tapped her nails again, tracing them along the initials etched into her phone case: VJ. This was Vivian Jones, asking me to dine with her at the Bloomsbury Club.

'Nothing. I'll be there,' I said, before I could think better of it. *Just be careful.* 'Yeah, I'd love that actually.' I nodded, as if convincing myself it was a good idea.

'Yes?' Her eyebrows were still raised and I couldn't work out whether she wanted me to confirm my answer or whether she just expected me to answer better.

'Yes,' I repeated, 'I'd love to join you.'

ME: *Hey Soph, I'm so sorry but I'm going to have to push our run back a little.*

ME: *I've got this work dinner, but I'll still have time to run together after.*

ME: *Meet there at 9?*

SOPHIE: *Sure thing, I understand.*

SOPHIE: *Lots of dating updates to give you.*

SOPHIE: *Just let me know when you're on your way.*

I looked up at the entrance to The Bloomsbury Club, its canopy of green climbing plants interweaving with an abundance of fairy lights for as far as the eye could see. How the hell had October slipped into November? Less than two months until Sophie's thirtieth and we still hadn't started planning. And Dom's elusive *we* was still annoying the hell out of *me*.

I'd been told to make my own way here. I was pretty sure I could have booked a car from the office, but with Daniel sitting opposite me, I couldn't bring myself to make the call.

'Coming to drinks?' he had asked, reminding me about the social going on in *Later*s. The thought of catching up with Liam was more appealing than it should have been, but I'd already made my bed. A bed with Vivian Jones nestled within its sheets.

'I've got plans with Sophie,' I said. It wasn't technically a lie. But I had no idea why I felt the need to hide the fact I was going to this dinner. Maybe because after weeks of witnessing Vivian ignoring me, Daniel would begin to wonder why her attitude towards me had changed overnight. 'Are you seeing Katy?' I asked.

'She's not called Katy,' Daniel snapped back, before softening; clearly my day with Vivian was hitting a nerve. 'But no, she's busy tonight...

again.'

I looked from the phone clutched in my hand and back up to the entrance to The Bloomsbury before me. I was ten minutes early. Swiping away Sophie's latest message, I tried to breathe deeply, before heading into the main dining room. I was greeted at the entrance by a waiter who took my coat and my name, before steering me towards a round table set for eight. Only one person had arrived before me.

'Liam,' I said, as I took my seat.

He grinned from ear to ear, running a hand through his silver-speckled hair. He'd stashed his tie in his top pocket and had his top two buttons undone. My eyes lingered on the space where his tie should have been, remembering again how I had seen him leave Vivian's house with it hung loose around his neck. 'Kidd,' he said, reclining as if the restaurant was his home. 'Didn't know you were joining us.'

I should have figured he would be here; he was the main senior associate working on the case.

'Have fun at the client meeting?' he asked. My eyes lingered on his lips a little too long. What did he know about the client meeting? 'Told you I'd make a good sponsor.'

'No you didn't,' I said and shook my head as a waiter offered us a bottle each of red and white for the table. Liam nodded: why choose when you can have both? I forced thoughts of Vivian and her younger lover from my mind for the thousandth time since that moment. 'You didn't even know what one was.'

'What can I say?' He raised an eyebrow, smile shining. 'I'm a quick learner.'

'Clearly.' I rolled my eyes, casting my mind back to the first time we'd met, on my very first day. A lot had changed since then.

'Just you, V and the client?' Liam pulled my attention back to him. It was V now?

'And his son from a relationship before,' I said, taking a sip of wine, still unsure as to what should and shouldn't remain confidential or why my eyes were drawn to his buttons. I could just ask him about that night at Vivian's, ask him why he was there.

'Ah yeah, V hates that guy more than me.' Liam laughed, seemingly unfussed by the thought.

'Do you really think she hates you?' I asked. 'And if she does, why did I

see...' but before I could finish my question, Vivian arrived, surrounded by partners and associates on either side. Burberry trench coats and weighty vintage fur were handed over to the staff to reveal an array of suits, Vivian's own red Victoria Beckham clashing against a sea of navy, greys and blacks. Liam rose to his feet to kiss her on the cheek, any competition between them kept under wraps.

A smattering of lawyers, some I recognised from the office, offered me hands to shake, not one of them knowing who I was or why I was there. Three waiters rallied round to pour the wine, as we all took to our seats. Wasn't Vivian going to introduce me? I looked across at her, head bowed to type into her phone under the table as Liam leaned in closer to top my wine glass up to the brim.

'That's the problem with these nice places,' he said with a grin. 'Glasses always half empty.'

'It's not going to go to before a judge,' Liam said, shaking his head, unable to stop his laughter, which rippled around the table.

'I agree with Liam, it shouldn't need to,' another senior partner chimed in.

'But we *want* it to go to court,' Vivian argued, eyes flitting to the other partners.

'And risk a loss?' Liam scoffed, the male partners sending their own scoffs around the table in solidarity. Vivian didn't flinch. The way she held her own in this world was beyond me; she was grace personified – except when she wasn't.

'To risk a win,' Vivian corrected, to no one in particular.

'On what grounds?' another partner challenged, clearly siding with Liam. It seemed like all of them did. The tension brimmed between him and Vivian, spilling across the table, overflowing like the wine. I sneaked a look at my phone, it was gone eight p.m. I'd have to leave now to have a chance of meeting Sophie on the starting line even though the thought of having to run after dinner was making me feel sick.

'The wife didn't contribute anything to the company,' Vivian stated as fact.

'Not directly, maybe,' Liam pushed back. 'But they'll argue she contributed indirectly by looking after the children, keeping the home...'

‘It’s not the fifties any more, Liam,’ Vivian objected. Fifty. *Shit! Fifty.* Sophie wanted to chat about their latest date. That and her latest date with Pete. Didn’t she know getting serious with two men wasn’t the same as getting serious with one?

‘She was a professional model,’ Vivian asserted.

‘Still is,’ said one of the older male partners, raising his eyebrows, a smirk across his face.

‘Argue it every way you want,’ Liam said. Vivian’s face screamed: *I will.* ‘But you know as well as I do that divorce papers have the final say, they’re a binding contract...’

‘And marriage isn’t?’ Vivian returned; hard, cold, immovable.

‘Well yes, but...’ Liam, for once, looked lost for words.

‘They signed a contract to forsake all others...’ Vivian began. I glanced at my phone again, Sophie’s messages demanding my attention, feeling time ticking away.

‘She cheated on him, Liam. He found her, saw his wife and his friend making a mockery of their marriage. I for one can’t imagine that pain.’ She placed a hand to her heart to emphasise her point.

I took another sip of my wine, stuck in the middle of the argument. I shouldn’t be here; I should be with Sophie, running alongside her.

‘If this goes to court,’ Vivian continued, ‘*when* this goes to court, we are going to argue that marriage is sacred.’

I looked down at my wine, unable to meet her eye. ‘A life-long bond of monogamous matrimony, not to be entered into lightly.’ She spun her wedding band around her ring finger.

I knew getting married wasn’t for everyone, that so much had changed in just one generation, but I had always thought it was for me, that I would have been married by now. But Dom and I weren’t there yet. The next thought made the butterflies flutter faster: *But Dom is there. It’s you, not him.* They say you know when you know. But how do you know when you know that you *know*? I forced my attention back to Vivian and Liam, the thought of ending someone’s marriage oddly more comfortable than beginning to contemplate my own.

‘We are going to argue that affairs are not only a breach of trust, but a breach of the very vows, the very *contract* that holds two people together,’ Vivian continued. ‘That an affair is a clear symbol that a marriage is over, meaning the couple’s marriage ended soon after New Year’s Day 2017, when

the two affirmed this intention by separating. A year before our client sold his business for 1.567 billion pounds.’ Vivian smiled from ear to ear. ‘A 1.567 billion pounds I for one have no intention of sharing.’

The partners around the table fell silent. This was the fight I had read so much about, finally here, tantalisingly close. Vivian wanted to win for her client. For herself, for the firm. *She had no intention of sharing.* And from what I’d seen, if Jason Jones knew the other truths about his wife, I was pretty sure he would say the same.

‘What do you think Kidd?’ Liam asked, loud enough for the table to hear. I knew he was trying to help me, to give me a chance to speak up. But right now, I couldn’t help but think he was throwing me under the bus. I’d already told him I thought settlements were usually best for the clients, to avoid the trauma of having the details of their marriage aired out in court. But Vivian *wanted* this to go to court. Her eyes burnt into me from across the table, ready to see where my loyalties lay.

‘Well, I guess in *White v White*, Lord Nicholls reiterated that the Matrimonial Causes Act gave the courts considerable judicial discretion in making financial decisions in achieving a fair outcome for both parties...’

‘And said that in doing so the courts should show no bias in favour of the money-earner,’ Liam argued back, eyes alive with fight as his words pushed up against mine.

‘But in *this* case, the wife was earning money too, she wasn’t a homemaker, she was a successful model, and the over-arching message of Nicholls’ judgement was that the objective of the law must be to achieve a *fair* outcome... and in this case, considering Ms Laurent’s conduct and the timing of the sale of the business, well... it could be argued that to award her half of the business sale was grossly *unfair* in the eyes of the law.’ My eyes darted to Vivian who was smiling and nodding in my direction, glad to finally have some back-up.

‘You could argue that...’ Liam smirked, ready for his next blow.

‘Anyone up for an aperitif?’ Vivian’s headed off the rest of Liam’s sentence. She knew when to stop, to leave with her win; *our win*.

‘An aperitif?’ I looked at Liam, with confusion. He was still grinning, pent up from our argument. We’d already eaten a three-course meal and polished off seven bottles of wine. I looked down at my phone to see three missed calls from Sophie. It was already half past nine. Crap. I went to reply before I felt Liam move closer towards me.

‘Yeah, to stimulate the appetite for our second stint of work.’ Liam pushed his hair back, the way he so often did. ‘We’ve got a big deal to close tonight, but we’ve got an hour.’ Liam broke off to look down at his watch, a chunky Omega that made my own look inferior in comparison. It had been a birthday present from Dom. Birthday. I *needed* to start planning Sophie’s party soon.

‘You’re going back to the office *tonight*?’ I asked.

‘I’m trying to make partner, Kidd.’ Liam leant his body closer. ‘If Vivian’s in the office, I’m in the office.’ He glanced in her direction. So the game was far from over. ‘But first, a drink. Coming for a quickie?’

‘I can’t, I’ve got to go and—’

‘Can’t or won’t?’ He raised his eyebrows, dimples etching deeper.

‘Can’t,’ I repeated, feeling my resolve slipping away.

Sophie would understand. This was work, networking. I looked across to Vivian, her partners now surrounding her, caught on her every word once more. If Liam was going to go head to head with her, it would take more than an *aperitif*.

‘I kind of need the back-up, someone to big me up.’ Liam smiled. ‘She really seems to like you.’ He gave me a quizzical look, knitting his messy brows together.

‘Tonight, at least.’ I gave a weak smile. ‘Probably because I just backed her up.’

‘No, it’s more than that.’ Liam looked at me more intensely, searching for more.

‘No, it’s not,’ I argued weakly. Liam couldn’t know about that night. Could he?

‘I don’t know, something’s changed,’ Liam mused. ‘Guess it only takes a moment to fall for you, Kiddo.’

‘I’m not sure about that,’ I whispered.

‘She’s definitely taken to you.’ He looked more serious somehow. ‘Why else would you be here?’

It was a good question, one with a very good answer, a good answer that would give him all the leverage he needed to get Vivian onside or sideline her completely. But I couldn’t. She was Vivian Jones. Her word would always trump mine and for now, her opinion still seemed to trump his.

‘Coming, Hailey?’ She materialised beside us as Liam stiffened.

‘I...’ I began, knowing it was time to leave, to leave them to it, to not

leave Sophie waiting any longer. Vivian accepted her coat from one of the waiting staff, who held it open for her. She smiled again, her eyes on me.

‘I’d err... love to.’

Chapter 18

6 April 2010

SR: It's official, I'm homeless.

HK: You're what?

SR: Homeless.

SR: Mum wants to move to Ireland.

HK: What's in Ireland?

SR: Not my dad.

HK: Fair.

SR: New man.

HK: Yeh?

SR: Yeh. Pretty sure Mum's not even told him about me.

SR: Hard to pretend you're thirty when you have a twenty-year-old daughter.

SR: I just can't believe when I go home from uni I will be going to sodding Ireland.

SR: Happy birthday to me, right?

SR: And Christmas.

DT: Thought we didn't talk about Christmas before your birthday?

SR: I'm serious.

DT: So am I.

SR: What's the point in long breaks if you have to spend them in the middle of nowhere with a mum who doesn't even care if you're around?

HK: You do know you don't have to, right?

SR: What?

HK: Move to Ireland.

HK: You could just come home instead.

SR: I don't have a home.

DT: Bit dramatic Robson.

DT: But 'course you do.

HK: Your home is here with us.

Looking down at my trainers, I wanted to cry. London had never looked greyer. And that was saying something. My hangover from the night before showed no signs of waning. On my right the Globe theatre welcomed tourists in, The Swan alight with fine diners and dinner dates, laughing and joking from within. To my left, Sophie fixed her eyes forward, trying and failing not to be cold with me.

‘Come on Hailey.’ She picked up the pace a little, as I felt bile rising in my mouth.

‘I can’t,’ I objected through my panting.

‘Can’t or won’t?’ She looked over her slender shoulder, echoing Liam’s words from the night before. A night that had become increasingly blurry as the hours passed by.

‘Can’t.’ I slowed to a standstill, as Sophie surrendered beside me. ‘Sorry Sophie.’ I was sorry for being tired and also tired of feeling sorry.

‘What’s up?’ Her tone softened. I could just tell her, tell her all about the notorious Vivian Jones and how the family values she fought for didn’t seem to apply to her.

‘Nothing,’ I said. Sophie’s smile vanished as my vulnerability closed up.

‘You sure?’ Sophie asked again. No, I wasn’t sure. I wasn’t sure about anything. Apart from the fact that Sophie Robson had zero tolerance for infidelity. And who could blame her after what her dad did to her mum, after what her mum did to her? Now wasn’t the time to tell her, not when she had so much to navigate herself. She’d think that Vivian had ‘bought’ me or something and start to worry, when it had always been my job to worry about her.

‘How’s Fifty?’ I asked her, trying to change the subject.

‘Still interested,’ she said, looking out across the Thames, away from me, ending all talk about him before it had really begun. She had been so cagey about him and still didn’t want me to meet him. And I was pretty sure I knew why: *she actually liked this one.*

‘And Pete?’ I asked, trying to steer the conversation away from her unnamed romance, treating it like a butterfly, like one strong gush would

scare him off.

‘And Jesse,’ she added, matter-of-factly. *Who the hell was Jesse?* ‘New guy,’ Sophie continued, taking my confusion as a hint. ‘Met him a couple of days ago. Seems nice; they’re all pretty cool.’ She shrugged. So ‘Jesse’ had been given a name? She *definitely* liked Fifty.

‘Do they know you’re dating other people?’ I asked, trying not to sound so startled. It was just that Sophie was never usually like this. But then again, I was never normally hungover or so out of touch with what was going on in my friends’ lives.

‘Define *know*?’ She grinned. ‘It’s just a bit of fun.’

‘What happened to settling down before you were thirty?’ I probed, not wanting to rock the boat but sure there was more going on below the surface. She liked this Fifty guy but didn’t want to let her guard down.

‘Not for me,’ she said and shrugged again. But she had said she was ready; she had said this was what she wanted. Surely, she was just scared. *A little like you.* My mind berated me, silently.

‘Are you sure?’ I said, trying to choose my words carefully. ‘Are you sure you don’t just like Fifty and are scared that if you admit it’s something more that you’ll risk getting hurt? What is his real name anyway?’

‘Look, we can’t all be relationship experts like you,’ Sophie snapped.

‘I never said I was an expert,’ I said, feeling stung. If anything, I was an amateur.

‘We don’t all find The One at school and sail plainly into our happily ever after,’ she said, eyes still fixed forwards. I tried to keep up as she turned the corner, my heart hammering, tears welling up in my eyes. How on earth did she think my life was so perfect? I wanted to tell her everything, about Vivian, about Liam, about my doubts. But I wanted to hold it together for her. I couldn’t do both at the same time, couldn’t be both things.

‘I know,’ I said, pushing my raging legs to close the gap between us. ‘But I promise, Sophie, you are so worthy of more. And this dating multiple people at the same time, messing them around, it’s just not you...’ I went on, pretty sure I was just talking to myself, reminding myself that even entertaining the idea of someone other than Dom was only going to end in tears. ‘If you like Fifty, you should just go for it. I know your record with relationships isn’t great, but look at Dom and me.’ I knew what she needed to feel hopeful, more certain. Even if I didn’t. ‘It can work out; you just have to take a risk.’

‘You don’t understand,’ Sophie said weakly, shaking her head.

‘Maybe not,’ I said. ‘But I’m trying.’ This was what Sophie did, pushed everyone away when things got too much.

‘You’re always at work,’ she said, almost under her breath as I struggled to catch mine.

‘I know, but that’s not going to be forever,’ I assured her, torn between wanting to comfort Sophie and wanting her to comfort me. Surely, she should understand my training contract, this career change, was important to me?

Turning the corner under the bridge, I could see a figure with salt and pepper hair heading towards us. I’d only seen him in a suit, but I could have sworn he looked exactly like Liam. Turning the other way, I began to run, my legs now shocked into action.

‘What are you doing?’ Sophie called behind me, running to catch up.

‘Got a second wind, I guess,’ I lied, turning to look behind me. It was unmistakably him, with a couple of female runners at his side. I wondered if one was his wife. Until now she had just been an idea to me, a little like Fifty; faceless, nameless. I turned my head back from Liam to look at the pavement before me, continuing to run. But it was impossible to keep going. My heart beat in my chest, my cheeks burnt a vibrant red, as my legs grew weightier and weightier until they slowed to a standstill.

‘Quit slacking, Kidd,’ Liam called out as he shot past. ‘Hungover?’

I willed the ground to swallow me whole, as Sophie turned to me and asked, ‘Hungover? I thought you said you’d been busy at work?’

I kicked the dent in the door and walked into the apartment to be met by the smell of fajitas. In our tiny kitchen, I could see Dom bent over the hobs, moving his hips ever so slightly to the rhythm of whatever music was blasting from his headphones into his ears. As I came in, he took one headphone out, then the other and put his hands around my waist.

‘How was running? How was Soph?’ he asked, glad to have some company. I knew he would have got home at least three hours before me.

‘She’s okay,’ I lied, forcing all thoughts of our awkward conversation and my brief encounter with Liam out of my mind. Dom probably knew how Sophie was, anyway; they seemed to see more of each other than me nowadays. He’d no doubt know she was anxious about everything, trying to fill her time with activity, keep everyone at arm’s length, just like the first

time her anxiety had started all those years ago. When she'd needed me and Dom more than ever. When she'd relied on us to be her family, to be the three of us. Man, I missed just being us. 'I miss us,' I whispered under my breath, not meaning to say the words out loud.

'I miss us too.' Dom held me a little tighter. 'But you're home now,' he said. No, I meant *us*. Before I started feeling like we were going in different directions. 'And so is date night, and you have to relax because I'm making fa-ji-tas!' He accentuated the words, clicking his fingers together to become a drunk Ross Geller in *Friends* – 'The One Where Ross is Fine'. Now I was hungover and pretending to be the same. *I'm fine*. Better than fine. I had finally got my 'in' at the firm. And now I was in for the night with Dom. 'No work chat tonight.'

'Promise.' I nodded, rising on my tiptoes to kiss him on the lips.

'Now you take this.' Dom thrust a glass of white in my hand as I tried to stop my stomach from churning. Dom had no idea I was hungover either. Apparently, hangovers did not equate to work. Maybe not in teaching but being a lawyer was different. 'Go *relax*,' Dom said, 'if you can remember how.'

Reclining on the sofa, I forced down my first sip of wine and looked around the room. It looked as messy and unmade as ever, even more so since I'd been around less; not that it was my responsibility to keep it all together. *We're not in the fifties any more*. I recalled Vivian's words from the night before, before things got a little hazy.

'Not long now, Hayby.' Dom's voice rang over the sound of his cooking.

'Sounds good.'

'You better not be working,' he shouted back.

'I'm not.' I smiled, taking another sip of my wine, savouring the taste. After weeks of being trainee number two, Vivian was finally picking me first. Of course, Liam thought he was the reason why. My phone vibrated and I looked down to see his name dancing across my screen, as if I had the power to conjure him into the room. I knew anything he emailed me about could wait until tomorrow. I should ignore it, be present, be here for Dom, *with Dom*. But my hands had other ideas and I swiped to open the message.

LIAM: *Great to see you earlier, Kidd. Sponsorship session tomorrow?*

As I glanced at the rest of my inbox, another email caught my eye.

VIVIAN: Hailey, thank you for your work today. I wondered whether you wanted to attend an event with me tomorrow. Not strictly work but it would be good for us to be seen there. I'll need to add your name and other details to the guest list, so please let me know and fill out the form attached by nine p.m. at the latest.

'What are you doing?' Dom looked up from smashing avocados, speaking loudly over the sound of the microwave warming our wraps as I entered our tiny kitchen once again before unfolding my laptop on the small wooden table we had squeezed in as a makeshift desk. As soon as I opened the screen, Dom pushed it back down. 'I thought we said no work?'

'I just need to send one tiny email,' I said, eyes pleading. 'It's important.'

'So is date night,' Dom replied, a little too quickly.

'I know, but...'

'At least have dinner first,' he said, no question about it.

'Dom, it's just one tiny email.' I couldn't stop the panic in my voice.

'It'll wait,' Dom said again, not open to negotiation. But this was the twenty-first century for goodness' sake, he'd have to be open to negotiation. *It's not the fifties any more...*

'Honestly, just one. And then I'm all yours,' I said.

'I thought you were already,' Dom muttered under his breath. I looked from the screen to him, trying not to look guilty, still unsure as to why I felt it.

'You know what I mean,' I snapped. 'This is work; it's time sensitive.' I looked at Dom, his shoulders sagging as he turned to face me again, opening his mouth to say something and then closing it, as if thinking better of it.

'Fine, do what you like. Join me when you're ready to slow down.' He walked past me and into the living room. I could hear the television turn on as I typed my first line. Maybe it was the endorphins, or the case, or Vivian's latest invitation, but I finally felt a spark of momentum surging through my veins; the last thing in the world I wanted to do right now was slow down.

Chapter 19

‘How you doing today?’ I asked Daniel, who was buried under a pile of paperwork. I watched as he swept his highlighter across the document before turning the page over and doing the same to the next. It was the busy work Vivian had asked me to do a couple of weeks ago, before my days actually became busy with work.

‘Yeah, I’m alright,’ Daniel said and sighed, looking up to offer me a smile. It wasn’t my fault he had been landed with it. ‘She got you working on anything good?’ He nodded down to the documents scattered across my own desk as I began to gather them up. Vivian had given me a huge piece of research: to look into on the wife’s backstory, how she’d spent the last couple of years, how she had spent her money – *his* money – over the last decade. I felt like I was reading *Tatler* on acid. High net-worth, high society, high stakes.

‘Just some research on the Ruslan-Laurent case.’ I smiled as his face fell.

‘Sweet,’ he said, eyes darting to Vivian. ‘Anything I can help you with?’

‘No sorry.’ I bit back my guilt. ‘It’s confidential.’

‘Oh okay, it’s just—’

‘Hailey?’ Vivian materialised in the doorway before Daniel could finish his sentence. ‘Can you come in here please?’ I looked at Daniel, who was now trying to look at anything but her.

‘Oh good, Liam.’ She looked behind me as I gathered the documents. I swear I could hear sarcasm in her voice. ‘Right on time.’

‘I’m always right,’ he said as he walked in and gave me a wink.

‘No,’ Vivian said, though she was already walking into her office. ‘No,

you're not.'

'Are you sure Aleksander isn't hiding anything himself?' Liam said, looking between myself and Vivian, insinuating not for the first time that maybe the wife wasn't the only one at fault.

'He's not hiding anything,' Vivian reiterated as if a man like Aleksander wouldn't even know how.

'I need to know everything,' Liam said, boldly.

'I thought you already did.' Vivian rolled her eyes. 'You sure act like it sometimes.'

'It's just it usually takes two to tango? What do you think, Hailey?' Liam turned to me, as Vivian just looked on.

'I think... I agree with Vivian,' I said. Liam's expression was hard to read. 'I mean, he's had so many marriages, I don't know why he'd bother with the secrecy of an affair.'

'The excitement?' Liam suggested.

'Maybe affairs seem exciting to you,' Vivian spat, hand on her hips. 'Because they keep us in business, but these are real people Liam, real marriages.'

'Yes, and that's exactly why this shouldn't go to court,' Liam snapped back. 'It will put them both under undue strain, plus it's expensive.' Not that they'd know that, with the millions they had between them.

'Aleksander wants to take this to court,' Vivian said. 'He wants to win.'

'Is that what he said?' Liam asked, the tension burning between them.

'Yes,' I said, as Vivian gave me her warmest smile. 'That's what he said.'

Liam looked at Vivian, eyebrows raised, like the student was becoming the master.

'Great, well, that's settled then,' Vivian said, pushing her grey-blond hair behind her ears. 'We'll pick this up tomorrow. I need to get ready for tonight.'

'Great work in there, Kiddo.' Liam lingered by my desk as Vivian closed the blinds to get ready, thankfully this time alone. 'I think my work here is done,' he said. Little did he know it had very little to do with him.

'Yeah, I guess,' I replied, a bit disappointed by the thought of the handful of sponsorship sessions we'd shared over the past couple of weeks coming to an end. But then, surely it was for the best? For better or for worse, I had got

my chance to impress Vivian Jones and I sure as hell wasn't going to get distracted now.

'Well, it doesn't look like you need my help any more.' Liam grinned again, although he looked a little disappointed too. But I couldn't think about that right now. I needed to prepare myself for tonight. Vivian was getting ready. Did *I* need to get ready?

'I have nothing to wear,' I said suddenly.

'Huh?' Liam asked, a hint of his amusement on his face as he looked me up and down.

'Vivian is taking me to this fashion thing tonight and I look like *this*,' I whispered. Daniel looked up from his phone to momentarily stare across at me.

'This' – Liam held a hand up to me – 'is perfect. Confidence, Kidd.'

'Confidence,' I echoed back, trying not to blush.

'Maybe you still need me after all,' he grinned before leaving the room.

'Get a *room*.' Daniel's voice bridged the gap between us as soon as Liam was out of earshot. I looked across at him, still swiping monotonously with his highlighter.

'He's married,' I hissed back, cautious that Vivian could appear at any moment.

'Not like that stops some around here,' he muttered, eyes darting to Vivian's office.

'Who?' I couldn't help but snap.

'Our clients? Talia Laurent?' Daniel didn't know; he *couldn't* know. But then, he'd spent so many late nights here. And then there were those papers.

'Oh,' I said.

'Who did you think I meant?'

I ignored his question. 'What were those papers I picked up for you that night?'

'Why?' His eyes narrowed.

'Just wondering.' I shrugged.

'Confidential? Just remember what I said about Liam you know, I'm here —'

'And I'm here for you too.' I didn't mean to cut him off. But this chat was making me feel awkward. There was nothing going on between Liam and me. And I sure as hell didn't want Vivian overhearing anything to make her think there was. 'Any word from Katy P?'

‘Yes, actually.’ He grinned a little. ‘But she’s busy tonight.’

‘Shame.’ I smiled, relieved to see a glimpse of my friend again, not the rival I had once seen him as. ‘Can I see a photo of her?’

‘Ready?’ Vivian appeared from inside her office, a vision in a floor-length black skirt, split at the side to reveal silver stilettos. Her embroidered jacket, cinched at the waist, was unmistakably Chanel. ‘Daniel, you don’t have any plans tonight, do you?’

‘No.’ He looked a little sheepish, unsure as to what she might say next.

‘There’s something I need picking up from the house.’ A glimpse of apology darted across her face. It had never been there when she’d asked me to run those kinds of errands. ‘Would you mind?’

‘Sure,’ he said, smiling, unable to resist her. It wasn’t like he had a choice.

‘You still have a set of keys?’ For a moment, she looked a little sheepish too, like even she knew Daniel deserved better than her dirty work. Why would Daniel have a set of keys? Maybe he ran errands for her more than I thought?

‘Kept them safe,’ he said as she looked to me, hoping I’d keep her secrets the same.

‘Vivian Jones and err...’ The well-dressed woman on the door looked me up and down.

‘Hailey Kidd,’ I said, pulling my coat tighter around me as she looked down her list.

‘She’s with me,’ Vivian said and walked past the woman, too important to wait for permission. I followed her into the department store, decorated from floor to ceiling in red flowers and gold lights. Christmas was not for another month and yet somehow had come early for the VIPs. No sooner had we walked across the main entrance than a flute of champagne was being placed in my hands. I looked at the bubbles floating upwards as my stomach did the same. *Why was I here?* The thought thrilled and frightened me in equal measures.

‘One of our clients is about to take the reins here at Harrods,’ Vivian said and took a sip of her champagne. ‘Just showing your face sometimes can really help things.’

I watched as Vivian worked the room, stopping to chat with one person

and then another. I guessed being visible in these kinds of places didn't hurt. The next time one of these people needed a divorce, they'd always remember the nice woman they spoke to at an event that one time. I followed her like a shadow across the floor. The department store was full of fresh stock, but I'd never seen the staff to shopper ratio swing so heavily in our favour. Time seemed to slow down as an attractive young man navigated us through the new collections that had just arrived for the press event that week.

'I can't believe Christmas is almost here,' Vivian said, taking in the décor around us.

'Still a good month and a half away,' I replied, trying not to think about Sophie.

'Not a Christmas fan?' she asked.

'I am a *huge* Christmas fan.' At least I used to be. 'Just a lot to do before then.'

'You're telling me.' Vivian laughed, taking another gulp of champagne. One hour passed, then two, then three, the top-ups kept coming as the time slipped by.

'You should try it on.' Vivian nodded to the floor length sage-green dress my hand had reached towards. 'You'd look good in Valentino.' She'd worn him in that *Vogue* interview I read years ago.

'I'd have nowhere to wear it,' I said, shaking my head, not sure whether that was true any more. First, I was in The Bloomsbury Club, now I was here. I ran my hands across it, savouring the feel of the silk, before I saw the label. 'Four *thousand* pounds,' I breathed. 'Dom would kill me.'

'Boyfriend?' Vivian smiled.

'Yes.' I nodded, embarrassed.

'And he wouldn't want to see you in this?'

'I'm pretty sure he'd prefer me in jeans and a T-shirt.' I laughed.

'You earn more than him?' she asked. That seemed a bit personal.

'I do now,' I said slowly.

'Is that an issue?'

'Why would it be an issue?' I asked, heart racing again.

'Well, some men feel intimidated by an ambitious woman,' Vivian mused, running the fabric of the dress through her fingers. 'They prefer someone a little more unsure of themselves, who they can help figure it all out.' I couldn't help but think of Sophie.

'Dom's not like that,' I objected, not sure why I felt the need to defend

him.

‘He gives you the freedom to do what you want?’ Vivian asked.

I thought about our argument last night. Of Dom trying to force me to slow down when I’d wanted to go fast. Still, I nodded.

‘Well in that case,’ Vivian said, picking up the dress and handing it to a passing store attendant. ‘Dom doesn’t need to find out.’

Chapter 20

TWO WEEKS AFTER THE MOMENT

The crowds parted as a waitress moved along the poolside, carrying a plate of tequila shots perched in one hand, a magnum of champagne sparkling in the other. The partners and senior staff sitting around the table cheered as she approached, their outfits like their demeanour coming undone. Patio heaters blazed on each side, the lights around the terrace twinkling across the water that sent steam into the cold November night.

‘Here she comes,’ one partner hollered as the waitress approached; he was already half-cut. Ties lay surrendered on tables amidst empty glasses, blazers slung across the back of chairs, some dropping to the floor as thick outdoor blankets wrapped around cold shoulders instead.

‘Thanks darling,’ another male partner slurred at her sleazily. She smiled awkwardly and I looked at Vivian, narrowing her eyes in disdain before rolling them in my direction. It was just a fortnight since I had seen Vivian on top of that desk and now it felt like she had finally seen me, seen what I was capable of at the firm.

‘Where’s the salt and lemon?’ I whispered towards Liam even though I needn’t have, he was already too close for anyone else to hear.

‘This is Don Julio,’ he replied, as if I should know. ‘It’s to be sipped, not shot.’ Aleksander’s case might still be on the table, but another had come to a big, jubilant close and now it was time to celebrate – turned out Taylor, Laters and Jones were good at that.

Hands reached into the centre of the table, taking glasses and champagne flutes. Some colleagues dispersed across Shoreditch House’s rooftop terrace, their bodies blurring into the distance as it dawned on me that I was far too

drunk for a school night.

‘Tell me something I don’t know,’ Liam said, taking a sip of his drink.

‘I thought you knew everything?’ I joked, remembering Vivian’s words from before.

‘Not about you I don’t,’ he said. There was a reason for that; we were colleagues.

‘Well, what do you want to know?’ I asked, not meaning to sound so flirtatious.

‘Well, what took you so long to get into law?’ Liam leaned into me.

‘I guess it took me a while to find my feet.’

‘And where were your feet before?’ he asked, genuinely interested.

‘I was a primary school teacher,’ I admitted, not that there was anything wrong with that. It was perfect for Sophie and Dom, so I had just assumed it was perfect for me, too. I took another sip, swallowing the thought. They were both at parents’ evening tonight. And I was at Shoreditch House.

‘Like your boyfriend?’ Liam asked, a silly smirk dancing across his face.

‘Yes, like my boyfriend,’ I said, confused. ‘How do you know that?’

‘Buy Daniel a drink and he’ll tell you anything.’ He laughed, signalling for a waitress to get us some more champagne. Daniel had told Liam I had a boyfriend? No doubt trying to warn him off. Turned out Daniel didn’t know everything either.

‘We worked together for a while,’ I said. ‘But then I started getting itchy feet, looking for something...’

‘More?’ Liam interrupted, reaching for another shot from the middle of the table.

‘Just different,’ I corrected, looking across the table to Vivian.

‘What prompted the change?’

‘It was kind of, well...Vivian,’ I admitted, remembering the first interview with her I had read; the woman who had it all, rising to the top with her feet on the ground.

‘Don’t tell her that.’ Liam looked serious. ‘Her head’s big enough already.’

‘Do you really think that?’ I asked, eyes darting towards her.

‘Yes.’ He held firm, before softening. ‘But with good reason. I actually think she’s pretty brilliant. It’s just this partnership thing; she’s determined not to give me a look-in.’ For a moment his crinkled forehead revealed him for the forty-something man he was. Turned out even gorgeous, successful

senior associates could feel overlooked. I didn't know whether this should make me feel depressed or reassured, but right now another thought occupied my mind.

'Do you ever go around to her house to work?' I lowered my voice to ask the question I'd been holding onto for far too long.

'To Vivian's?' Liam pushed a hand through his silvering hair. 'Not really.'

'I think I saw you leaving hers late one night?' I asked, searching his face for answers.

'When?' Liam asked in return, eyebrows raised in confusion.

'About four weeks ago?' I said, the specific date and time wedged in my memory.

'I haven't been to Vivian's house in months,' Liam shrugged. 'Not since we went around to have dinner with her and Jason. That's happened a lot less since I've been going for partner.' He smiled in my direction. 'Must be another me out there. Can you imagine?'

'One of you is enough.' I rolled my eyes playfully, feeling relief rush through me. I knew the man I'd seen Vivian sleeping with wasn't Liam; I also knew whoever I'd seen leaving her house that night was up to no good too. I shifted in my seat, the secret I was sitting on starting to itch. If I wanted to, I could make all of Liam's dreams come true. The partners wouldn't take kindly to their model for morality doing the dirty on one of the most powerful men in the City.

'It's so nice you could join us, Hailey,' Vivian said, loud above the chatter.

'It's nice of you to invite me,' I replied. Who was I kidding? I wasn't going to tell Liam; I wasn't going to tell anyone. Vivian Jones had the power to get me, a first-seat trainee, working on a potentially landmark case and sipping drinks I'd never heard of on Shoreditch House's rooftop. And my silence was the only thing powerful enough to keep me here.

'Honestly, it's good to see more women with skin in the game,' Vivian said proudly. She was practically quoting herself from an interview, but this time the phrase took on new meaning in my mind.

'Soon we'll be outnumbered!' Robert laughed across the table. 'It will be like a scene from a rom-com where flowers start springing up all over the place...'

'Robert.' Vivian shot the smile off his face. 'If that's all you think women

can bring to the table’ – she glanced meaningfully at me – ‘I’m afraid you’re sorely mistaken.’

SOPHIE: *Now, you don’t need to give me all the details but do you know what date my birthday party is going to be on this year? People are starting to ask.*

ME: *I’ll let you know soon.*

ME: *Just firming things up.*

SOPHIE: *Exciting!*

SOPHIE: *Honestly, Hailey. You know you and Dom don’t have to plan anything big this year if you’re too busy.*

ME: *I’m not too busy for this.*

SOPHIE: *You sure?*

ME: *Sure, I’m sure.*

SOPHIE: *Too busy for a bottle of wine soon?*

SOPHIE: *I feel like all we do is run.*

ME: *Sure.*

SOPHIE: *Good, because Pete just asked me to be exclusive and I’m freaking out.*

ME: *I thought you really liked Fifty?*

SOPHIE: *That's the thing. I think he wants more too.*

ME: *What you going to do?*

SOPHIE: *typing...*

Walking into the lobby of Taylor, Laters and Jones, not even my hangover could stop me from holding my head up high. Despite my false start, I was right about one thing: I *did* want to do what Vivian did. The work part, at least. Handling sensitive cases smartly, smart cases sensitively; it was everything I had hoped it would be.

'Kidd.' I heard Liam's voice call out from behind me as I made my way towards the lifts up to our floor. My stomach flipped as I followed the sound of his voice. He was leaning on the reception desk, chatting to the pretty brunette behind it, the one who had smiled across at me when I'd walked through here with Vivian. Now, her eyes seemed to narrow in my direction as Liam left her side. 'Good night, right?' he asked, quickening his step to keep up with me. Apart from the sore head it had given me this morning, last night had been brilliant, fighting the case for feminism, side by side, with the best female lawyer in London.

'Bit tired.' I shrugged, not wanting to act too keen, as Liam slid into the lift beside me and the doors closed, sealing us in.

'You were great craic though, Kidd,' he said. I tried to act casual; was '*great craic*' code for '*too drunk*'? I racked my brains, hoping beyond hope that I hadn't been as drunk as the partners around me. Dom hadn't seemed to notice when I arrived home. Although, saying that, he was fast asleep.

'Don't try and pull *craic* off,' I told him. 'You're not Irish.'

'I can totally pull that off,' he quipped back, as I raised my eyebrows in objection. 'Anyway, the way you argued with Robert about the flowers thing was incredible.'

Oh God, Robert was one of the most senior partners at the firm. He'd worked here for over thirty years. I put a hand to my forehead as I recalled how I had argued that both sexes should be able to buy and receive flowers, all with a glass of champagne sloshing in my hand.

‘I’d never really thought about it before,’ Liam mused. ‘But I think I’d quite like someone to buy me flowers – preferably peonies.’ I studied Liam’s straight face, trying to work out whether he was taking the mick.

‘Do you even *know* what a peony is?’ I rolled my eyes as I walked out of the lift, Liam following behind. As we arrived onto our floor, heads turned and people whispered. Or at least, I felt like they did. I looked across the office to see Vivian standing in the doorway to her own office, watching us as we made our way towards her. She looked from Liam to me and for a brief moment I saw a look in her eyes that might have been panic. She covered it quickly, poise resumed.

‘Good morning,’ Liam said to her as we came in. She stiffened, her fitted pencil skirt leaving little room for manoeuvre. Her hair was down for once, but as I sat down at my desk, she began to scoop it up into a bun.

‘Good morning,’ she said, casting another look my way.

‘Great that our deal went through.’ Liam puffed out his chest, confident he’d played a significant part in the reason we were celebrating last night.

‘Yes.’ Vivian looked down at her nails, preened to perfection, before forcing her eyes back to him, busy looking like a man who had made a million. ‘Well done.’ She nodded as Liam glanced towards me as if to say, *That must have hurt.*

‘Can I have a quick word?’ she said to me. This time it actually sounded like a question, as if in front of Liam I’d have the balls to say no. ‘Alone.’

‘I didn’t know you and Liam were friends,’ Vivian said without making eye contact, as she took a seat at her desk. ‘In the real world,’ she added, as if Taylor, Laters and Jones was anything but.

‘We run together sometimes,’ I said, feeling a nervousness wash over me that wasn’t just my own. Vivian shifted in her seat, her mouth making motions as if to say more on the subject but then appearing to think better of it.

‘Right, well.’ She seemed to rally, eyes scanning across her monitor before appearing to settle on what she was after. ‘I need you to look into something for me.’

‘Great,’ I said, pen and paper at the ready, preparing to take notes.

‘I think Alek may be lying to us about something,’ she said. ‘I need you to look into the ex-wife’s phone records. You have access to them, right?’

‘Yes, I’ve got the records that go right back to the time of her affair.’

‘Do you know if she called him late at night?’

‘The family friend she cheated with? Yeah, there are multiple records of her calling his number around that time.’

‘No, not him.’ Vivian shook her head. ‘Alek.’

‘Alek?’

‘I think they slept together after they separated.’

‘Oh,’ I said. ‘That’s bad, right? For us.’

‘It’s not good,’ she admitted. ‘But I’m not worried. I’ll question him about it at our next meeting together. We need to know the truth.’

‘Do you want to go through your line of questioning now?’ I asked, trying not to sound too keen, but now that I was in the loop, desperately wanting to stay there.

‘No, it’s okay.’ She smiled her million-dollar smile. ‘I’ll offload to Jason tonight.’

‘You can do that?’

‘Why wouldn’t I?’

‘It’s confidential, right?’

‘I mean *technically*, but he’s my husband. We talk about everything.’ Surely, not everything? ‘Don’t you talk about work with your boyfriend... Tom, is it?’

‘Dom,’ I corrected. ‘Well, yes. But when I’m home I think he’d rather not talk about work all the time.’

‘Does he talk about his work?’

‘Well... yes.’

‘So, he just doesn’t like talking about *your* work?’

‘It’s not like that,’ I objected, though I wasn’t entirely sure *what* it was like.

‘No?’ she asked, her eyes alive with warmth; she wasn’t probing to be mean. I held her gaze for a second, but then hers drifted out of her window in the direction of Daniel, sat behind his desk, Liam lingering beside it. ‘So you run with Liam?’

‘Yeah,’ I replied, glad that she’d changed the subject. ‘In the running club, you know? And he’s been very supportive of my work since I started.’ Liam still thought he was the reason I was working on the case.

‘Well, just... just be...’ Vivian trailed off. I looked at her pinched features and tightening posture as it clicked; she was scared I’d tell him. That if we got too close, I’d be tempted to share her secret. She was scared. Of *me*. Of what I’d say, what I’d do. For just a moment I felt powerful, like

somehow, I'd got the upper hand on Vivian Jones.

'Would you like to join me for a client lunch tomorrow?' she said finally.

'Oh I...' I began, knowing I should be cautious of spending too much time with Vivian but also knowing I couldn't say no. I knew in that moment that any power I thought I might have was fleeting. Vivian had worked too hard for hers to let go of it now.

He was already sitting there as we walked in, pretending to study the menu but clearly aware of every movement Vivian made towards him. As we moved a little closer, he looked up to greet us with a smile. I had become so used to being invisible that it took me by surprise as Alek leaned in to kiss me on one cheek, and then the other, just like he had Vivian moments before. 'Thank you for coming,' he said.

'No Marcus today?' Vivian observed without emotion, as she picked up her own menu and started to scan through the low-calorie options. Alek shook his head, not once taking his eyes off her. She looked even more striking than usual today, her black leather skirt juxtaposed against a blush pink top. It made me think of peonies.

'Good,' Vivian noted in hushed tones before readjusting her posture and adding, 'It's important for us to know how you're truly feeling about the case and everything.'

I had already told Vivian what I'd found in the telephone bills: late-night short calls between Alek and Talia. Vivian was mad that Alek hadn't told us. Meanwhile, I was trying not to think about it. Alek was twenty-nine years older than Talia. She looked like Karlie Kloss and he looked like, well...

'How do you think I'm feeling?' Alek muttered, his mustard suit pulled taut over his broad torso. 'My ex-wife cheated on me and is now trying to take even more from me.'

I studied his profile, pained for a moment before he puffed out his chest, trying to reclaim his usually proud posture.

'Well, we're not going to let her do that,' Vivian assured him. What was she doing? She was meant to be questioning him about his lies. 'As you know, however, one of the biggest sticking points' – she drew a breath, turning to look at me – 'is the fact you continued to sleep together after you had separated.'

Alek had all of a sudden become interested in today's specials. He'd

never wanted her to know, but it was her job to.

‘We were separated.’ His three words sounded tired, like he’d worn them out again and again whilst trying to tell himself not to go back to her. He looked ridiculous in that suit, but beneath the surface I was beginning to think he was genuinely hurting.

‘We know that.’ Vivian put her hand to her heart, her diamond band shining on top of it. ‘But your wife is going to argue that many marriages continue despite affairs,’ she said, even her pauses rehearsed. ‘That some even work better for them, therefore undermining our argument that your marriage was effectively over when you found out about her affair.’

‘Then I would ask the judge whether, if he were to see his wife shagging someone else in plain sight, he’d feel like those marriage vows had ended? Whether he felt *married* after seeing her legs wrapped around another man?’ His anger spilled across the table, and I wondered again whether this was about his purse strings or his pride.

‘Passion is good.’ Vivian tried to soothe him. ‘But we need to put aside our opinions and focus on objective, hard facts,’ she counselled.

‘Well, you’re the lawyer, how would you put it?’ Alek shot back.

‘That their client breached a contract. The parties then made a clear decision to separate. And that all further sexual relations were fleeting in nature, our client becoming nothing more than another of her conquests with no intention of continuing in a long-term relationship.’

‘And do you believe that?’ Alek turned to me. ‘You’re being very quiet.’

‘It’s Hailey’s job to be quiet,’ Vivian said, a warm smile plastered over her face.

‘And do *you*?’ Alek was becoming more anxious by the second, turning his full attention to Vivian. She sat bolt upright, her lipstick smile perfect and unwavering.

‘Believe that affairs signal the end of a marriage?’ Vivian asked. ‘Yes, I do.’

I used to love turning right onto Lough Grove, with its small terraced houses. Today it felt odd. Like somehow evenings in our one-bedroom ground-floor flat didn’t suit mornings spent in the firm’s ivory tower or afternoons spent at The Ivy.

Forcing a final kick to our front door, I realised how little I’d been home

lately, caught between late nights in the office and late nights out with the team. Surely, I should feel excited to finally have a night in, just us?

Tottering into the living room, legs tired from a day of walking in Vivian's shadow, I looked around. Dom was nowhere to be seen. The sofa was empty, the television turned off. But I wasn't alone. On top of our stack of books stood the most gorgeous bouquet of flowers tied together with a gold ribbon, their colour and scent bursting into the room. *Peonies*.

It couldn't be. He couldn't have. I poked my head into our bedroom, knowing that Dom wasn't there. It was impossible to hide in a space so small. He wasn't home. And my bet was this was why.

With shaking hands, I reached into the bouquet to pull out a small white envelope, a single 'H' inscribed onto its front. Breath held, I began to open it, looking down at the words before me: '*Just a little something from your not-so secret admirer.*' I turned the card over and over in my hands, searching for any indication of who they were from. The peonies stared back, daring me to make conclusions. But they couldn't be. He was more senior, much older, *married*. If Dom had seen these, what must he think?

ME: *Hey, you okay?*

DOM: *Yeah. Just grabbing some dinner and I'll be back soon.*

DOM: *typing...*

He didn't sound pissed off. If someone else had sent Dom flowers, I'd be fuming.

DOM: *Did you get your treat?*

ME: *I did, yes.*

DOM: *Aren't you going to say thank you?*

ME: *They're from you?*

DOM: *Who else would they be from?*

ME: *typing...*

Of course they weren't from Liam. My stomach turned in relief and sank with something else: a whisper of disappointment.

ME: *I don't know. Sophie?*

DOM: *They're from me, you muppet.*

ME: *I love them!*

DOM: *Well I love you.*

ME: *typing...*

WILL SHE SETTLE?

It has been two months since The Legal Chirp first reported Taylor, Laters and Jones would be acting for the respondent in a case between Acclaim's founder, Aleksander Ruslan, and his soon to be ex-wife, British runway model, Talia Laurent.

Needless to say the case has caused quite a stir. Both individuals are household names and the case itself has the power to change family law for good. Should this case go to court, a new precedent could be established, one where the law treats physical actions rather than legal actions as signalling the end of a marriage when it comes to calculating a fair division of the assets.

Lesser known is the stir being caused within the firm itself. Speaking anonymously, our source referred to the situation as a 'civil war' and one with the power to see Jones lose her winning streak for good. 'Almost everybody wants to see this case settle outside of court. It will be expensive and there is no guarantee of a win. I think it's just a power play. Vivian wants to take this to court and "change the law" to prove she can, to prove she's not losing her touch. There's no doubt Vivian has done a lot for the industry. But part of being a good leader, a smart leader, is knowing when it is time to move out of the way.'

Only time will tell whether the partners at Taylor, Laters and Jones will form a united front on how to play this billion-pound divorce. One thing is for sure, all players have a lot to lose.

Chapter 21

THREE WEEKS AFTER THE MOMENT

London had dropped by five degrees, but the temperature in the office felt sub-zero. Even the glow of the first Christmas lights being erected couldn't warm up the atmosphere. Each time I saw new decorations go up, my stomach sank. I was still no closer to planning anything for Sophie's thirtieth and had no idea when I was going to find the time to organise it.

I was gathered in the boardroom with Liam, Vivian and the rest of the team working on Alek's case. A single speakerphone was blaring out from the middle of the table, all eyes fixed on it. Alek was sitting a few seats away from me, looking down at his hands under the table, trying to leave the speaking to Vivian, who looked sharper and somehow colder against the icy skyline outside. She'd seen *The Legal Chirp's* latest article over the weekend. Everyone had. Someone in the firm was talking and secrets were being shared. Vivian was fuming, the article only fuelling her determination to take this case to court.

'This is ludicrous. Didn't any of you go to law school?' one of Talia's lawyers spat out of the speaker. Vivian raised a hand as if to remind us this question was rhetorical. 'Are you seriously saying that my client's application for divorce – an application to *sever* their marriage – counted for nothing?'

'Not at all.' Vivian's voice was laced with sweetness though her face showed nothing of the sort. 'The application for divorce simply went over in pen what our clients had clearly marked out in pencil years before. And crucially, years before our client sold his company.'

'Which our client contributed to.' The speaker's volume dialled up a

notch.

‘How so?’ Vivian crossed her arms, eyes glued before her.

‘By contributing to the ongoing running of the family home,’ the opposition continued, as Liam looked vindicated. His approach was safer, but Vivian was *brilliant*.

‘Our client’s son maintains she did little of the sort,’ one of our team chimed in.

‘Great, well let’s hear from him then,’ the faceless voice retorted, though everyone knew he was a no-show. For all Marcus’s passion when we had first visited their family home together, he’d been incommunicado for over a week.

‘You’ll hear from him soon,’ Vivian said, looking from the speakerphone down to the mobile in her hands. She’d been checking it sporadically, each time exposing just a little more worry in her face. I wondered whether she was looking at her messages or the latest media updates on the Ruslan case. She might pretend she didn’t care what people thought, but her reputation was everything.

‘Maybe we can reschedule when all interested parties can be bothered to show up?’ the speaker asked.

‘He’s not an interested—’ The line went dead before Vivian could spit out her reply.

‘I told you we shouldn’t have let the son get involved,’ Liam said, lowering his voice as he leant into Vivian’s ear, careful not to let Alek overhear him.

Vivian stared down at her phone and I swear I could see her hand shaking in rage. ‘He’s not involved,’ Vivian whispered back. ‘Any more.’

‘I’m so bored,’ Daniel said, looking up from his own papers. ‘Can you help me with this?’

‘Sorry,’ I said a little too quickly. ‘I’m kind of tied up with this work from Vivian.’ I couldn’t help but notice the disappointment on Daniel’s face.

Wasn’t this a good thing: women in the driving seat, the men supporting from behind? But if it was, why did I feel so shitty about it?

‘Do you know where she is?’ Daniel asked cautiously, gazing down at his phone as mine vibrated on top of my desk and Vivian’s name flashed up.

‘No, actually, I don’t,’ I mumbled. It wasn’t technically a lie. Swiping her

email open, I read: *Fundraiser tonight. Be good if you could be there, Vivian* x. I studied the sign-off; she had never sent me a kiss before. I swear she was actually beginning to like me – and not just because of what I knew. The thought made my stomach spin with something like excitement.

‘Dom?’ Daniel asked, nodding to the phone in my hands.

‘Vivian,’ I replied. ‘She wants me to go to this fundraising thing tonight.’ I tried my best not to sound bothered. But Daniel clearly was. He reached a hand to his clenched jaw and started to stroke it, attempting to soften his rising resentment.

‘Party season’s starting,’ I mumbled, heart picking up pace.

‘That’s great,’ he said through gritted teeth, his attempts to be kind somehow making this worse. ‘She must have really seen something in you.’ A sadness weighed on his shoulders. If only I could tell him it was actually me who had seen something in her.

SOPHIE: *Run tonight?*

ME: *Sorry, I’m at a work thing.*

SOPHIE: *Okay, no worries. Chat soon?*

ME: *Yeah, everything okay?*

SOPHIE: *Yeah, could do with a sounding board though.*

ME: *Yes, of course.*

DOM: *Enjoy the fundraiser tonight, baby.*

ME: *Thanks. Not sure I’m dressed okay.*

DOM: *Can help you undress later if you like?*

ME: *I'm serious. What do you wear to a fundraiser?*

DOM: *Asking the wrong guy. Stop worrying and have fun.*

DOM: *And be careful, okay?*

ME: *I always am.*

I looked from my phone to the white steeple before me. I had reached my destination. Apparently. I checked the postcode again and looked up at the church, floodlights illuminating the grounds before it. Walking up the stone steps, I heard the noise of a crowd coming from below. Looking down to my right a second set of steps became visible, winding down towards the thumping baseline of music. Walking into the dimly lit basement, I had never been so grateful to be met with the glass of bubbles that was thrust into my hand. I looked around the large room: women in colourful floor-length dresses rubbed shoulders with tuxedo-clad men. I suddenly felt out of place in my safe, black cocktail dress. I didn't think a fundraiser hosted in a church basement would be so fancy; why the hell was I here?

I searched the crowd for my colleagues, for any familiar faces to latch onto until we took our seats. Tables were set out ready for us, place-settings determining where we'd be. Other tables were heavy with alcohol, glass after glass after glass illuminated by the strings of fairy lights that traced their way from every corner of the room. For a moment, I wished Dom was here. Not that he would even *want* to come – Vivian was right about him not really getting my new job, not really even trying to get it. But right now I could do with a partner.

'Hailey.' Liam called my name, drawing my attention to our table.

'Oh, thank God.' I couldn't hide my relief as I found my place next to him. The weight off my heels felt like heaven. 'I thought I'd actually have to make an effort tonight,' I quipped, the champagne in my stomach loosening my lips.

‘Imagine that.’ Liam grinned.

‘Yeah, I’m not really in the mood to try to make new friends after the day we’ve had.’ I rolled my eyes.

‘Well you’ll have to make room for one.’ Liam motioned across the room as a slender brunette weaved her way through the other tables. As the figure moved closer, my eyes searched her cascading hair gathered to one side, down to her sharp collarbones and a large diamond necklace resting against her full chest.

‘Hailey, this is Megan,’ Liam said as she finally arrived at our table.

‘Nice to meet you.’ Megan revealed a set of perfect white teeth.

‘You too,’ I offered as I reached my hand to hers. Megan manoeuvred her full skirt to sit beside Liam, now forcing a smile.

‘Do you two just know each other from work?’ I began, before Megan reached an arm around Liam. My eyes lingered on her diamond engagement ring. *Oh shit.* She was the wife. He turned to her and grinned; she couldn’t be more than a couple of years older than me. Before I could stop it, my mind shot to Dom, to a ring half the size of hers. I could be Mrs Thomas tomorrow if I wanted to be.

‘We don’t really,’ Liam said, eyes still on her; she laughed a little too hard.

‘You look so handsome,’ she told Liam, inches away from his lips, like I wasn’t even here. *I wish I wasn’t here.* ‘Doesn’t he?’ She turned to me. I looked up from topping up my already sizable glass of wine, my hands trembling as I did, to look at Liam, his black tux making him look broader still and his silvering hair pushed back and to the side.

‘Yes, he does,’ I agreed, not meaning my voice to sound so meek. I longed for Dom to be here, a clear indication that I had nothing to hide. That I had my partner too.

‘Vivian!’ Megan stood to embrace her, offering an exaggerated kiss on both cheeks. ‘You look fabulous,’ she said, admiring Vivian’s canary-yellow dress, cascading to the floor.

‘As do you, Megan,’ Vivian said, taking her seat beside her husband.

‘Hello, I don’t think we’ve met, I’m Jason.’ Jason Jones offered me a broad smile that sent crinkles up to his eyes. The same one he’d given me back when I was invisible, not that he seemed to remember. But now he reached over to shake my hand, a kind gesture that felt all the more generous coming from him, one of the City’s most notorious bankers. Dom and I had

found ourselves googling his salary just the other day before calculating that it would not only buy our apartment but the whole bloody house.

‘I’m Hai—’

‘This is Hailey, one of our most promising trainees,’ Vivian said, putting her arm around him protectively.

‘Trainee?’ Jason smiled again. ‘And Vivian’s inviting you to sit at the big boys’ table? You must have done something right.’ He laughed, more at his wife’s expense than mine. ‘Or should I say the big girl table?’ He leaned in to plant a kiss on her cheek. ‘You don’t need to tell me that the women are in charge around here.’ He smiled again, before moving his way around the table, making sure everyone was comfortable, that everyone had been introduced. I looked at Liam and Megan and his arm around the back of her chair. Then to Jason beaming by Vivian’s side. I lifted my wine to my lips and took a big sip, knowing it would take a lot more to make me feel comfortable tonight.

SOPHIE: How’s it going?

ME: Yeah, good thanks. It’s mad here.

ME: I swear half of this room are models.

SOPHIE: Well, make sure you send any nice guys my way.

ME: You already have three!

ME: Are you sure you don’t need to slow down a little?

SOPHIE: I’m turning thirty Hailey. I don’t have time to slow down.

‘I know we shouldn’t have favourites,’ Jason said, now in full flow, a little like the wine. ‘But our Lily is a real ball-buster.’ He laughed. ‘Really gives

her sisters a run for their money.'

'And her parents,' Vivian added, taking another sip of wine as the table laughed around her. It was strange seeing them together, sharing snapshots of their personal life. Like glimpsing a diary entry; it felt intimate, enticing.

'She's a corporate event planner,' Jason boasted, the proud father.

'But she wants to go into weddings,' Vivian added.

'Ironic, given your line of work,' he said and winked at his wife.

'If only people cared less about the wedding and more about the *marriage*,' Vivian lamented.

'A little like us.' Jason kissed his wife on the shoulder, clearly totally besotted. Her eyes darted towards me, as if daring me to object. But I didn't dare. Not one bit. *Just be careful*. 'We were only twenty-two when we tied the knot,' Jason's said. 'But I guess...' *Don't say it, don't you dare say the very thing I've been denying ever since I found that ring*. 'When you know, you know.' He beamed. 'And then there's our youngest, Rose,' he went on. 'She's fallen for this older guy in the space of about two months. I swear she'll make grandparents of us by the end of the year!'

'Gosh, I can't imagine being old enough to have grandchildren,' Megan exclaimed.

Liam stiffened in his seat, looking apologetic, not so much for Vivian but for the other partners around the table. The ones he was trying his hardest to convince should force through his promotion in the absence of a unanimous decision. I looked at Jason, gazing lovingly at his wife. Lots of decisions weren't unanimous.

'And by old, my wife means *wise*,' Liam said, in an attempt to rescue the situation. I looked at Megan again, trying to work her out. But after two hours of drinking and moving food around her plate, I was pretty sure her pretty waters didn't run too deep. I could see Liam put a hand on the top of her thigh, as if to say *chill out*. It was an assurance so often meant for me – well, the 'chill out' part, not the hand on my... I pushed away the thought, replacing it with bubbles. Next to Vivian, Megan was lacking. But then so was everyone.

'Are you okay, Hailey?' Liam leaned into me; his breath so damn close.

'I'm just going to the bathroom,' I said, forcing any sadness from my voice.

Looking in the mirror, I didn't know what to make of my reflection. I could see myself clearly – black dress, black-lined eyes, plum-coloured lips –

but I could draw no conclusions as to what I felt about it. Or what I felt about tonight or *anything* right now.

I studied my reflection as the room began to spin. I guessed I was a lawyer now. I decided to look at the facts. The fact that I wanted Dom here. The fact that I didn't. The fact that I liked Jason. The fact that Vivian was cheating on him. The fact that seemingly everyone thought Vivian was something she's not. But the fact that I liked her all the same. The fact that I liked Liam. The fact that I *really* liked Liam.

It was all too much. Scanning the bathroom to check I was alone, I pushed myself up to sit on the marbled counter, letting my feet rest as I tried to rest my mind. As I breathed deeply, the sweet air of scented moisturiser made me feel sick. I knew I needed to call it a night and call a taxi, before I could say or do something stupid. Just then, the door swung open and Vivian strode in. I hopped down from the counter, giving her a quick smile before making my way towards the door.

'You don't need to leave,' she said, opening her clutch and leaning towards the mirror to reapply her raspberry pout.

'It's okay, I'm done.' I smiled, sweat prickling on my already damp hands.

'Stay awhile.' Her voice echoed against the empty stalls as I studied her expression. She was drunk. I looked from her to the door behind. 'It would be nice to get to know you better,' she said and smiled again, something about it sending another wave of sickness through my body. 'Seeing as you already know me so well.' Her eyes widened, eyebrows raised. We had spent the last three weeks working together. Didn't she know me well enough already?

'I don't feel I know you that well,' I said in little more than a whisper.

'I think you *think* you do.' Vivian placed her lipstick back in her bag. 'I see the way you look at me, judging me.'

She'd held it in for three weeks, brushed it to one side, ignored it. Why couldn't things just stay that way? Once something was out of the box, it was impossible to get back in. Like that stupid ring in a box at home. Vivian was just pissed. Pissed and pissed off – because of that stupid article.

'I'm not judging you,' I stuttered, unsure how I got here and unsure how to get myself out of it.

'Of course, you are.' Vivian shook her head. 'How could you not? When I'm sat out there with my golden guy.'

'He seems very nice,' I said as the lump in my throat threatened to close

it.

‘He is.’ Vivian sighed again. ‘He’s everything, so don’t you dare think about ruining that for me. Contrary to what *some* people seem to think, I still have a lot to lose.’ She fixed her dilated pupils on me and I saw a hint of the insecurity Liam had warned me about all those weeks ago.

‘I’m not the one who spoke to the media,’ I said. Vivian looked taken aback. She held my gaze for a second that seemed to stretch for days, before letting out a laugh.

‘I know it’s not you, Hailey.’ She gave me a look that seemed to say *you wouldn’t dare*. ‘There’s only one man who would stoop so low.’ Vivian left me to fill in the blanks. Liam? But he wouldn’t; he wanted to make partner but by building himself up, not tearing her down.

‘He wouldn’t,’ I said. Why did the thought of his betrayal bother me so much?

‘You are a promising trainee, Hailey,’ Vivian said. ‘But you’re very young...’ *You’re very naïve*. I swallowed, able to read between her lines. ‘Honestly Hailey’ – her voice softened into a slur – ‘I’m not a bad person.’ *You’ve just done some very bad things*. ‘I love Jason. I love my job. And I’ve worked bloody hard to get them both. I have fought at every corner, worked tirelessly for powerful men, until I’ve broken through that glass ceiling – all for girls like you,’ she went on, passion reverberating in her voice. ‘I work late hours, I’ve raised children. I’m still raising women. I work twice as hard as the men at this firm.’

‘I know you do,’ I reassured her. ‘It’s one of the reasons I wanted to become a lawyer in the first place.’ Vivian visibly softened at the compliment.

‘So, if I want to have a little fun, blow off a bit of steam like the rest of them...’ She pointed towards the bathroom door. ‘And provided I’m not hurting anyone...’ She broke off, eyes threatening me to object. ‘I allow myself this one little vice,’ she went on. ‘It makes my marriage stronger, it makes me work harder and after all of the years of forcing doors open, fighting for yeses instead of accepting all the maybes, all the “not yet”...’ She took a step towards me, her eyes fixed on mine. ‘I’ve earned the right to never say no.’

Chapter 22

FOUR WEEKS AFTER THE MOMENT

10 October 2017

Dom Tom: What time are you home?

Hailey Kidd: On my way now.

Dom Tom: To yours or mine?

Hailey Kidd: Yours.

Dom Tom: Thank God.

Hailey Kidd: Why ha?

Dom Tom: Just come home.

Hailey Kidd: No tell me.

Dom Tom: I've planned something.

Hailey Kidd: Three candles, two wines, one takeaway?

Dom Tom: Am I that predictable?

Hailey Kidd: Yes. But I love it.

Dom Tom: I'll surprise you one day, I swear.

Hailey Kidd: Probs by turning up at the wrong house.

Dom Tom: Probably.

Hailey Kidd: It would be so much easier if we lived in the same place.

Dom Tom: Move in with me then?

Hailey Kidd: I was joking.

Dom Tom: I'm not. Move in with me.

Hailey Kidd: Okay. Yours or mine?

Dom Tom: Neither. Let's find somewhere that's ours.

Hailey Kidd: Deal.

Dom Tom: That was simple.

Hailey Kidd: It always is with us.

Dom Tom: Let's hope that never changes.

Hailey Kidd: It won't.

Hailey Kidd: I promise.

Dom laced his fingers into mine as we walked across the lawn to the marquee.

‘Don’t you just think it’s a little too much?’ He turned his face towards me, his already off-white Converse becoming muddier still as we traipsed across the well-kept grass.

‘It’s gorgeous,’ I said, as the blue bunting lining the marquee came into view.

‘But he’s *one*, he won’t even remember it.’ Dom shook his head.

‘Nor will his parents by the looks of things.’ I could see my friend and her partner, now on what looked to be their fifth glass of prosecco. I looked down at the orange juice in my hand, unable to stomach anything else since the latest round of work functions.

‘Sure I can’t get you something stronger?’ Dom smiled, sending his glasses slipping just a little down his nose, his fisherman beanie just about keeping them in place. ‘People might start asking questions.’ He laughed, sending his eyes down to my stomach. I was already breathing in. I forced myself to laugh too, as if the idea was ludicrous, despite the fact that we were at the christening of the child of someone precisely our age.

‘Not just yet.’ Dom dismissed all *ifs* in favour of a *when*. Now there were only butterflies in my stomach.

Together, we walked closer to the small collections of people gathering near the heaters warming the marquee. It was a relief to see Sophie coming to join us. She looked stunning and stylish in a dark green jumpsuit, layered with a winter coat.

‘Not drinking?’ she asked, seeing my orange juice. Why was it such a big deal? It wasn’t like I was the wild one of our group. I was the safe one, always content with being whatever Dom and Sophie needed me to be. I was suddenly wracked with guilt over the fact that I still hadn’t made a start on sorting out her party, but why did the responsibility – all the *thinking* about everything – seem to fall on me?

‘I had a big one the other night,’ I explained, taking a small sip. ‘I’m still a little fragile.’ Fragile, confused. And yet, a little empathetic. I couldn’t shake the feeling that Vivian might still be everything I had hoped she’d be, just with one little vice. She’d been even nicer to me the day after the fundraiser, nicer still the day after that. Like somehow our bathroom run-in

had bonded us; like we were now seeing eye to eye.

‘That’s not like you.’ Sophie looked concerned. They both knew I only went too far when my emotions felt too much. Sometimes it was nice to be around people who didn’t know your whole backstory, that didn’t see every change within the context of your past.

‘I told you,’ Dom mouthed under his breath to Sophie, rolling his eyes. When? When did he tell her? I looked around the scattering of people mooching around the marquee, trying to ignore the niggle that told me these kinds of celebrations would be coming thick and fast whilst Dom and I continued to claim we were just *going with the flow*.

‘You’re not drinking either?’ I asked her. Now that *really* wasn’t like her. ‘Not pregnant, are you?’ I shamefully deflected the attention with the one question I’d hate anyone to ask. Guilt filled my stomach where my anxiety had been.

‘Oh God no.’ Sophie threw her loose hair back. ‘Can you imagine?’

‘I think you’d make a great mum,’ Dom said as Sophie rolled her eyes playfully.

‘Oh please.’ She laughed.

Sophie was single and dating. Surely, she wasn’t about to overtake me? *It wasn’t a race*. When had I started to think it was, like we were all bound for a place called adulthood? I imagine around the time I realised I wasn’t as close to it as I’d thought.

‘Well I’m *not*,’ she said and held a hand to her washboard stomach. ‘I’m just taking training seriously.’ She looked at me, the *unlike some* remaining unsaid. I knew I needed to make more time for that, for us and for planning this party. Dreaming up some ridiculous theme with Dom was usually one of the highlights of my year, but somehow this time it felt different.

‘Work’s been mad,’ I said, as if it explained everything. Maybe it was me that felt different now. As if on cue, my mobile vibrated, making me jump out of my skin. The late hours in and out of the office were setting me further and further on edge. As I swiped, all three of us saw her name. *Hailey. I have an extra ticket for the theatre tonight. The Winter’s Tale. Join me. V*

‘She’s signing off V now?’ Sophie looked up from the text, excited by the thought.

‘She’s inviting you to *the theatre* now?’ Dom was far less impressed. He knew why she’d taken a shine to me, after all. Sophie just thought I was smashing it. ‘I don’t think you should go.’

Sophie looked up to him in confusion, not used to seeing Dom deny me anything.

‘What the hell, Dom?’ she snapped. ‘Of course, she needs to go. This is *Vivian Jones*.’ Sophie put a hand on my shoulder. ‘You go and you imbibe all her influence, okay?’

Dom bit his bottom lip. Vivian’s influence was precisely what he was worried about.

‘Hailes, can I have a quick word?’ He leaned in to whisper into my hair.

‘Alright, alright.’ Sophie put her hands in the air in mock surrender. ‘I know when I’m not wanted.’ She laughed warmly. It’s not like I’d ever be the kind of girl who dropped her best friend for a boyfriend; I’d made sure of it. ‘I’ll leave you lovers to it.’ She kissed me on the cheek, just once, before turning to mingle with the crowds.

‘That was rude.’ I turned to Dom as we retraced our steps away from the marquee.

‘So was reading your messages in front of Sophie,’ he shot back, but his hand still reached for mine. I wasn’t even sure he knew he was doing it after all this time. ‘I know Vivian’s your boss, but you don’t have to be at her beck and call twenty-four seven.’

‘You know I do,’ I replied under my breath, as he led me to a wooden bench a little away from the crowd. *And what’s more, I kind of want to be.* To anyone else we looked like we were about to share a lover’s kiss, not a lover’s tiff. Sitting down, Dom turned his broad body towards me, wrapped up in his best winter coat and dark jeans, his smart-casual still looking casual-casual in comparison to how I’d spent the past few months.

‘Look, I’m worried about you.’ Dom held my gaze and my hand.

‘Why?’

His green eyes sent my stomach sinking as I held his hand tighter. I was worried too, about everything, about our future, but that didn’t mean I wanted *him* to be worried. I’d made it my job to make his life easier. Why wasn’t he doing that for me too?

‘This Vivian thing.’ He moved his concerned face a little closer to mine. ‘I think you should tell someone else,’ he urged. ‘An HR manager or something.’

‘But why?’ I asked again, looking down at our hands. She’d only had sex with someone else, it wasn’t a crime. People had affairs all the time; well, some people.

‘She’s bringing you into all these meetings, inviting you to all these events – and she’s already proven she can’t be trusted,’ he went on, as I wondered how long he’d been sitting on this. I shuffled in my seat, gravitating closer to him despite the distance in our voices. His body leaned towards mine, keeping me warm without me even needing to ask.

‘I don’t think she’s going to have sex with me, if that’s what you’re worried about.’ I forced a laugh and it sounded limp.

‘You know it’s not.’ Dom turned his face towards me, now inches from mine. ‘Never heard the phrase, *keep your friends close and your enemies closer?*’

‘I’m not her enemy,’ I snapped, shocking both of us with my defensiveness. ‘I think she actually likes me, like, actually *wants* me around.’

Dom’s eyes narrowed with caution.

‘Like, I know why she invited me to the client meeting at first was because of that night, but since then we’ve worked really well together. I know she shouldn’t be cheating on her husband, I do, but does that undermine the fact that she’s an amazing lawyer, an incredible businesswoman and a good boss?’ I went on, my own passion now in full flow. ‘Men cheat on their wives all the time and their accolades don’t get diminished. I can be inspired by her professional life without being influenced by her personal one.’

‘Men don’t cheat on their partners all the time,’ Dom objected, hurt and confused.

‘But if Vivian was a man—’ I began.

‘I’d still think what he was doing was wrong,’ Dom interrupted, lifting his hand from out of mine. ‘If his partner didn’t know the truth.’

‘I’m a big girl, Dom – no, *woman*,’ I argued, my voice creeping a little louder. ‘I’m a strong *woman*, I can handle myself, I can—’

‘I don’t know when you started feeling you have to prove something.’ Dom’s sentence sliced across mine as he shook his head.

‘What’s that supposed to mean?’ I snapped again; my eyes fixed on his.

‘Like this new job, and this going out all the time and...’ he trailed off.

‘Dom,’ I said. ‘I’m allowed to change my mind about what career I want.’

‘I know,’ he sighed, reaching a hand to his forehead in exasperation ‘But just make sure you’re not changing yourself in the process.’

‘People are allowed to *grow*, Dom,’ I said, as angry tears started to gather

in my lashes, but still I forced my hand back on top of his. His fingers laced into mine naturally. ‘And just because I’m hanging out with Vivian doesn’t mean...’

‘Okay, okay.’ Dom let go of my hand again only to put his in the air, waving his white flag. ‘I’m not saying you’re going to go off with someone else.’ Dom shook his head at the suggestion as I cursed Liam for popping into my mind again. ‘Just be *careful*.’

‘Name one time in my life when I *haven’t* been careful?’ I asked, annoyed.

Dom looked at me, his eyes softening. He shook his head as a kind smile replaced his pursed lips. He knew I had a point.

‘Good point.’ He put an arm around me and I softened at his touch. ‘I’m sorry, Hailey,’ Dom whispered close to me. ‘It’s just a lot of change for me too.’

From a distance, I could see Sophie looking over to us intermittently as she chatted away to some unattached man. Despite juggling Pete, Jesse and Fifty, I had to admit she looked a little less anxious. And all I wanted was for Sophie to be happy.

‘It’s okay,’ I whispered back to him, breathing in the familiar scent of his hair. Turning my face towards him, I placed my lips on his, soft at first then harder, until all my maybes were erased by his kiss.

‘Thanks for inviting me,’ I said to Vivian again, as we took our seats. She was dressed down in a cashmere cardigan that must have been worth triple anything I was brave enough to call dressed up, her hair tied up in a loose ponytail.

‘He cancelled.’ She shrugged, looking forward to the curtain-drawn stage, taking another sip of her wine. I looked down at my own, promising myself I’d make the single glass last the whole evening.

‘Jason?’ I asked, though I was pretty sure I knew what was coming.

‘No, this guy I’m seeing.’ She smiled with a shrug, as if it was the most normal thing in the world, as if after her confession there were no more secrets left between us.

‘Is that the guy I saw you err—’ I began, half daring to put a name to the face.

‘No, no,’ she interrupted, as if the thought were preposterous. I studied

her profile, trying and failing to work out why she was telling me all this, why she felt like she could. Friends close, enemies closer? Or because she didn't think she was doing anything wrong?

'I'm sorry,' I replied, not knowing what for. I looked down at my black jeans and black top. Sorry I couldn't be more original, perhaps?

'That's okay,' she said, finally turning towards me. 'His wife came home early.' She recalled this fact as if it were just another in a case.

'Are you... like... disappointed?' My questions were becoming braver as I settled into my new-found role as confidant.

'Not really, we both know the deal.' She smiled. 'Our spouses come first.' *Well thank God for that.* I tried not to laugh; I knew she wasn't joking. 'I know he'll never leave his wife and I'll never leave Jason; I'm committed to him.' Just not enough to stop having sex with anyone else. 'It's just a bit of fun, blowing off steam.' She made it sound so normal.

I couldn't shake the thought of Dom from my mind, knowing that if he were sat in my place he'd challenge Vivian on this. Then I thought of Liam. What would he say? His wife was gorgeous, but hard work. And he worked so hard in the office all day too. Part of me wondered how he blew off steam. Another part was scared to find out.

'Do you not find it difficult working on the case? You know, representing Aleksander?' I asked, longing to find answers in her moment of vulnerability, not knowing how long it would be before her guard shot back up.

'Why?' Her simple response spoke volumes: it was just business.

'Because you know, of all of the... infidelity?' I said the word in a whisper, but Vivian didn't seem concerned.

'Oh. No, that's entirely different.' Her tone made me feel silly for not already knowing this. 'She got found out, she hurt our client, she hurt *Alek*.' She accentuated his name as if to drill her personable nature home. 'She caused him hell. Imagine seeing your spouse doing something like that. I would never hurt Jason. I love him enough to lie, to protect him from getting his heart broken.'

'Do you not think—' I began, cursing my voice for always wanting to speak up.

'Did he look hurt to you?' Vivian interrupted me.

'Well, no,' I admitted. He didn't. He looked happy. She looked happy. And their marriage was still strong, perhaps even stronger for all her *blowing off steam*.

‘I don’t believe in hurting people, Hailey,’ Vivian continued. ‘And that’s why we need to make sure he never finds out.’

Chapter 23

SOPHIE: *You'll never guess who fancies Dom at work?*

ME: *Eliza?*

SOPHIE: *No, Eliza's seven. She thinks Dom's like dad-age.*

SOPHIE: *Although I guess he could be dad-age.*

ME: *Who then?*

SOPHIE: *Mrs Turner.*

ME: *The new Head?*

ME: *But she's like seventy!*

SOPHIE: *I know, but she wears that corduroy well.*

SOPHIE: *If I were you, I'd watch your man, Hailes.*

DOM: *Hey lovely. Will I see you, later?*

‘Ms Kidd, let me take your coat.’ I looked up from my phone to see a waiter ready to assist me. ‘Mrs Jones is already waiting inside,’ he said. The harsh contrast between my first trip to The Bloomsbury Club and this one wasn’t lost on me. Though I wasn’t sure which was most stark: the fact that this waiter now knew me by name or that Vivian Jones was now waiting for *me*.

‘Hailey.’ She jumped to stand as I walked across to her usual table, kissing me on one cheek, then the other, then the first again. I knew the routine well enough by now not to get caught out. ‘How are you?’

I stood back to take her in: black courts leading my eye up her slender legs, encased in expensive black denim, to a large oversized jumper falling ever so slightly off her shoulder to reveal a chunky gold chain crossing her clavicle; I recognised it from Chanel’s latest campaign.

‘Earth to Hailey?’ Vivian prompted, before taking her seat.

‘Oh sorry.’ I couldn’t help but blush. ‘I’m really well thank you, how are you?’

‘I’m wonderful.’ She smiled broadly, moving one long leg to cross the other. Her already glowing features were full of the joys of the city’s fast-approaching season. ‘Forgive my sloppiness.’ She gestured down to her outfit, the sum total of which was a far cry from sloppy. ‘I’ve just come straight from his place,’ she oozed, enjoying saying the sentence so freely.

I looked around the restaurant, scared enough for both of us that someone might overhear but Vivian didn’t look scared at all.

‘Relax Hailey, his wife’s not here.’ She laughed openly, no malice within it, just an assurance as causal as her attire. She had a way of making her affairs sound like the most natural thing in the world. For her, they were. ‘And she wasn’t there in his house in the country either – obviously – it was just him and me for three whole days.’ She couldn’t hide her smile. ‘Don’t worry,’ she assured again, ‘Jason was away on business.’

I studied her afresh as she ordered a glass of champagne for each of us, no questions asked. I’d never seen her this happy. Hollywood’s depictions of affairs were so often sexy, sordid, a dark edge of depression in each lover’s desire. Vivian’s felt lighter. And Jason was none the wiser, safe and unhurt

and returning home to a happy wife. I wasn't sure I agreed with it, but I was struggling to find the downside.

'It was amazing,' she went on, enjoying the freedom that my knowing had given her to speak about him with ease. 'Walks in the mountains, dinner in cute little taverns, making love by the lake...'

I took a sip of my newly arrived champagne, letting the bubbles cool my tightening throat, loosen my limbs.

'Is your boyfriend romantic?' she asked me.

'Define romantic?' My mind went to Dom's peonies, the ones I thought for a moment might be from Liam.

'Does he take your breath away?' Vivian pressed.

'Well... yeah... I guess... sometimes,' I stuttered, willing the words to come.

'Surprise you?' she asked.

'Not often, but that's okay,' I said, not meaning the words to sound forced.

'He's lazy,' she said. It didn't sound like a question.

'No, he's not lazy, he's...'

'Boring.' Vivian filled in another blank.

'No, just *steady*,' I objected, not sure how we got onto me, onto *us*.

'Aren't they the same thing?' Vivian's eyes twinkled. 'How long have you been together?' she asked as my heart jumped to my throat.

Tick, tick, tick. I didn't want to say, to prompt the same question spilling from everybody's lips: *Well, what's taking you so long?*

'Met at thirteen, kissed at seventeen, fooled around for years and then decided to get serious around Christmas 2012,' I said and tried to distract myself with the menu, not sure why I felt the need to quantify our relationship in statistics.

'So, seven years this Christmas?' Vivian looked incredulous, eyes lingering for a moment on my fourth finger. 'You think he's going to propose?' Oh *shit*. Of course, Dom would propose around our anniversary.

'I'm not... I mean, he...' I stammered, searching for the words.

'You don't want to get married?' Vivian probed.

'Well... yeah... I guess... sometimes,' I said.

'I see.' Vivian smiled.

'I didn't say I *don't* want to get married,' I clarified.

'Just not to your boyfriend?' Vivian raised a perfectly plucked eyebrow.

‘I think so, I don’t know,’ I admitted. It was the first time I’d said those words out loud. Never for one second did I think I’d be saying them to her.

‘Well wh—’

‘I know: *when you know you know.*’ I rolled my eyes as my stomach sank.

‘And you don’t know that was what I was about to say.’ Vivian laughed, a laugh so warm that for a brief moment it made me feel okay, about everything. ‘I was going to also ask what you think is making you unsure?’ She was grilling me like a lawyer now.

‘It’s just a big decision, isn’t it? One person forever. I love him, I really do. It’s just, I don’t know what’s wrong with me, I’m... I’m like...’ I said, my thoughts tumbling.

‘You’re like me,’ Vivian said. *I’m nothing like you. I’m just not ready.* Some people never were, some people didn’t want to be, and I knew on some level that was okay. But in my circles, my groups, the shows I was watching, the podcasts I was listening to, the books that seemed to find me, the articles that appeared to hunt me down, it seemed that marriage was the only thing on anybody’s mind. And it still seemed to *mean* something.

‘You want to be married.’ Vivian took another sip of champagne as I wondered which of our clients she was charging this time to. ‘You just don’t want the monogamy mandated within it.’

‘I’ve been in a monogamous relationship my whole life,’ I objected. That part wasn’t the problem. I loved Dom, I *love* Dom.

‘You love your boyfriend, right?’

‘Yes.’ I nodded, sure of that much at least.

‘And you’re committed to him?’

‘Right.’ I nodded again.

‘But sometimes you doubt that commitment.’ Vivian said this as a fact. ‘And tell me Hailey, how many times have your doubts been caused by wondering whether the grass is greener?’

‘Not greener.’ I shook my head. ‘Just, different. A different kind of grass.’

‘And what if I told you’ – Vivian was now in full flow – ‘you could commit to your wonderful grass, water it for life, but not deny your human nature, your natural urge to go and play on a *different kind of grass*, desire something else, something *other.*’ She leaned in closer, eyes alive. ‘Would it not make it easier to commit?’

‘Maybe,’ I admitted, as Vivian sat back in her seat, arms folded. Case closed.

‘One in two marriages ends in divorce, Hailey.’ Vivian took some documents out of her bag, placing them on the table between us, making her point even clearer. ‘I guess I’ve seen too many end to believe that “forsaking all others” is the answer.’ We looked down at the documents before us, claiming our client’s marriage was ended by affairs and separation.

‘They *decided* to separate,’ Vivian said, as if reading my mind. ‘And that’s the brilliant thing about life; we get to decide what we want to do, who we want to be with.’

I looked at her again, taking another sip of my drink. Vivian’s marriage continued to thrive whilst others based on monogamy and honesty struggled to survive. It went against everything I stood for, or at least, everything society had taught me to stand for, everything Sophie’s past had too. But just then, the evidence in her favour seemed overwhelming.

Chapter 24

All eyes looked at us as we walked back into the office. Was it the champagne or was I getting used to this? I paused at my desk and caught Daniel's eye.

'Come on then,' Vivian said over her shoulder, wondering what was slowing me down. She was still wearing the same jumper, but it was now tucked into her leather pencil skirt, jeans and informality long forgotten. 'I need to brief you on what we need to prepare for court.'

I cast a quick look at Daniel again, who forced his attention down to the papers before him, pretending not to listen, pretending not to care. Vivian's gaze lingered around the top of his downturned head, his hair falling to cover his eyes. Guilt churned in my stomach; I knew he deserved these opportunities as much as me, but could he really blame me for welcoming them with open arms? If he were in my position, he'd do exactly the same, I was sure of it.

'Sure,' I said and followed her.

'So, it's not enough to just barge into my office, now you need to redesign the interior as well?' she demanded as we came in and found Liam lounging in an armchair in the corner of her room, now pushed up to the window for a better view. 'You're not a partner yet, you know,' she quipped.

'Yet.' Liam's eyes twinkled teasingly in her direction. 'Just the women I was hoping to see,' he said, holding my eye contact for a little longer than was comfortable. 'The queen and her mini-me.'

I wasn't sure whether to take it as a compliment. After all, Vivian had beauty, intelligence, wit. Then there was her dishonesty and taste for extra-

marital sex. But Liam didn't know about that.

'How can we help you Mr Hartman?' She put a hand to her popped hip, walking past him to the locked filing cabinet and opening it to retrieve the files meant for me.

'I was actually after Ms Kidd.' Liam nodded towards me, now standing in the doorway, neither out nor in, the scent of his aftershave filling the space around us.

'And what can Hailey do for you?' Vivian asked, suspiciously. 'She's pretty busy already.' She slammed the files down on the table with more gusto than necessary.

'I could do with some assistance on countering the disproportionate costs the wife will no doubt claim in the settlement,' Liam said.

'But I didn't ask you to look into that.' Vivian sighed, shaking her head. 'Just like I didn't ask you to—' Vivian started before cutting herself short. *Didn't ask him to what?*

'No, but Jason did,' Liam replied, staring her straight in the eye. Vivian's eyes widened at the words, and she bit her lip as if to stop herself saying what she really wanted to say.

'That's...' Vivian began, her head darting from Liam to me. 'That's not important right now, we need to concentrate on preparing our case to take before a judge.'

I looked to Liam, smiling from ear to ear but at what I didn't know, perhaps at the thought of being able to ruffle her. What did Jason have to do with any of this? I knew better than to ask.

'But surely that's not the best thing for our client.' Liam began to pace the floor, the gap between eye to eye growing wider. 'I don't know why you —'

'Because I say so.' Vivian's voice raised to his, as my muscles tightened, trying to shrink. 'And until you're a partner, Liam, the partners are still listening to me.' In spite of her stature, you could see a glimpse of worry, masked by a dogged determination, an inability – a refusal – to lose the control she had worked so hard to earn. She thought Liam becoming partner and gaining power would diminish her own. She wanted women to step up, women like me. But surely, there was more to the story?

I looked between them now; I still couldn't get my head around it. Liam was good at his job, he was funny, he was kind.

'And I'm telling you, I don't want to settle.' *Settle.* That was all I had

wanted to do before starting at Taylor, Laters and Jones. *Settle* down. Be *settled*. Now, looking at Vivian and Liam, I wasn't so sure. Was settling all life had for me? The same job, the same moment, the same man – forever. We were all living longer now, the world was so much smaller, we could achieve so much more. And Vivian Jones didn't want to settle. Nor did I. It was the reason I had moved, the reason I was here.

'Well, just in case this *does* go to court...' Liam looked to Vivian with his own look of seniority, well versed in trying it on for size. 'I need Hailey to help us get our shit together.' Liam was now face to face with Vivian, polar opposites standing at either end of her office. She was the most powerful female lawyer in London, and he was the most charming one this side of the equator. If they were depending on me to get their shit together, they had bigger problems than my issues with Dom and Sophie and my future combined.

'Cheers!' Liam raised his glass towards me, his elbows leaning upon our usual table in Laters. I raised my glass to meet his, ignoring the vibrations of my attention-seeking phone beside me. 'Do you need to get that?' He nodded at my down-turned phone.

'It can wait.' I smiled across the table at him. They needed me to get their shit together. 'Have you got any indication of how low the appellant will go?'

'She shagged her husband's best mate on their kitchen table. So, I'd say *very*.'

'No.' I narrowed my eyes. 'I meant in the settlement.'

Liam laughed again, knowing exactly what I'd meant. Was this all a game to him?

'We'll get to that. But first, how are you?' Why did everyone seem to be interested in that today? Interested in me? Like Vivian's questioning that morning. What had they found out? My anxiety raged within me as my mind dreamt up full-blown posts in *The Legal Chirp* about me getting too close to the firm's very own Vivian Jones or their favourite up-and-coming partner. I looked at him now. Surely it wasn't him leaking gossip to the press? And anyway, we weren't *too* close, were we?

'I've not seen you properly since the fundraiser,' he said and leaned a little closer. He may not have seen me, but I had seen him; walking past my office, walking into Vivian's, walking up to meetings, chatting to the guys

hot-desking on our floor. I couldn't *stop* seeing him. But still I nodded: *No, I haven't seen you much since then either.*

'It was great, wasn't it?' I said, ignoring visions of his arm wrapped around Megan, or Vivian and Jason. Or worse still, Vivian in the bathroom, baring her soul to me.

'I don't know,' Liam said. 'I find those things quite stuffy. Megan likes them.'

'Oh yeah,' I replied, as if this was the first time I had thought about her since then. 'Megan seems nice,' I said and took a sip of my Old Fashioned, just as he took a sip of his.

'Yeah,' he breathed, taking another gulp. 'She's gorgeous,' he went on, leaving so much unsaid: *but when has gorgeous ever been enough?* 'Sometimes I wonder whether you can really find everything you're looking for in one person.' He pondered, musings on monogamy clearly the order of the week. 'I mean, I like how she looks and who she wants to be.' He was talking about her as if she were an aspirational lifestyle brand, not his wife. 'But then I'm drawn to the tenacity of some women, the ones who know who they are, intelligent and kind.' My mind conjured images of Vivian, unsure whether Liam really did despise her after all. 'You know, women like you.'

'What?' I couldn't help but spit the question across the table. I looked at him; his chiselled jaw, jet-black eyes, devilish good looks.

'I'm serious.' He took another sip of his cocktail as I questioned whether it was his first. 'If you didn't have a fella, I swear...' He ran a hand through his hair, unruffled and relaxed, as I looked around the room to make sure no one had overheard him.

'Yeah but I do,' I said. He knew about Dom already.

'I hope he knows how lucky he is,' Liam said and smiled again. 'You're a catch, Kidd.'

'He does.' I struggled to hold his gaze. He had bought that ring, hadn't he? But then it wasn't like he chased me now. I'm not even sure he *chased* me then. And he was pretty complacent around the house. And it did sometimes feel like the only conversations we had nowadays were about football or housework or homework.

'No, seriously,' he said, reaching a hand across the table, as I looked around the darkened room again. 'If I didn't have a wife, I'd be...'

'But you do,' I said and pushed his hand away. 'I only have an hour before I need to be somewhere,' I went on, trying to put a clear boundary in

place. 'We should probably talk about the case now.'

Chapter 25

ME: *Hey lovely.*

SOPHIE: *Hey friend.*

ME: *Sorry I've been so MIA.*

ME: *How are you doing today?*

SOPHIE: *Yeah, I'm okay thanks.*

SOPHIE: *No, better than okay. I'm good today.*

ME: *Good! And I've been thinking...*

SOPHIE: *Don't hurt yourself.*

ME: *Shall we do your party on your actual birthday this year?*

ME: *It's a Saturday.*

SOPHIE: *I know it's a Saturday.*

SOPHIE: *I've been counting down for months.*

SOPHIE: *Like I've been counting down to the run.*

ME: *Yeah, sorry I've missed so many of them.*

SOPHIE: *typing...*

ME: *Let's meet up tonight.*

ME: *Dom and I will come to yours?*

SOPHIE: *Sure. What time will you be round?*

ME: *I've got a dinner with V.*

ME: *But it shouldn't be a late one.*

ME: *Hey D. Change of plans.*

DOM: *Let me guess...*

DOM: *You're working late?*

ME: *No, actually*

ME: *We're going round to Sophie's.*

DOM: *But I thought we were going to finally start planning her party tonight?*

ME: *I know.*

DOM: *It's less than a month away.*

ME: *I know.*

DOM: *And it's her thirtieth.*

ME: *I KNOW.*

ME: *And she says she's good, but I get the feeling she needs some company.*

DOM: *I've been giving her plenty.*

ME: *What's that supposed to mean?*

DOM: *Like, I've been around but I know she's missing you.*

ME: *I know, that's why I suggested we go round tonight.*

ME: *And anyway, it's not like I can help it.*

ME: *It's work.*

'Have whatever you want.' Vivian smiled at me, her face inches from mine as we sat together on the sofa looking out across The Ned. I was people-watching, but everyone else was just watching Vivian. I took a sip of my champagne, mindful that I was drinking something that cost four times our monthly rent.

'I'm torn between the salmon supreme,' I said, reading the cheapest main on the menu. 'Or the grilled lobster,' I stammered, thrown by the eighty-

pound price tag and the thought of dismantling it in front of her.

‘Excuse me.’

I looked up from my menu to see a tall, blond-haired man smiling down at me.

‘Yes?’ Vivian asked.

‘I was wondering, if it’s not too bold, if I could have your number?’ He smiled, looking into my eyes. It was too bold, so bold I didn’t think people did this any more.

‘I’m afraid I’m taken,’ I said, though my heart fluttered, taken aback by him. He smiled, his confidence an armour that it would take more than my rejection to dent.

‘No worries,’ he said, brushing his hand through his hair, his wedding band catching my eye. So, he was pretty *taken* too? ‘If you change your mind, I’ll be at the bar.’

Vivian checked her watch.

‘I’ve only got a couple of hours,’ she said, her sentence lingering as if she wanted me to ask why. I didn’t take the bait. Dom’s voice still rang in my mind every time she asked me about my personal life: be careful, be careful, *be careful*. ‘I’m meeting him again tonight,’ she went on. ‘Have you got anything nice planned for the evening?’

‘I’m meeting my boyfriend at my best friend’s house,’ I said, taking another sip of my champagne, as I heard ‘Fairytale of New York’ fill the space around us. It was still weeks until Christmas. We still had time to plan Sophie’s thirtieth. I still had time to decide what the hell I wanted to do about Dom.

‘They spend time together without you?’ Vivian probed.

‘All the time,’ I said. ‘Not like that. They’re best friends too. We all are – we’re kind of like Sophie’s family, really.’

‘Sophie doesn’t have a family of her own?’ Vivian asked, taking another sip.

‘Not a good one.’

‘Well, if working in family law has taught me anything’ – Vivian softened – ‘true family are the people you pick.’

‘Exactly,’ I said and smiled back. ‘In fact, Dom and I are meant to be planning her this big party for her thirtieth.’

‘A surprise?’

‘More of an expectation.’ I laughed. ‘We do it every year. I’ve just been

so busy...'

'I could give you less work to do if it's too much...'

'No, no,' I corrected quickly. 'I love working on this case, on all the cases you've given me. It's just when I say "we" plan a party, I guess it doesn't really happen without me.'

'Classic.' Vivian rolled her perfectly made-up eyes. 'Even before children are on the scene there is so much emotional labour we women are expected to carry. Take it from me, you need to push back on that stuff early. If I could give you one piece of advice...' Vivian sat up a little straighter as my ears hung on her every word. It was like every piece I'd read in *Belle*, in *Elire*, coming to life right before my eyes.

'You know those expectations you feel?'

I nodded.

'Smash them to fucking pieces.' She grinned. 'And start making your own rules.'

'Now that,' I said, draining my champagne flute as a waiter immediately arrived at our table, 'is excellent advice.' I watched as the waiter placed another flute in front of Vivian before gliding back across the restaurant in the direction of the bar.

'Why didn't you give him your number?' Vivian asked, following my eyes back to the bar where the man who had asked me was still leaning. 'He was handsome.'

'He was married,' I said, eyes still fixed on the menu, flitting between my options.

'Got to treat yourself sometimes.' Vivian laughed. 'Now how about that lobster?'

Although I was pretty she was talking about more than just dinner.

'I'm here, I'm here,' I announced, as if Sophie hadn't just buzzed me up. I looked at the sofa where they would usually be sitting, hidden under a pile of pillows. Not a cushion was out of place. Instead, I saw the two of them sitting around the small wooden dining table, so often covered in a stack of schoolbooks. Tonight, they were cleared away and a single candle and two empty wine glasses sat there instead. Thankfully, the table was set for three.

'Oh, thank you for gracing us with your presence.' Sophie's retort fell somewhere between angry and amused as she drained the last of her wine.

Was I really that late? ‘We’ve both been WhatsApping you all day.’ Sophie looked towards Dom who was already standing up and pacing across the floor towards me.

‘I know, I’m so sorry,’ I said slowly, trying to gauge the strength of my four glasses of champagne with each and every syllable. ‘Work’s been mad.’

Dom arrived in front of me, placing a warm hand to my cold arm. For a moment, my eyes caught on his hoodie, the same one he had worn yesterday and the day before that.

‘I thought you were going to go home and get into something comfier?’ he said, eyes searching my blouse and suit trousers, as I tried my best not to breathe, sure he’d smell the alcohol on my breath.

‘And I thought you were going to dress up a bit tonight?’ Even my smile couldn’t mask my tone. I guess we were both disappointed we weren’t more in sync.

Walking across the room towards the table, I reached down to hug Sophie, who didn’t bother to get up from her chair. She was wearing dark jeans with a silk top I didn’t recognise, the perfect mix of smart and casual – at least one of us was getting things right.

‘You look nice,’ I said. ‘I love this,’ I continued, gesturing to her outfit and hoping the compliment would make up for all of her messages left unread.

Dom soon returned from Sophie’s kitchen with a new bottle of red and took a seat at the table. Pouring my glass more than half full, I picked it up with shaking hands to take my first tentative sips: after all the champagne, this was enough to send me over the edge.

‘I’m so sorry I’m late,’ I said again.

‘You’re here now, that’s what matters.’ Dom reached across the table to rest his hand on mine and I swear I saw Sophie flinch. I looked around the room, the candle and the low lights setting the mood. Unlike the world outside, Christmas mania hadn’t hit Sophie’s house share. And it wouldn’t. Not until she’d had her birthday and even then, she usually spent her Christmas with us.

‘No housemates around tonight?’ I asked.

‘They’re all out.’ She smiled, and I searched for the sadness beneath. Getting her own apartment was up there on her bucket list with running a marathon before she was thirty, but the chances of that were as slim as Sophie was fast becoming. I studied her figure; she was almost as small as

she had been when her dad had first left. Guilt rushed to my stomach: I should really have made more time to check in with her. But I was here now. *That's what matters.*

'And no Fifty?' I asked, taking another sip. Sophie's eyes went to Dom, who took another sip too. What was I missing?

'He's busy tonight,' she said, still looking towards Dom. Could they tell I was drunk? *Oh God*, they could tell I was drunk.

'And Pete?' I tried to enunciate the words.

'Busy too.' Sophie smiled again. She really did seem okay tonight. Good, even.

'Reckon they're seeing other people?' I asked.

'Why would you ask that?' Dom snapped, looking at Sophie, scared that the question might upset her.

'Because lots of other people are cool with seeing multiple people at the same time?' I suggested with a shrug, taking another sip of my red, draining it fast.

'Not Pete.' Sophie laughed, looking at Dom again. Clearly, they'd talked about this all before I arrived. 'I told you that he asked me to be exclusive, remember?'

I gave Sophie my blankest expression.

'When we were messaging about my birthday party? When I told you that you guys didn't need to plan anything special.'

'I remember—' I began, before Dom cut me off.

'Of course, we're planning something special,' he insisted, before fixing his eyes on me. Right now, we hadn't planned anything. 'I mean, unless you think what we've planned for you the last fifteen birthdays weren't anything special?'

'Dinosaur Dinner, Murder Madness, Sophie's Safari...' She grinned, remembering just a few of our ridiculous ideas. 'Nah, nothing special about them,' she joked.

'So why would this year be any different?' he said, beaming in my direction. *Because I have much more work to do? New responsibilities. A whole new bloody career?* 'Hailey?'

'Of course, we're planning something special,' I said, seeing Sophie's face lighting up at the thought. 'I've got it all under control.' Man, I was so far out of control. Vivian's advice from earlier began to fill my mind: *you know those expectations you feel?*

‘How are you feeling about the big three-oh?’ I asked, trying to sound nonchalant as my phone buzzed in my back pocket. I didn’t need to look at it to know it would be from Vivian.

‘Alright now, actually,’ she said to me but smiled at Dom. ‘I mean, I’m not where I thought I’d be by thirty, but you can’t force it, right? Jobs, houses, relationships, these things take time. Do I deserve to feel bad about myself because that’s not happened for me yet?’

‘No,’ Dom and I said in unison. ‘Absolutely not.’ I looked at her, wanting to ask more about Fifty – his real name, his real identity, her real feelings for him. But she was happy right now, and I wanted her to be happy. More than anything.

‘And you’re still enjoying dating them all?’

‘Yeah,’ she said. ‘I really am. I’m just not ready to put all my eggs in one basket. But I do feel a bit bad for leading three guys on.’

‘You must know which one you like best by now?’ Dom asked. ‘If you found out one of these guys was dating two other girls...’

‘Yeah, I know. I’d feel pretty shitty,’ Sophie said, reaching for the bottle of wine to top up her glass. ‘Especially if they were sleeping with them,’ she went on, looking sadder still. ‘But I really can’t say no to any of them. The thought of breaking up with any of them feels horrible, but the thought of getting serious with the wrong one feels even worse.’ She sighed. ‘I guess when I really think about it, I just feel a bit stuck.’ She looked at me and I wanted to throw my arms around her. I felt stuck too. Impossibly. Undeniably. Not one bit of me wanted to break up with Dom, but a huge part of me just felt so damn anxious about moving forwards, about never experiencing a *different kind of grass*. But Sophie didn’t need to feel stuck. She could shrug that all off, be free, like Vivian.

‘I think you’ll feel happier if you just pick one,’ Dom said seriously.

‘I disagree,’ I said.

‘*Huh?*’ It was Dom and Sophie’s turn to speak in unison.

‘Sophie, you’re beating yourself up for not wanting what you think you should want,’ I began. ‘But what if you don’t want a long-term monogamous relationship?’ I asked, trying not to look at Dom, sure he’d see right through me. But this wasn’t about me. This was about Sophie, my best friend, beating herself up because of society’s expectations thrust upon her. ‘You said you didn’t want one for the longest time, anyway.’

Out of the corner of my eye, I could see Dom squirm. I knew what he’d

be thinking. It was what we had both been thinking all along: she did want to let someone in, she was just scared of being hurt. Was it possible that I had so believed that of her, so wanted that narrow happy ending for her, that I'd heaped extra expectations on top of the heavy load we women already had to carry?

'What if it's just not for you?' I asked. 'Like, do people actually want to settle down with one person because that's what will actually make them happy or because that's what they *think* will make them happy? You know, because society tells them to? I mean, for loads of people, maybe that one person is worth saying no to all others. But for other people, maybe one or two partners, or a whole host of friends and lovers, or no partner at all will be the thing that feels right for them?'

Dom and Sophie stared on.

'I guess what I'm saying is, if dating three guys makes you happy, don't let me or society or anything else get in the way.'

Sophie gave me a hard stare, trying to process this latest revelation. I was her moral compass, her reason to keep believing in love. But love didn't have to come in one form, right? Maybe it could come in many.

'Yeah...,' Sophie spoke slowly. 'But I may have given them the impression we were exclusive. You know, just to buy some time to work it all out...'

'But that's the thing, Sophie,' I said. 'What if you don't need to work it all out?' I thought of Vivian. 'What if no one ever does?'

'But surely, I should be honest about, like, sleeping with more than one...'

'Is it hurting anybody?' I asked, not sure where this had started or how to stop.

'I guess not,' Sophie sighed. 'They don't know.'

'And are you enjoying seeing all of them?'

'Yes.' She grinned, a weight lifting from her shoulders.

'And you want to enjoy your life, right?' I didn't dare look at Dom.

'Right.'

'So, you know those expectations you feel?' I said, Vivian's voice still ringing in my ears.

Sophie smiled, nodding me on.

'Smash them to fucking pieces.'

Chapter 26

SOPHIE: *Hey babe.*

SOPHIE: *You were totally right, H. Feel better than I have in weeks.*

SOPHIE: *Isn't it mad that you can just get in your head about how wrong something is when actually it's totally okay? All those shoulds, when it should be wants. Mad, right?*

SOPHIE: *Like you said, what people don't know can't hurt them.*

SOPHIE: *I'm feeling so much calmer.*

ME: *That's amazing Soph.*

ME: *Just in a meeting.*

ME: *Speak later x*

I looked from Sophie's message to Vivian, sitting across from our client: one cheater and one cheatee in perfect harmony. Alek had chosen monogamy;

Vivian had chosen variety – and only one of them had a messy, expensive divorce on their hands. But as Vivian had said, once the fun and games were found out and someone got hurt, there was no going back. Except, our opposition was claiming there was.

‘She’s not backing down.’ Vivian leaned forward in her armchair. I sipped my loose-leaf tea and looked around the room, noticing the festive garlands hanging from every corner. We were back in Alek’s house.

‘She offered a settlement proposal?’ Alek asked again.

Vivian nodded. ‘She’ll settle for a third of what she claims is the marital wealth.’

‘And we’re considering it?’ Alek rubbed his face, more tired with every day that the case dragged on. I could have sworn this case was only about his power and pride, but with every moment we spent with him, I could feel his bravado fading away; now I wasn’t so sure. ‘We should consider it, right?’

‘Absolutely not,’ Marcus said, leaning forward in his chair, arms crossed in defiance. I could see Vivian glare in his direction. Alek looked deflated, a little disappointed that this wasn’t coming to an end. His eyes caught mine and for a moment I could hear his thoughts loud and clear: *I just want to move on.*

‘I have to agree with Marcus,’ Vivian spoke slowly, as if it pained her to say it. ‘Settling would look weak. We have a good case Alek,’ she assured him, reminding me afresh that this was just another case for Vivian, another case for her to win. And with Liam pushing for a settlement, she wasn’t going to lose that fight too. ‘Your ex-wife had nothing to do with your company, you were separated, your marriage was over. And I have a good feeling about this.’

I imagined the coverage such a case would attract, *Vivian Jones, Fighting for Fidelity, Striving for Sanctity*. It would look great for her, great for the firm.

‘But what would the judge think about us continuing to, you know... sleep together after the affair came to light?’ Alek asked as Vivian took another sip of her tea.

‘What’s to say she wasn’t just sleeping with you after you separated *because* of your business?’ Vivian threw her arms wide, her powers of persuasion needing no practice.

‘Well I never told her I was planning to sell.’ Alek shrugged.

‘But perhaps on some level she *knew*.’ Vivian put a hand to her chest. ‘A

wife's intuition.' Husband's intuition was evidently not a thing.

'Maybe she was just trying to make it work?' Alek asked in a whisper.

'She must have known there was no making it work.' Vivian shook the idea away. 'After you found out about your wife's affairs, there was no going back from there. A marriage without trust is meaningless.' Vivian reclined. *No further questions, your honour.*

'That's that then,' Marcus said and smiled at Vivian, who looked away. She had no interest in making friends, just money. Not making a name for herself but keeping her name on top.

'Yeah.' Alek looked at me with a sadness that shot to my stomach. 'Anyway, if you don't mind,' he continued, weary at the thought, 'I need to finalise a few things ahead of tomorrow. Still coming?' He turned to his son.

'Wouldn't miss it,' Marcus said, getting to his feet, as Vivian stiffened beside me.

'Are you still joining us?' Alek asked Vivian. 'The fundraiser in Manchester? The Hilton?'

She nodded, casting a brief look to Marcus.

'And Robert? And Liam? I've reserved rooms for both – too far, and far too much booze for either to drive.'

'Sadly, Robert can no longer make it,' Vivian explained. 'He sends his apologies.'

'Not to worry, I'm flattered even a few of you can.' Alek looked softer, his hard edges worn down. 'The charity really does appreciate the support,' he said again before turning to me, appearing more himself than he had done all week at the talk of his philanthropy. Maybe he wasn't just another businessman racking up supercars and supermodels after all?

'Hailey, if you're available? The charity I chair is putting on a large fundraiser in the North.' He said the location, like most Londoners, as a term entirely nondescript. The North. *Not London.* 'Dinner, drinks – we've rented the Hilton, should be a nice affair,' he said, glancing towards Vivian as if asking her permission. 'If you've not got plans and would like to join us, I'd be glad to save you a room?'

If you didn't have a fella...

It might be good for me to show my face.

If I didn't have a wife...

You know, another chance to represent the firm.

'Yes.' The word tasted good on my tongue. 'Yes, I'd love to.'

Chapter 27

SOPHIE: *Pete wants something serious.*

SOPHIE: *I should tell them I'm seeing other people, right?*

ME: *Do you want to tell them?*

SOPHIE: *Not really, no.*

ME: *Is it hurting anybody?*

SOPHIE: *No, I guess not.*

ME: *Now, when do I get to meet Fifty?*

ME: *Or even know his name?*

SOPHIE: *typing...*

‘Morning, trouble,’ Dom leaned over to my side of the bed and put his arms around me, the feel of his skin against mine a little sweaty. I tried to roll onto

the cold edge of the bed, but he held me tight. ‘Not so fast,’ he said, placing his lips on mine.

‘I need to get up,’ I moaned.

‘No, you don’t,’ he objected. ‘You’ve got ages.’ He reached across to his bedside, grabbing his glasses and putting them on before returning his hands to my sides.

‘Dom, you do know initiating sex sometimes takes a bit more than a quick grope?’

‘That’s not what I would call—’

‘You haven’t even brushed your teeth,’ I said, as Dom shook his head at the thought. Had Dom stopped making an effort? Or was being around Vivian just drawing my attention to the fact he never had?

‘Nor have you,’ Dom said under his breath.

‘Yes, and I’m not the one trying to come on to you.’

‘I know, you’ve not done that since you started your new job.’

‘That’s not true,’ I snapped back, not entirely sure it wasn’t.

‘Come on, Hailey.’ Dom nestled into me again.

‘But I need to pack.’ I pushed his heavy hands off me, not meaning it to feel so forceful. My boyfriend still wanted me; that was a good thing.

‘You leaving me?’ Dom joked, a hint of seriousness in his voice. He’d been acting weird ever since our conversation at Sophie’s. He was standoffish one second, over-attentive the next. ‘Where are we going, then?’

‘I’m going to a client fundraiser with work tonight,’ I said.

‘Why didn’t you tell me? I kept my evening free, thought I might actually get to see my girlfriend for once.’

‘Work kind of just sprang it on me.’ I shrugged.

‘Yeah, they seem to be doing that a lot lately.’

‘Vivian’s getting me more involved.’ I smiled at the thought. ‘Which is a *good* thing.’

‘For you, maybe.’ Dom ran a hand through his hair, worry lined across his brow.

‘I always thought a good thing for one of us was a good thing for both of us?’ It had been when something good happened for Dom, or Sophie. I’d always celebrated their highs, helped to make them happen. I thought it was what family did. ‘We’re a team, right?’

‘Yes, but teams also need to invest in time *together*.’

But I’d spent the last sixteen years of our three-way friendship investing

in time together, moving mountains to keep all three of our lives in sync.

‘I’m sorry,’ I said, the sinking feeling in my stomach growing stronger still. ‘I only found out about it yesterday and then I got in so late.’

‘That’s okay.’ Dom’s tone softened. ‘I get it.’ Well, he didn’t, but he was trying. That had to count for something. Vivian’s voice rang in my mind: *some guys feel intimidated by an ambitious woman...* ‘But why the packing, the costume changes?’ He leaned in to kiss me on the top of my head. I used to love it when he did that.

‘They’ve actually got me a room at the Hilton.’ I couldn’t help but smile at that. I must be the only trainee in London getting put up at a client fundraiser.

‘Single?’ Dom interjected.

‘Double, I reckon.’

‘So maybe I can come with you? Make use of the room?’ He snuggled in closer, kissing my clavicle, really not caring when or where I had to be.

‘I don’t think it’s that kind of thing, I’m afraid.’

‘What kind of thing is it?’

‘I’m not sure, like a work thing,’ I said again, hoping he’d understand, that he wouldn’t press me further. Was Megan going? Jason? It hadn’t crossed my mind to ask.

‘Who’s going?’ Evidently Dom was better at getting to the point.

‘Me, Vivian,’ I began, as Dom stiffened at the sound of her name. I knew he didn’t like our situation, but now he looked like he despised it. Dom thought she had a hold on me, when really it was me who had the dirt on her. I thought he knew that. ‘And Liam.’

‘Liam?’ Dom pressed on, ‘You’re always talking about him.’

‘No, I’m not,’ I said, heart throbbing against my chest.

‘You are,’ he insisted, brushing sleep from his eyes.

‘He’s just working on Aleksander’s case.’ That part was true at least.

‘Liam got a cracking bowtie collection too?’ Dom joked, but I knew he was trying to find out more about him. I shook my head. ‘More money than sense?’

‘No, he’s actually got a lot of sense,’ I snapped, not knowing why it bothered me.

‘He senior?’

‘Yes.’

‘Old?’

‘Not exactly.’ Older than me, but not *too* old.

‘And now you’re sleeping over in this big, fancy hotel together.’ Dom leaned his face closer to mine. ‘Should I be worried?’ He tilted my chin up to his and kissed me softly.

No. I replied wordlessly. But as Liam’s face threatened to push Dom’s from my mind, I knew for sure that I should be.

‘Hey Kidd.’ I looked up, having been carefully studying the staircase as I negotiated my way down into the lobby, worried I would catch the bottom of my dress and go flying. It was every bit as grand as Alek’s country house, the sweeping marble floors stretching for miles. A huge Christmas tree reached up to the ceiling, dripping with glass decorations and fairy lights that sent light bouncing across the room.

Liam leaned against the reception bar, Old Fashioned clutched in one hand, the other clutched to his heart. ‘Someone call the police!’ His voice echoed loudly as I made my way over towards him, each move I made just another opportunity to trip and fall. I glanced down at the sage-green silk sweeping from my torso to my toes, thankful that I’d finally got the dress code right for once. It was the dress I had seen with Vivian at Harrods. When she’d whispered, ‘Dom doesn’t need to find out’, and I’d forced my shaking hands to press my four-digit pin into the card reader for a four-digit dress; peer pressure had never been so pricey.

‘The police?’ I asked, confused.

‘Yeah, someone’s just stolen my breath away.’ He gave me a sly smile and turned around to face the barman, not waiting to see me roll my eyes.

‘Oh *please*,’ I reprimanded him, although I was far from disappointed with his reaction. I hated to admit it, but I knew I’d been dressing for him. Liam handed me a flute of champagne, which I downed far too quickly, the bubbles mixing with the nerves that filled my stomach.

‘I’m glad you’re here,’ he said and it sounded like he meant it.

‘No company tonight?’ I raised my glass, letting the bubbles replace my nerves.

‘Just me.’ He grinned over his tumbler. ‘You? No lovely boyfriend in tow?’

I couldn’t meet his eye. Dom didn’t belong here. That was my life at home. This was Taylor, Laters and Jones.

‘Not really his scene though, right?’ Liam grinned, as my stomach tumbled.

‘Just me,’ I whispered, taking another sip.

Just him, just me. So why did it feel like *us*?

Liam hooked his arm through mine, as we walked into the busy Grand Hall. The room was alive with noise and colour. Countless Christmas trees stood at four-metre intervals around its perimeter, huge tables laid out with candle-lit pieces in their centre.

Liam steered me through the crowds and towards the bar at the edge of the room. I looked around for familiar faces; would it look strange to them that we were together like this?

Dom, Dom, *Dom*. My mind screamed the warning as my heels tapped the floor. I wasn’t doing anything wrong. This was networking, schmoozing, getting ahead so that maybe one day we could finally have that mortgage approved and maybe even have a wedding. If I could just say yes to him. If I didn’t screw this up first.

As we reached the bar, a familiar figure turned around to face us.

‘Hailey,’ Vivian said, slightly taken aback. ‘I forgot that you were coming.’ She glanced from me to Liam. Really? It had only been yesterday that I’d been invited; she’d been in the very same room as me, albeit a little distracted. A little like now. I knew she was nervous about me telling anyone about her affairs, but Liam seemed to be the highest on her list. He, for one, seemed completely unaware of any awkwardness, placing his hand on the small of my back and asking for my order.

‘Hi Vivian.’ I went in to kiss her cheek, in a subtle attempt to shrug Liam’s hand away. ‘You look lovely.’ And she did, a vision in dark metallic grey.

‘You do,’ Liam agreed, hand still on my back.

‘As do you both. Anyway, I’d better go and find Alek and give him our best.’ She excused herself quickly.

‘Reckon she’s giving more than her best?’ Liam raised an eyebrow.

‘*Alek*?’ I choked on my champagne.

‘Aleksander Ruslan, billionaire extraordinaire?’

‘She’s with Jason,’ I shot back at him.

‘I know that, I was joking.’ Liam laughed, taking a sip.

What if I told him about Vivian and her lover? The secret would bring us closer. But then what if he told someone else? It would break everything

apart. I could feel the secret inside me, just wanting to be released, to have me scream the words across the room, to finally tell someone who understood the gravity of what I knew – someone other than just Dom. *Dom*.

‘You need to lighten up, Kidd,’ Liam said, motioning with his glass for me to drink up.

‘I’m trying.’ I laughed, taking another sip obediently. ‘It’s just there’s so much tension between you and...’

‘Yeah, I guess this case has kind of become a test of my partnership potential.’

‘No, it’s more than that,’ I said, suddenly feeling bolder. ‘I feel like there’s something you’re not telling me.’ My sentence hung between us, blurring the boundaries between work and pleasure. ‘Am I being crazy?’

‘Yes,’ Liam said, placing his empty glass on the bar and picking up the next. ‘You are being crazy, but not in a bad way – and not for thinking there’s something going on.’ He smiled, leading us away from the crowds at the bar and out into the room. ‘Viv and I – we have a few secrets.’

Well, we have a few secrets, too.

‘Oh yeah?’ I followed him to the almost empty dancefloor where a smattering of people swayed in time with the beat of background music, excited for the band to come.

‘Yes,’ Liam said, as I followed his eyes across the room and in her direction. We could see her bare back, laced with light grey straps, as she laughed in response to something Alek was saying, placing a hand on his broad, tuxedoed arm. ‘Can you keep a secret?’

‘Yes,’ I breathed, not sure whether I wanted to know if it was the same as mine.

‘I know something that would damage Vivian’s reputation,’ Liam admitted, his eyes on mine. Did he? How could he know? But that would explain her behaviour around him. Unless, there was something going on between the two of them? The thought made my stomach plummet. I thought about the tension between them, and the time I had seen him, tie undone, walking from her house. Except he had said that wasn’t him.

‘Is there something, like, going on between you two?’ I lowered my voice, scared of his response. I studied his face as it crumpled into laughter, his dimples inviting me in.

‘God no,’ Liam said, shocked. ‘She would be so lucky.’ He ran a hand through his silver-flecked hair. It looked nothing like the dark long locks on

Vivian's mystery man, I reminded myself again and again. I tried to laugh my question off, as if I was joking, as if a wash of relief wasn't coursing through my veins.

'I'm not saying I'm an angel.' His eyes lingered on my lips before returning to my gaze. 'But I'm not stupid, sleeping with a partner is not the way to become one.'

'Then what do you have on her?' I took a little step closer.

'Well you can't tell anyone...'

'I promise,' I whispered.

'Their youngest, Rose, was just caught having an affair with a married man.' He gave me a long look, as I recalled Jason's words about her from that dinner together: *she's fallen for this older guy in the space of about two months*. 'Vivian found out and they slapped a gagging order on him and have sent Rose off to live in Paris.'

'Paris?' I thought back to that article I had read in *Belle*, the perfect family celebrating forty years of marriage together.

'Pushing the problem away.' Liam nodded.

'But why do you know about that?' I asked, ashamed to be enjoying the gossip. Little did Liam know that it was only the tip of the iceberg.

'Jason called me, wanted a second opinion on the NDA,' he explained, in hushed tones. 'Thought Vivian was a little too involved in the case.' Liam opened his mouth to speak again but stalled for a second, his eyes lingering on my lips again. 'It was me,' he sighed, shoulders sagging. 'That night you thought you saw me leaving Vivian's. I had just been with Jason helping him with the NDA. I'm sorry I lied to you, Kiddo.' He broke off to study my expression. 'I just swore I wouldn't tell *anyone*. When Vivian found out Jason had called me, she hit the roof. She thinks I'll use it against her to make partner...'

I thought back to that day I'd seen him at Vivian's. I *knew* it had been him. Man, he was a good liar, but then, he was only helping Jason, protecting Vivian, trying to do the right thing; I guess I knew what *that* felt like.

'But why would her daughter's actions be held against her?' I asked, confused.

'It hardly goes with the Jones' *family values* brand, right?' Liam let out a little laugh.

'I guess not.' I took another sip, silencing my own secrets.

'She promised that if I told a soul, not making partner would be the least

of my worries.'

'So why are you telling me now?' I asked, his black eyes staring into my own.

'Because you asked whether there was something going on between us...' Liam began, reaching out a hand to mine. Against all my better judgement, my palm opened up to his. 'And you thinking that really bothers me, because, well...' His eyes seared into my soul. 'I kind of think there's something going on between *us*.'

Chapter 28

DOM: *How's it going, fancy pants?*

DOM: *Hope you're having a ball (geddit?)*

DOM: *I know I've not been perfect lately.*

DOM: *But I still love you.*

DOM: *You know that, right?*

ME: *typing...*

'Right, I'm off to bed.' Alek swayed up from his seat at our table. He'd been doing the rounds but had settled on ours, right next to Vivian. He knew the people to keep sweet – the people who were fighting for his 1.567 billion pounds.

'Me too, actually.' Vivian yawned, shooting a look towards our side of the table. Did she want me to leave too, so she could keep a close eye on me?

'Come on Viv, one more in the lobby,' Liam called across to her. She shook her head, yawning again, and followed Alek towards the lifts.

‘Coming for one?’ Liam flashed his bright white smile in my direction. I should be going to bed, too. To ring Dom or Sophie.

‘Sure,’ I said, following him out of the ballroom and into the dimly lit foyer.

‘Bottoms up, Kidd.’ He placed another glass of champagne in front of me, as fresh and sparkly as my first but undoubtedly my...

‘What number is this?’ I lifted my head to face him; he laughed away my concern.

‘Who’s counting?’

DOM: *Are you having a good time?*

DOM: *Soph’s just popping over for a bit.*

I read Dom’s message and stashed my phone, only now noticing how empty the bar around us had become. One man sat facing the barman and another couple were sat sipping steaming mulled wine, legs entwined, entirely unaware that anyone else was there. Apart from them, we were alone. And we shouldn’t be. We categorically shouldn’t be.

‘Missing Megan?’ I asked, forcing her name into the space between us.

‘Not right now, no.’ Liam shook his head, an amused smile on his lips, as if wanting to laugh at my awkwardness: why was I talking about Megan now?

‘Missing Dom?’ he asked in turn.

‘Yeah, a bit,’ I replied, not meeting his eye. It sounded like a lie.

‘Why didn’t you invite him?’ Liam asked. ‘I’m sure Alek wouldn’t have minded.’

‘He was busy tonight.’ I took another sip, washing down another lie.

‘Too busy to see you in that dress?’ Liam’s eyes lingered on my neckline. Dom was rarely too busy, but he absolutely would not be seeing this dress – or the receipt.

‘He’s hanging out with our friend Sophie tonight.’ I steered us back on steady ground.

‘Alone?’ Liam raised his eyebrows; the same way Vivian had when I told her about our three-way friendship.

‘Yes, but not like *that*.’

‘Like what, then?’

‘Like *friends*,’ I said, Vivian’s doubts about that suddenly ringing in my mind.

‘Oh, come on, Kiddo.’ Liam chuckled over his cocktail as my cheeks grew pink. ‘You’re old enough to know guys and girls can’t be friends...’ He let the sentence linger between us as his eyes drifted down to my exposed neckline again; his case in point. I thought of Dom and Sophie now, snuggled on the sofa together back at our flat. Of walking in on them at a candle-lit table. I could see why an outsider would think that, but I knew Dom and Sophie. I had known them my whole adult life. There was absolutely no way.

‘I bet Megan would have loved this,’ I said.

‘Yeah, probably a little too much.’ Liam looked sad, taking another sip. I gazed around the dimly lit room. I knew I shouldn’t be here, but Liam was my friend, I didn’t want to see him drink alone. ‘Sometimes I think she just married me because of the money, you know?’

‘I’m sure that’s not true.’ My voice softened as I tried not to slur.

‘Of all the people I could have fallen for,’ Liam mused. ‘Sometimes I wish I’d married another lawyer, someone who, you know, didn’t get wrapped up in all of...’ He waved his hand around, drawing attention to the decadence all around us.

‘Someone like Vivian,’ I suggested.

‘I can’t believe you thought that.’ Liam smiled tenderly.

‘Well I didn’t know about Rose,’ I said. Vivian’s unease around him and our friendship now made perfect sense. She didn’t want me taking his side; she didn’t want me giving him any ammunition in his fight for partnership. And I wouldn’t. Vivian’s morals may have been a bit flawed, but she wasn’t the only person in the world to have an affair.

‘Vivian made sure of it,’ Liam said. ‘I guess I admire that about V... she’ll do anything to protect the people she loves.’

And she really loved Jason. Just like I really loved Dom. I had always thought that doing anything for the people you loved meant bending over backwards to make their lives easier, saying no to things so that they could say yes.

‘You don’t really think that do you?’ Liam rested a hand on my arm.

‘Think what?’ I asked as if he’d just read my mind.

‘That I want someone like Vivian?’

‘Well, no... not really...’

He was leaning in closer. I should leave. I needed to leave.

‘Because you know I mean someone like you.’ Liam moved his hand to my knee, as I looked around the room in case anyone could see. ‘No one is here,’ Liam urged, leaning closer still.

‘I should... go.’ I pushed my drink to one side but let his hand linger a little longer.

‘Hailey, sorry. I thought there was something here...’ Liam turned his dark gaze on me.

‘There can’t be.’

‘Dom doesn’t need to know.’ Liam’s eyes burnt mine; he’d never looked better. He was a senior associate, almost a partner, with money, power, a bright future, a bright mind. I wanted him. Man, I hated how much I wanted him. ‘No one will ever know,’ he said.

‘Yes,’ I whispered, forcing myself to my feet. ‘But I would.’

It took all my strength to turn and walk away.

Chapter 29

FIVE WEEKS AFTER THE MOMENT

His tongue parted my lips, his hand reaching to my hair as he drew me in and whispered into my ear, 'I missed you.' I pulled away to look Dom full in the face. His hair was messy from his two-hour head start relaxing on the sofa.

'I missed you too.' I looked up through his beard, my chin pressed to his chest. He laughed down at me before engulfing me in his arms completely. I held onto him tighter, scared one of us might let go, not sure which one would break away first.

'I can tell,' he said into my hair, breathless and hungry for more. 'I'll be less pissed off about you going away next time if you promise to come back like this.'

Guilty. That's how I felt as I came home. But nothing happened. *But you got close, you got very close.*

'Did you have fun with Sophie?' I asked, pushing away all thoughts of Liam as I held Dom closer still. His eyes searched mine, something like worry skimming across his face.

'Let's not talk about Sophie right now.' Dom tightened his arms around me.

'Okay,' I whispered against his chest. 'So, what do you want to do tonight?' I grinned. I didn't want to let him go. This was Dom we were talking about. My Dom. He looked across at the television, then to the pile of takeaway menus.

'Why don't we go out?' I was still a little hungover. But I wanted to make the effort, we *needed* to make the effort.

'I'm knackered, Hailey.' Dom smiled down at me, still in his arms. From

what? I'd been the one working all hours, working late into the night. It wasn't like he was closing deals at eleven p.m., not like Vivian, not like Liam.

'Late night?' I couldn't help but stiffen. Outside our home, I was moving, going places, going *out*. 'Did Sophie stay over?' She often did, but usually I was here too. Liam's words from the bar circled through my mind: *guys and girls can't be friends...*

'Can we not go one second without talking about Sophie?' Dom bristled.

'Why wouldn't you want to?' My eyes narrowed, my voice a little short.

'Because.' Dom sighed. 'It's finally just us two again.' Except, we'd never been just us two. 'And I don't want to go out and have to shout at you over some crappy background noise and drink overpriced cocktails.' But I was starting to *like* overpriced cocktails. 'Plus, if we stay in, we could... you know...'

'I thought you were knackered?' I muttered under my breath. He only had the energy when it suited him. Always too tired to read, or get a hobby, or try something new.

'But first, fuel.' He spoke loudly as he pressed 'play' on our speakers, old-school Fall Out Boy booming into the room. The beat of the track transported me back, to a time before real jobs and real responsibilities and real decisions about a very real future...

'Great.' I moved across the room towards him, wanting to keep the tone light. I really wanted to have a good time with him, to want to be nowhere else but here. 'We really need to start planning this sodding party though...'

'Since when did Sophie's birthday become the "sodding party"?' Dom asked.

'We've always done something special,' I said.

'No, I mean, the "sodding" part. You used to love planning Sophie's party.'

'Yeah, I guess I don't have as much time for it any more.'

'There's a difference between not having the time and not making the time, Hailey.'

'Says you.' The words spilled out before I could stop them.

'What's that supposed to mean?'

'Nothing,' I lied, before wondering whether he'd actually understand. 'I just don't think you realise that I don't have as much time as people like—'

'Like us part-timers?' Dom cut me off, unable to hide his annoyance.

‘I didn’t say that.’

‘Teachers work really hard too, you know Hailey,’ Dom pressed on, worry lining his forehead. ‘Sometimes I think you think you’re the only one who does nowadays.’

‘I’m sorry.’ I sighed, seeing the hurt in his eyes. I was so fed up of being sorry. For being a bad girlfriend, for being a bad friend. But I’d given so much to those roles for so long. ‘You’re right,’ I said, feeling my shoulders sag in surrender. ‘Let’s just stay in. How’s she doing anyway?’ I asked as Dom looked confused again. ‘Sophie.’

‘Oh right, yeah. She seems fine actually. Starting to enjoy where she’s at right now.’

‘That’s good,’ I said quietly. Once again, I’d managed to solve *Sophie’s* problems.

‘And how about you?’ Dom looked to me, reaching a hand to me, trying to steer us from hot-headed to horny again. ‘Are you enjoying where we’re at right now?’ he asked cautiously.

‘Yeah, good,’ I answered quickly. ‘I mean, there’s been a lot of change,’ I added, my voice cracking in the process before I forced another smile; I needed to keep it together.

‘Yeah.’ Dom pulled me into his arms once again. ‘Speaking of change...’ he whispered into my hair, moving his hand down my back before searching to hold my hand in his. Oh shit. This was it. The moment, the next move. *I’m not ready.*

‘Yeah?’ I breathed, heart beating faster, mind going a mile a minute. I couldn’t tell Dom I’d found the ring, that after telling Sophie she should just embrace where she was at, what she wanted, I couldn’t bring myself to do the same.

‘I was wondering whether we shake up our Christmas plans this year?’ Dom pulled away a little to look down at me. Our Christmas plans? The three of us would always go for a walk together and then head to my family for the evening. ‘I know it’s a bit last minute, but I wondered what you thought of going away somewhere in the evening, just us two?’

‘Oh,’ I said, heart hammering all the more. Our anniversary. *That ring.* My stomach spun in summersaults.

‘Unless you don’t want to,’ he added hurriedly.

‘Yeah, that sounds...’ My sentence trailed off into nothingness.

‘What are you thinking?’ Dom asked softly.

That I don't want to break up but am terrified of moving forwards. That I thought I'd feel sure by now.

'I just feel...'

Like there's a big fat question mark over the right thing to do and whether that even exists any more.

'A bit overwhelmed.' I breathed before adding, 'You know, about work and the party and the future and stuff...'

'I get it,' Dom said. 'It's a lot to navigate.'

'Does it ever bother you...?' I stopped the sentence before it could form itself.

'What?' he asked.

'No, it doesn't matter.' I shook my head. 'It was a silly question.'

'You can tell me anything,' Dom whispered as my stomach lurched.

'Does it ever bother you that I'm the only person you've ever been with?' For a moment Dom looked a little taken aback, like he wasn't sure where the question had come from.

'No,' he said. 'Does it ever bother you?'

'No,' I whispered, but looking into his eyes, it felt like a lie.

'You know we're going to get there, Hayby.' He leaned to rest his nose against mine.

Yes, I did. But I wasn't sure where 'there' was any more or whether I needed to take one last detour to help me to figure it all out.

ME: *How're things?*

SOPHIE: *Great. Work's good.*

ME: *And the guys?*

SOPHIE: *All going strong.*

ME: *Feel good?*

SOPHIE: *Kind of, I'm not sure. Is it bad? Should I choose one?*

ME: *If you're enjoying all of them, I wouldn't worry.*

SOPHIE: *Ha!*

SOPHIE: *Since when has this ever been your advice?*

SOPHIE: *What has got into you, Hailey Kidd?*

‘Liam?’

I looked up from my desk and through the glass walls at the sound of Vivian calling his name. It wasn't that she had said it loudly, but I guess I was on high alert ever since Manchester.

‘How was Manchester?’ Daniel asked across our desks.

‘Yeah, it was fun,’ I said, swivelling my chair to face him. He looked tired, disappointed.

‘Any gossip?’ he pressed on, rubbing his eyes before forcing back his floppy fringe.

‘Not really,’ I lied, thoughts of Liam's confession about Vivian's daughter filling my mind. ‘Amazing dinner,’ I deflected, as Daniel's face fell further. We both knew he should have been there too. He'd worked too hard and too long to be left on the sidelines. If I was him I'd be looking to transfer to another team by now; what was really keeping him here?

‘Did Vivian make an appearance?’ he asked, taking a sip of his coffee; he should be hooked up to a drip.

‘She was there, yes,’ I replied, as his eyes darted in the direction of her office. ‘How's everything been here?’ I tried to manoeuvre the conversation back onto more familiar ground. Daniel looked down at his paper-covered desk, to his two phones face up on top of them. Just like Vivian: one for work, one for pleasure.

‘It's been, you know’ – he checked his phone again – ‘a bit lonely without you.’

‘Everything okay?’ I asked. Something was up.

‘It's this girl again.’ He sighed deeply. ‘This *woman*,’ he corrected. ‘We've been on loads of... err... *dates* now...’ His stutter suggested they

were more than just that. ‘But she’s gone quiet again. She always does.’ His eyes looked red. ‘I just know I need to move on.’

‘Oh Daniel,’ I said, heart lurching as I stood to go over to him. He took one last look into Vivian’s office to check no one was looking at us before putting his head in his hands.

‘Are you sure she doesn’t see a future with you?’ I lowered my voice to ask.

‘Pretty sure, yeah.’ He shrugged, clearly gutted.

‘Why?’

‘It’s complicated,’ Daniel whispered back, looking sadder still.

‘Isn’t everything?’ I sighed. I had once thought love was simple.

‘I know she likes me,’ Daniel said. It didn’t come across cocky like the first time we had met, but genuine and sweet. ‘But you can’t make someone sacrifice their freedom, right?’

‘You make being in a relationship sound like a chore.’ I laughed; it wasn’t funny.

‘I want to be.’ Daniel put a hand to his heart. ‘But she...’

‘Look at me,’ I demanded. He raised his puppy-dog eyes. ‘What woman wouldn’t be lucky to have you?’ Daniel managed to crack a smile. ‘I say you just need to have it out with her. Ask her why you guys can’t just give it a proper go. She could just be scared?’

‘She doesn’t strike me as the type.’

‘Confidence, Daniel.’ I echoed Liam’s words to me all those weeks ago. ‘Now, let me take a look at this girl, this *woman*,’ I corrected myself before Daniel had the chance. He reached for his personal phone and instead of swiping to his photos of her, stashed it in his pocket. ‘Hey, let me see her,’ I half joked, unsure what he had to hide.

‘Hailey, we should get back to work.’ He shifted in his seat.

‘Why won’t you show me her picture?’ He was the one who had brought her up in the first place. I thought he *wanted* to show me her.

‘Why do you want to see her so much?’ he snapped back.

‘I don’t,’ I said, feeling stung. ‘It’s just you’ve asked for my help and I thought...’

Daniel sighed, eyes darting back into Vivian’s office. ‘It’s my fault, I shouldn’t have started talking about my personal life with you.’

‘Why not?’ I thought we had become friends. We *were* friends, weren’t we?

‘Because we’re at work,’ he said carefully, his face flushing as he did. ‘In fact, we should probably be careful about blurring the boundaries,’ he went on, his face morphing from my friend back into the cocky stranger he was before. What the *actual*? ‘It never ends well.’ Daniel glanced towards Vivian’s office again.

‘What’s *that* supposed to mean?’ I asked.

‘Just be careful, Hailey.’

‘What do you mean?’ I asked again, hurriedly, as both Vivian and Liam made their way to the door.

‘It never ends well,’ Daniel repeated, busying himself with his papers.

What doesn’t end well? There was nothing going on! My cheeks burned red as my mind filled with objections. We were supposed to be friends. Now he was accusing me, hiding things from me. I stood to my feet and sat back behind my desk. I had only asked to see a picture of his *woman*. A woman clearly using him for just one thing. I hammered away on my keyboard, letting my anger spill out.

I glanced back at Daniel, floppy brown hair covering his eyes whilst he typed a message on his personal phone. I looked up to see Vivian standing in her office, looking down at her own phone and smiling.

No, it couldn’t be.

But it all made sense.

Of course, it was him.

‘Kidd?’ Liam interrupted my revelation, having materialised by my side. I looked at Daniel, still busying himself with paperwork. Was I the only one saying no to my body’s desires? ‘Just to let you know,’ he said, rather cryptically, ‘the offer still stands.’

Chapter 30

‘I slept with my *husband*.’ Our opposition accentuated the last word, eyes fixed on Vivian before her, even though the husband in question was sitting awkwardly next to me.

‘Excuse me, my client—’ Talia’s lawyer tried to regain control over the situation, but we all knew who was really running the show.

‘And it had nothing to do with the fact that he sold his company for over 1.5 billion pounds?’ Vivian interrupted him, leaning closer to her counterpart. I could feel Alek shift beside me as I tried my best to read his expression.

‘No, it didn’t.’ Talia looked at Alek this time, ignoring her own lawyer completely. Gone was her see-through catsuit. Today, her long blonde hair was tied up in a ponytail, her jumper and black jeans as understated as her muted make-up.

‘I don’t believe you,’ Vivian said, her own hair falling loose.

‘Vivian,’ Alek warned, raising a hand in her direction, as if trying to stop her. I studied his face, lined with sadness. Even his paisley suit looked tired.

‘I’ll ask you again,’ Vivian pressed on, ignoring Alek, ignoring Talia’s lawyer. ‘Why did you sleep with your ex-husband after you had cheated on him and separated, and he had just sold his company for 1.567 *billion* pounds?’

‘Vivian, *please*...’ Alek pleaded.

‘Why?’ Vivian pressed on.

I looked at Talia now, young and pretty and about to make millions. And yet, as she fixed her gaze on a man old enough to be her father, her eyes welled with tears.

‘Because I was still desperately in love with him,’ she whispered. Alek stared back, tears in his own eyes. I had always thought this divorce was about the money, but sitting here now, I could tell it had always meant more.

‘But you cheated on him, *a lot*.’ Vivian looked up from her phone, no doubt receiving texts from Jason or Daniel. It really was the pot calling the kettle black. Apart from one thing: Vivian was careful enough to not get caught.

‘I know, I made a mistake.’ Talia looked at Vivian, who was far from convinced. Was the mistake getting caught? ‘I fell for him,’ she said it as if she didn’t have a choice. My mind filled with thoughts of Liam. Were some things just inevitable?

‘But I still loved Alek, very much. I still wanted to make it work.’

‘Tell me,’ Vivian said, as Alek shuffled beside her, ‘how did you think your marriage was going to survive something like that?’

‘Because we loved each other,’ Talia argued, now speaking to Alek, who was saying very little; he’d been told to keep quiet. ‘And for a time, we wanted to make it work.’

‘Hmmm,’ Vivian said, letting the silence speak for itself.

‘Honestly, Vivian,’ Talia argued, tears still prickling in her eyes. ‘I loved him.’

‘That was intense.’ Vivian turned to me in the cab back from Talia’s lawyers’ offices. She pulled her phone from her handbag, emblazoned with the gold VJ on the case. I read the message over her shoulder – *See you tonight?* – before she could swipe it away. But I couldn’t catch who she was messaging. She breathed a sigh of relief.

‘I know,’ I said, trying to concentrate on the case. ‘And Alek seemed so upset. Is a settlement definitely off the table?’

‘And give Talia a third of the company?’ Vivian barely looked up from her phone.

‘Their lives did still seem pretty intertwined after they separated.’

‘I’ve been looking into how we can argue that the business sale should be seen as a “special contribution” when it comes to the division of the assets,’ Vivian said, ignoring me.

‘But what about *Work v Gray*?’ I asked, pretty sure that dragging this case out any longer wasn’t doing any good for our client. ‘In that case the

husband argued similarly, but the court still decided that it didn't entitle him to more.'

'Hailey.' Vivian finally looked up from her messaging. 'I think you need to unwind.' She stashed her phone in her bag and pulled out her make-up case, proceeding to touch up her already perfectly lined eyes. 'This kind of work can be all-consuming at the beginning but if you're going to build a long and successful career, you really need to find ways to switch off from the office. How do you plan on doing that?'

'Oh,' I sighed. 'Just a night in, relaxing.'

'No plans with your lovely boyfriend?' She somehow made lovely sound like *boring*.

'Not really,' I said.

'You should try something new,' she said, eyes lighting up at the thought.

'I'm not sure I know what you mean,' I stammered, reaching to find my phone.

'You're more likely to regret the risks you don't take than the ones you do.'

'Maybe I'll go for a run,' I said quietly. I knew Vivian was talking about more than new challenges. 'If my best friend wants to...'

'No plans of your own then?'

Plans of my own. Usually my evenings revolved around others: Sophie wanting to train for a marathon, Dom wanting to stay in. I had never really minded before.

'Take it from someone who's been there.' Vivian reached a hand out to rest on mine. 'Sometimes you need to take a few risks to find out what *you* really want to do.'

What I really wanted to do? Being there for Sophie and Dom had always been enough. But now I wanted to do something just for me.

LIAM: *Hey Kidd.*

LIAM: *Fancy a drink tonight?*

ME: *I think I'm busy, sorry.*

LIAM: *You think?*

LIAM: *Well, if you change your mind, I'll be at the Hereford Arms on Gloucester Road from 9pm. And there'll be a drink waiting for you.*

DANIEL: *Hailey, I'm sorry I upset you the other morning.*

DANIEL: *I just want you to be careful.*

DANIEL: *And sorry for being so shady about who I'm seeing. She asked me not to tell anyone for now. It's complicated.*

ME: *It's okay. I understand.*

DANIEL: *I took your advice and asked her about our future.*

ME: *typing...*

DANIEL: *So it's a bit 'to be continued' at the moment.*

DANIEL: *Once we know how things are going to play out, I'll let you know.*

ME: *It's okay, I already know who your 'woman' is.*

DANIEL: *She told you?*

ME: *Kind of.*

DANIEL: *Really?*

ME: *Really.*

DANIEL: *Oh right. Okay. Curveball, right?*

DANIEL: *I know it's going to be a bit weird in the office now.*

DANIEL: *Do you hate me?*

ME: *typing...*

SOPHIE: *You around for a run tonight?*

SOPHIE: *Hailes?*

SOPHIE: *Could do with a listening ear.*

I looked down at my phone. I couldn't go running, not tonight, not with my head running a mile a minute and Dom waiting at home for our long overdue party-planning session. I tried to ignore Liam's messages, burning from my phone. I could head back to work and try to draw up a settlement proposal, to somehow convince Vivian this was the right thing to do. But what if there was no right and wrong, just simply matters of opinion?

'Anywhere you want dropping off?' Vivian asked, not looking up from her phone. 'Back to Dom?' I swear I saw her wrinkle her nose at the thought. 'Or the office?'

'I'm not sure...' I said, as Vivian smirked again. Liam wouldn't be there. He'd be at his local bar, ordering two drinks and leaving one for me.

'Well, we haven't got forever.' Vivian laughed. No, we only had today. In the silence, my fingers moved across my screen to pull up Liam's latest message.

I'd not responded to Daniel's or Sophie's latest messages either. And it wasn't like Sophie needed me right now. She was a big girl making big girl choices. And now I needed to make some of my own.

‘Home,’ I said. ‘Can you drop me off at home, please?’

I walked up Lough Grove, kicking open our door to find Dom sitting in his usual position, with the football on the screen and a Budweiser in his hand. I wasn’t sure how long I could keep doing this, pretending I still belonged here. I placed my new handbag on top of our stack of legal and teaching books, only to watch it topple over, ‘Shit!’

‘It’s okay, don’t worry.’ Dom knelt down beside me to start stacking the books again.

‘We should really get a proper table,’ I snapped, pushing his helping hands out of the way.

‘I thought you loved our table?’ Dom looked stung. I had once said it summed us up perfectly, our professions entwined with our personal life – usually a beer or a bowl of Doritos on top.

‘I did,’ I said, before correcting myself. ‘I do.’

‘Good, because I can’t take another argument tonight.’ Dom stifled a yawn as he rubbed his eyes. He was tired, *again*, and was always home hours before me.

‘It’s not like we’ve been arguing much anyway,’ I said. Arguments required passion.

‘You just seem a bit more stressed,’ Dom said. ‘But it’s okay, I understand...’ He broke off to lean over to kiss me, still on his hands and knees. My stomach sank as I realised I didn’t want him to. I wanted to kiss Liam. I really, really wanted to kiss Liam. To just, for once, do something that wasn’t sensible, cautious and thought-out.

‘Of course, I’m more stressed Dom,’ I said as he rolled his eyes.

‘Okay, okay.’ He stood up, raising his hands in surrender.

‘Not everything is exactly the same,’ I muttered as I got up too. So much had changed for me. I was working out what I wanted; I had to work out if I wanted this too.

‘I know.’ Dom took a seat on our sofa, finding the remote and turning the volume up.

‘I thought we were going to plan this party.’ I sighed again.

‘This “sodding” party.’ Dom tried to joke, but the punchline didn’t land.

‘That’s not fair,’ I snapped. ‘I’m trying.’

‘I’m trying too,’ Dom spat back, standing to his feet.

‘I know, I’m sorry I...’ I began again. But what was I sorry for? For wanting to explore something different, for wanting to figure this, *us*, out?

‘Okay, let’s do it.’ Dom tried to salvage a smile. ‘Let’s finally sort out this party for Sophie.’ He put a hand on my hip as my heart started to race. I couldn’t do this right now. Couldn’t stay in and plan Sophie’s thirtieth now.

Dom pulled me a little closer, but my limbs still felt stiff. I needed a drink; I needed a drink with *him*. Just to find out if anything was there. If the grass was greener. Not forever, just for a moment, just for the night. One last fling to know that this, with Dom, was the real thing. I needed to do this, for us, for *me*.

‘Thanks, but I actually have to head out again.’ I looked more apologetic than I felt. I needed to do this. *Just one drink*.

‘Where?’ Dom looked less shocked than I expected him to be. I guess he was used to me being MIA by now. It had been around three months since I started at Taylor, Laters and Jones, and I was pretty sure my dream job had turned into Dom’s nightmare. But he didn’t understand that this was progress. I had been stuck; *we* had been stuck.

‘I need to run,’ I said.

Walking away from our flat, I felt the guilt rise up in my stomach. This was stupid. I was with Dom; I shouldn’t be doing this. But Vivian was with Jason, Daniel was with Vivian, Talia had still loved Alek, Sophie was happy dating everyone. I owed it to Dom to find out if I really wanted him, or whether I was just settling, settling to settle down. With every step I took, my guilt turned to lust. Then, I saw him at the bar.

Chapter 31

‘Everyone does this, Hailey.’ He leaned in closer, his knees touching mine, his hands on my thighs.

‘Well *I* don’t do this.’ I pushed his hands away but my body remained glued to the spot, enjoying our closeness even though my mind was attempting to abort. Something had made me come here tonight, to this bar, to this place. ‘Whatever this is.’ I looked into his eyes, growing darker with desire, the air between us growing thin.

‘Well, it’s actually very simple.’ He smiled, a smile now so familiar that it fooled me into feeling safe. ‘I like you.’ He leaned in to kiss my cheek, moving across to the other, his breath lingering on my mouth before placing his lips lightly on my other cheek. ‘And you like me.’

‘I don’t... I...’

His face was now dangerously close to mine, the bodies around the darkened bar fading further into insignificance.

‘Tell me you don’t like me.’ His whisper was light, his breath so warm.

‘I... I...’ I stuttered, my stomach heavy with wine and yet light with desire. ‘No,’ I forced myself to say, scared at how I’d never meant anything less.

‘No?’ He moved back just an inch, eyes scanning my made-up face, smiling as he breathed every inch of me in. I knew I shouldn’t be here, that I never should have come. But right now, I didn’t want to be anywhere else. ‘So, you don’t want me to do this?’ He put a hand to the side of my face, letting his fingers lose themselves in the depths of my hair, drawing me closer and placing a light kiss on my lips. As he pulled away, I struggled to

inhale, like I was breathing for the very first time.

‘No,’ I whispered, weakly. He kissed me again, this time longer, harder. ‘No.’ I breathed again, willing the word to remain, but with each kiss feeling my resolve, like my life outside this room, slip away until... ‘Yes,’ I said. ‘Yes, *yes.*’

Chapter 32

SOPHIE: *I popped round to yours last night and Dom said you were out running.*

SOPHIE: *Why did you say you couldn't?*

SOPHIE: *Can we talk?*

Liam's kiss still lingered on my lips – our own little secret – as I made my way home from work. I'd managed to limit it to that, *just a kiss*. Even though I knew my body wanted more. Sophie's messages moved their way across my screen, but I couldn't deal with her right now. Liam's kiss would turn up the corner of my lips, right where his had been on mine, and she'd know. But no one could ever know. *Dom* could never know.

Walking into our living room, I found him sitting there with a pile of schoolbooks. He looked up to give me a smile, soft and sad. I knew I loved him. But I didn't know what we should do next, or what I should do about that ring. This thing with Liam was just an experiment to finally work out what I wanted. I was taking a little leaf out of Vivian's book in an attempt at making my own rules.

Dom's glasses slipped down his nose as he studied the sums before him. If only adults still got points for showing our working.

'You okay?' I asked, taking a seat by his side.
'Just busy,' he said and carried on marking.
'Okay.' I smiled, guilt churning in my stomach as I unlocked my phone to read.

LIAM: *Last night, wow.*

LIAM: *Cut too short, don't you think?*

ME: *I was thinking about Dom.*

LIAM: *Not when you were kissing me.*

LIAM: *Come to mine tonight.*

ME: *I can't.*

LIAM: *Can't or won't?*

ME: *Both?*

LIAM: *You're too good, Hailey.*

LIAM: *Good to your boyfriend, good to your friends, good to Vivian, good to work.*

ME: *Your point?*

LIAM: *And I promise they're not being good to you.*

ME: *That's not true.*

LIAM: *Well, where was your brilliant boyfriend when you were at the*

bar with me?

ME: *I think he ended up hanging out with Sophie.*

LIAM: *I see.*

ME: *Nothing is going on with them.*

LIAM: *But you've still not met this guy she's seeing.*

ME: *I've met one of them.*

LIAM: *But not all of them?*

ME: *She wouldn't.*

LIAM: *Then why hasn't she introduced you to him yet?*

LIAM: *We all have desires, Hailey.*

LIAM: *Do you ever just do what you want to do?*

LIAM *Come to mine.*

I looked up at Dom. I wanted us to work, I really did. I just needed that spark again. Not all day, every day, just some days – just to remind me it was still there. I studied his face, concentration scrawled across it. He was working late; no doubt taking a leaf out of my book. I couldn't just sit alongside him for another night *in*. I couldn't bear it. Every moment I spent with him my mind picked holes and found faults. It was as though on some level I'd already decided we weren't going to work. And as much as I tried to tell my mind otherwise, I couldn't help thinking, *I need to get out to work this out.*

‘Dom,’ I said.

He didn’t look up from his marking. I’d never seen him so focused, so focused on anything other than me.

‘I might go out for a run with Sophie tonight,’ I lied, Liam’s messages burning through my screen and onto my hand.

‘Like you went for a run last night?’ Dom looked up, hurt and accusatory. *He knew.*

‘Yeah?’ I replied, not meaning it to sound like a question. Part of me had hoped Sophie would have given me the opportunity to explain myself before telling Dom that I’d lied.

‘Cut the crap, Hailey,’ he spat.

Maybe I should have known better.

‘I know you didn’t go for a run with Sophie.’ Dom lowered his voice. He didn’t look like himself. He looked cold, unavailable. ‘She popped round last night.’

‘She’s always around now,’ I said, trying to deflect the accusations coming my way.

‘She always *was.*’ Dom shook his head. ‘The only thing that’s changed here, is you.’

‘I’m *allowed* to change.’

‘She mentioned that she’d gone for a run earlier that evening and was saying she was a bit disappointed that training for this marathon together hadn’t really happened,’ Dom went on, face flushed with rage. Sophie didn’t care about that; she was doing this marathon to prove a point. ‘I thought it was strange, seeing as you were out for a run right at that moment.’

‘I can explain...’

‘But you weren’t out for a run, were you?’

‘I was,’ I lied, blood rushing to my head, heart hammering in my chest.

‘I’m not an idiot, Hailey.’ Dom shook his head, his voice cracking as my heart broke. For him, for us. I was doing this for us. ‘You left your trainers here.’

‘Dom, you’re not letting me explain,’ I said, panicking, tears pricking my eyes.

‘Sophie left wondering why you’d lied to her,’ Dom went on, tears now filling in his own, our already small apartment shrinking around me. He ran a hand through his hair, shaking his head like I was just another child in his classroom. ‘But what I’m more concerned about Hailey, is why you are lying

to me.'

'I was at work, okay?' I blurted out. *Love him enough to lie.*

'Work?' Dom was standing now, pacing the floor before me. 'Why lie about work?'

'Because I felt bad, Dom. I'm always there, and I know you hate it, I know you—'

'Don't turn this back on me, Hailey. I've been nothing but supportive.' Dom's voice started to rise. I'd managed to make the most laid-back man who ever lived bright red with rage.

'Not really,' I said, my voice a little weak.

'What?' Dom demanded.

'You won't let me change. You want everything to stay the same; you said it yourself,' I sobbed, tears falling faster down my red-hot cheeks. 'Maybe I just don't fit your mould any more, maybe you're better suited to someone like Sophie...'

'Your *mould*?' Dom scoffed, putting his hand to his head. 'And what the hell has Sophie got to do with any of this? This is between us.' Except it had always been the three of us. What if we just didn't work if I wasn't being everything they needed me to be?

'I'm sorry,' I began, before Vivian's voice in my mind told me to stop. 'No, I'm not sorry. I'm allowed to change, to grow. I just need some...' My sentence trailed off as I brushed away my tears, only for more and more to fall.

'I'll *always* let you grow.' Dom took a tentative step towards me. I couldn't talk about this right now, couldn't think of a life-long commitment when I couldn't even commit to staying in. Couldn't think of doing one more thing for another damn person without doing something for myself first. My phone buzzed to life in my pocket.

'Hailey, would you look at me?' Dom stared in disbelief as I cradled the phone in my hands. 'I'm trying to *talk* to you.'

'That makes a change.'

'What's *that* supposed to mean?'

'We never talk any more, not really; we just sit and watch TV and well... waste away.'

'Fucking hell.' Dom looked at me before turning away, as if sick of the sight of me. And all this time I was worried that his rose-tinted spectacles would protect me from that. 'Are you *serious*? I try to talk to you, try to get

through to you all the time. We need to talk about us Hailey, about where we are, about where we're going...' He broke off as my phone buzzed again. I knew it was Liam. I wanted to be with him now, feeling light and tipsy and sexy and carefree. Not here arguing.

'I can't do this right now.' I looked at Dom, his face like stone.
I need to do this.

ME: *Okay, you win.*

ME: *Drop me your address.*

ME: *I'm coming over.*

'Hailey, would you stop looking at your phone for one second and listen to me?'

I looked from Liam's messages to Dom's face: one so foreign, the other so familiar. Liam's words beckoned me closer, as Dom's expression made me feel more distant from him than ever before. I felt miles away from the girl he fell in love with. She felt like a different me. But he was the same old him.

'I know you *can't do this right now* but we need to talk about this, Hailey.'

'I need to go, work needs me,' I said. I felt my phone vibrate in my hand and knew it was him. He was waiting for me. It felt like I had been waiting for him too, waiting for a love that wasn't just warm but burnt-red hot.

I looked at Dom, my best friend. Could I really do this to him? But what if he never found out? What if Vivian was right and one last fling was exactly what I needed to help me see that I was ready. This wasn't breaking us; it was saving us. At least giving us a chance.

'You need to go to work? Now?' Dom's voice rose to a volume it never had, and I inched backwards, surprised by its force.

'Yeah, it's just...'

'Let me guess, Liam?' Dom spat his name. What did he know? How did

he know? Panic rose inside me, it was only a kiss, one stupid drunken kiss. But tonight, it might be more. Hot tears sprang up in Dom's eyes again as my mind berated me for being a bitch, trying to force me back into the loyal, good-girl box I had carved out for myself. But what if I was meant for more than that? Why couldn't I play at Taylor, Laters and Jones' big boys' table, behave like every other lawyer milling around that world?

Another message vibrated through my fingers and my eyes darted to the screen; it was Sophie again. But I didn't need her drama right now; for once, I had enough of my own.

'I can't keep doing this, Hailey.' Dom took a step closer to me. 'I don't need to know we're going to get married tomorrow, I don't need to know we're going to be together for the next ten, twenty, thirty years, but I do need to know you're in this right now,' he went on, placing a hand to his worried brow. 'I feel like I'm losing you.'

'I know,' I surrendered, suddenly filled with the urge to pull him close, to make everything okay. But I couldn't just bend over and people please my whole life, could I? What if Vivian was right? What if sometimes life was about taking risks, making a few mistakes? Doing something just for yourself because you actually really wanted to.

'I w-want to *want* us to work.' I stuttered the sentence, not sure why my wants were one step removed.

'But you don't want us to.' A tear escaped from the corner of his eye.

I don't know, Dom. I don't know anything any more. I know us. But what if there's something better? How will I ever know if I don't step out, try new things? Emotion burned in my throat as desire sunk in my stomach, confusion clouding everything.

'I'm not sure, Dom,' I said finally. 'I just feel like I've got so much to work out. I'm so confused.'

'And you just expect me to wait around until you're what, not confused any more?'

'Yes,' I said, then, 'No, maybe. I don't know?'

'Look, I love you, Hailey.' He took a step closer still. 'I know I want you in my future. But you need to be excited about that future, too. We both deserve to *want* this.' He wiped another stray tear away from his cheek.

If only I knew what I wanted. Liam's message buzzed for my attention again. I looked at Dom, his face, his body, his very being demanding answers that I couldn't give.

‘Maybe we just need a bit of space?’ I said softly.

‘Space? Hailey, we’ve had nothing but space. You’re never here!’

‘I’m sorry I can’t be perfect.’ I spat the words, all of a sudden feeling my rage rise to meet his. I’d always had to be so damn perfect, but I couldn’t get it right all the time. ‘I’ve kept in step with you and Soph all this time, been everything you’ve needed me to be. But the second I do something different, something I’m passionate about, something you know nothing about, you don’t like it.’

‘That’s not fair!’ Dom said, forcefully. ‘I love that you’ve found something you’re passionate about, but this shit with Vivian, whatever the fuck is going on with this Liam guy...’

I winced at his words.

‘They’re not good for you, Hailey. You need to take a step back from them. Don’t be stupid; protect yourself.’

What if I didn’t need to be protected? He was always trying to hem me in, keep me safe. But from what? From mess and disappointment and doubt? That was part of life, a part I’d never fully made peace with because I was trying too hard to be everything he needed me to be, everything *everyone* needed me to be.

‘Dom, that’s not what...’ I began, before he could cut me off again.

‘Fine,’ Dom said. ‘But having people care for you isn’t a weakness. Sure, you can probably do it all alone, can’t you? But is that what you want?’

‘Maybe it is,’ I snapped back, knowing in an instant I didn’t mean it.

‘Fine, well leave then.’ Dom was crying again now. ‘Go to *work*.’

We both knew where I was going, who I was going to. It was inevitable, undeniable.

A buzz filled the room, as the intercom chimed. No, it couldn’t be him. He couldn’t be *here*. Dom reached towards the button, pressing it down to hear who had called.

‘Hailey are you there?’

What the hell?

‘It’s Vivian, can I come in?’

‘What the fuck is she doing here?’ Dom took his finger off the intercom, turning his attention to me, shaking his head in denial or defeat.

‘I don’t know, Dom. I’m sorry, but we have to let her in...’ I pushed past him towards the door.

‘Don’t bother.’ Dom stepped in front of me. ‘I’ll let her in on my way

out.'

Chapter 33

‘Dom wait,’ I called after him, as I watched him leave. *But wait for what?* My phone buzzed in my hand again, but before I could check whether it was Liam or Sophie or Daniel or all of the above, she was here. In my apartment.

‘Vivian, what the...’ I started to say, before her mascara-stained and red, blotchy face stole the sentence away. Her hair was down, damp from rain or sweat, I couldn’t be sure. She was wearing an old raincoat and carrying an overnight bag.

‘I didn’t know where else to go.’ Fat tears rolled down her face, pushing black tracks further down her red raw cheeks.

‘Why? What’s happened?’ I asked. Was it the case? Had I done something wrong? Had she? Had Liam shared his secret? But he wouldn’t, surely?

‘Jason knows.’ Her tears started to fall freely now. Dropping her bag, she buried her head in her hands.

‘Oh my God, how?’ I asked, racking my brain for people I had told. Only Dom. I knew he didn’t like her, but surely he would never stoop so low as to ruin her marriage.

‘One of the guys I was seeing came clean, told Jason everything,’ she said with a wail. ‘And he told Jason that he knew he wasn’t the only one.’ She sobbed, louder and louder as I tried to look into the darkened corridor behind her. Was Dom still here, could he still hear? But somehow I knew he was gone.

Vivian sat in the middle of the sofa, perching on the edge as if she could smell it was second-hand.

‘I can’t believe he told Jason.’ Vivian had stopped crying now. ‘After all this time.’

‘What changed?’ I asked. I had been asking myself the same question for weeks.

‘He developed feelings for me,’ Vivian replied. ‘He knew it was only sex.’ She shook her head, unable to make sense of it. Who? The man who had been driving her out to the countryside every time his wife was out of the picture? Or...

Daniel.

Of course, it was Daniel. *It’s okay, I already know.* I recalled our messages only days before. *She told you? Kind of...* Shit. My messages had got Vivian caught?

If she’s telling people, maybe so can I... I tried to imagine Daniel’s justification, dreading any part I had to play in it. I hadn’t replied when he asked whether I hated him. I bet his guilt had jump-started him into doing the right thing, or what he thought was the right thing. Now it was Vivian’s turn to try to justify herself. Though the fact that she was here suggested her case was not as compelling outside of the courtroom.

‘Was it only sex?’ I double-checked, for want of anything better to say.

‘For me, yes.’ Vivian looked ahead, fixated by the blank television, frozen to the spot. ‘It’s never, ever been more than that with anyone other than Jason.’ She looked panicked now. ‘I love Jason, my *husband*, Jason.’ She turned to me, her eyes filled with regret. ‘I’m so in love with Jason.’

Something told me she’d been telling Jason the same for the last hour or so, maybe more. The fact she was here told me he didn’t buy it. I opened my mouth to speak, but I wasn’t meant to know about Daniel. I wasn’t meant to know about a lot of things.

‘I hurt him, Hailey,’ she said. The very thing she was so sure she wouldn’t do. ‘I don’t know what to do without him,’ she said, filling the room with sobs again.

My phone chimed and I saw Liam’s name flash up. So close and yet so far. I looked at Vivian. It was all fun and games until someone gets hurt. But out of anyone, I guessed she never expected the person who might be hurting would be her.

Chapter 34

SIX WEEKS AFTER THE MOMENT

I miss you so much. Please don't tell Hailey x

I had found the note crumpled up in Dom's stupid box last night, around the time I had given up trying to call his mobile for the thousandth time. Where the hell was he? Why hadn't he been home to the flat? I had thought the box might hold more answers, but I never imagined I'd find that note, the handwriting faint – as if washed away in the rain – but still unmistakably Sophie's. Don't tell me what? Liam's words hurtled around my mind again and again: *guys and girls...* But right now, I had other problems to deal with.

'Have you checked your emails?' I asked Vivian, who was lying face down on the sofa; I already knew her answer. She had been wearing the same jumper for three whole days. The same expression too – shattered and devastated. She really was a woman of extremes. She groaned and turned over, pulling the open sleeping bag further across her face.

'I have some good news,' I said, as Vivian stirred.

'Jason?' she asked. I'd never had her down as an optimist.

'No, sorry,' I said, cursing myself for being so vague. Between Vivian, Liam and Dom, I was hardly firing on all cylinders. 'It looks like the case is actually going to go before a judge. Robert is asking after you, he wants to know where you are.' I paused; it was actually getting urgent now. No one would guess Vivian was here; it was the reason she had made the snap decision to come here in the first place, why she couldn't bring herself to check into one of the many hotels this city had to offer. *What if someone thought there was something going on?* she had said, the irony not lost on

either of us. But I needed to get Vivian back in the office now. ‘Liam is asking too,’ I added. This time she looked up, eyes wide with regret. Who would stop him winning the other partners round to his way of thinking without her there? ‘They all are, actually,’ I finished, lamely.

‘But not Jason?’ She pushed herself up to sitting, her once glorious hair now matted in clumps. I checked her phone, face up beside me.

‘Sorry,’ I said, looking up from the blank screen, before glancing at my own. Dom hadn’t called either. Vivian hadn’t even asked where he was, too caught up in her own affairs.

‘Do you think you can do it?’ I asked her softly, not wanting to push her too far. The firm needed her to pull it together. *I* needed her to pull it together. ‘Fight this out in court?’ Vivian stared at me with a blank expression that left me far from convinced.

‘And tell the wife what?’ Vivian whispered, even though she knew the facts of the case and the lines of her argument better than anyone else.

‘That she isn’t entitled to Alek’s money,’ I went on. ‘That the marriage was over when her husband found out about her affair.’

Vivian stopped crying, turning her huge eyes to rest on me, looking like a tragic heroine. It still felt strange to see a grown woman cry, especially one like Vivian Jones. *Idols always break the hearts of those who love them*, I recalled Dom telling me. Warning me not to build her up too much and I guess he was right. But now my broken idol had broken her own heart too.

‘I can’t,’ Vivian whispered, barely loud enough for me to hear.

‘Can’t or won’t?’ I said, trying the tough-love tactic on her now.

‘*Can’t*,’ Vivian repeated again, this time with more venom. I would have flinched had I not known that her anger was only directed at herself, not me. ‘The marriage wasn’t over,’ Vivian went on. ‘How the hell could it be over? When they had years of love and pain between them?’ We weren’t talking about Alek and Talia any more.

‘But I thought you said that once she had hurt him like that, once everything was out in the open, there was no going back?’

‘There has to be.’ Tears streaked down her face once again, showing no signs of stopping. ‘I have to get him back, try again, make it work.’

I thought of Dom. I wanted to get through to him, to know he was okay. But did I want him *back*, or did I want to move forward? To move forward with Liam? And what the hell was going on with Dom and Sophie? I looked at Vivian. Maybe. I don’t know. I don’t...

‘Maybe you can,’ I said soothingly, as I went over to bend down beside her. ‘But if this case goes to court and you’re not there, you’re going to have to deal with some serious professional shit alongside your—’

Vivian’s glare cut me off. Afraid I’d overstepped the mark, I went on, ‘Robert or Liam could represent us?’

‘No,’ Vivian said firmly. ‘We have to settle this outside of court.’

‘But I thought...’ I thought Vivian had never wanted to *settle*, in work, in love, in life. ‘She could just be saying it for his billions, you said it yourself.’ I was loath to play devil’s advocate, but sometimes it was necessary.

‘She wasn’t.’ Vivian shook her head, pulling her jumper more tightly around her. ‘I’d forgotten what it was like... you know, heartbreak.’ Her voice caught in her throat. ‘To take for granted what was right in front of you and then be caught between wanting to run and wanting to stay.’ I could feel my own tears threatening to rise again. ‘She said she loved him; that it was real.’

‘So, what are you saying?’ I asked. I had watched her fight with everything she had to take this to court, for this to be the next big case, the next big thing, her next big win.

‘We are going to settle,’ she said again, louder this time. ‘If that woman said she loved her husband and wanted to make it work, then she wanted to make it work.’ Vivian sat up straighter in her seat, pushing her messy hair out of her face.

‘Then you need to get on the phone to the office,’ I said. ‘They are taking action on this, and soon.’

‘I need a shower.’ Vivian stood to her feet. She had needed a shower for two days now. I nodded in approval as she made her way to the bathroom. ‘You tell Robert I’ll be in the office within the hour.’ And with that, she closed the door to the bathroom behind her. I typed out the email as the sound of running water seeped into the living room. I tried not to think of Dom. Surely, he must need to come home by now? I looked at my phone face up on our makeshift table, right next to Vivian’s, and saw new messages from Liam waiting.

LIAM: I’ve missed seeing you in the office.

LIAM: *I still want you.*

LIAM: *Like, really want you.*

LIAM: *Tonight?*

LIAM: *I heard the news btw.*

LIAM: *Jason knowing doesn't change anything, right?*

I picked up the phone gingerly, as if it might burst into flames in my hands. I was desperate for it to be mine. But the lettering on the back told me what I already knew. It wasn't mine. And nor was Liam. It was Vivian's. And he wasn't anyone's. All this time I thought they had been fighting, fighting for my attention and maybe even my affection, when really, I had been runner-up to his main prize. Runner-up or first loser.

I looked down at his messages, bile churning in my stomach, eyes widening in realisation long overdue. *How could I have been so stupid?* I didn't know for sure that this thing with Liam would be better than what I had with Dom, but I could have sworn it was *real*. That I was the exception, not the rule. But it wasn't like it could have lasted; he'd made me feel special but never once mentioned leaving his wife. Confusion still clouded my mind, making my future so damn hard to make out, but I should have known chasing a guy like Liam was like chasing the wind. My heart hammered, Vivian's phone still shaking in my hands. Now only one thing was clear: I was risking everything that was important to me for all I thought I wanted.

Chapter 35

Walking into the office with Vivian now felt nothing like it had before. I no longer felt invincible by proxy; I now felt guilty by association. Maybe Dom was right, maybe she had rubbed off on me more than I had ever dared think.

‘Ladies,’ Liam said, greeting us halfway across the floor to Vivian’s office. ‘Nice of you to join us at last. Not like this case has turned into an absolute shitstorm whilst you’ve been gone.’ Liam spoke to Vivian like it was the first time they’d talked in weeks.

A handful of colleagues looked up from their caseloads, hanging on his every word. If there was a mole in this group, I was sure we’d be reading about this little scene soon enough.

‘I trusted you to handle it,’ Vivian said, her eyes fixed on his. Whilst I tried to look anywhere but at him.

‘Hey, it’s not me.’ Liam put a hand to his chest in objection, the same hand I had wanted to touch me, the same chest I had wanted to press myself against. Now the thought of it made me feel sick. That, and the fact that Dom hadn’t answered any of my calls or tried to call me in three whole days. The fact that Sophie’s note to him was still crumpled up in my pocket. Surely, he’d be at hers? But right now, I couldn’t bring myself to find out.

‘It’s his son, Marcus.’ Liam actually did look desperate. I’d have felt sorry for him if he wasn’t such a dick. I might have felt sorry for myself, too, if I hadn’t been one as well. ‘Turns out the guy can be pretty persuasive. He told us that getting the case to court *now* was what you wanted, that you wanted to take his step-mum for all she was worth,’ Liam went on as Vivian looked down at her shoes, suddenly shifty. It did sound like something she

would say; it was what she had been pushing for all this time. ‘He pulled some strings with a friend who knew the judge, said he was fed up of waiting, that it had to be resolved before—’

‘Enough about Alek’s bloody son,’ she interrupted. ‘We are *not* going to court. We are going to settle this here and now.’ She looked at Liam, the man I had been falling for or lusting after or whatever the hell it was that I had been feeling for the past few months, and I knew she meant more than the case. *He developed feelings.* Vivian must have been talking about him. But then, what about Daniel?

‘Daniel?’

I walked into our office, not knowing whether he was going to be there and what I was going to say if he was. I figured I’d start with sorry. Sorry I told you Vivian had told me. Sorry that made you think you had permission to share. Sorry, the woman you want will never be your own. Sorry that I saw you having sex and got more out of it than you did – professionally at least. I looked around the empty office, no coffee cups, no phone on his desk. I stared out of our window, across the Thames and wondered where he’d be. *Sorry that you’re not here, that you’re not at work, and that you may never work here again.*

SOPHIE: *Hailey. Like seriously, are you alive?*

SOPHIE: *I really need to talk to you.*

I looked down at my phone, unable to bring myself to message her back. I’d struggled through the hours in the office but now I was back at home, I had nothing left. The sleeping bag Vivian had been using was still slung across our sofa. If Dom had been here, he would have moved it by now. He was thoughtful like that. But he wasn’t here – or at least there was no trace of him. Perhaps he had been back and seen Vivian’s stuff still muddled in with his and thought better of it. He didn’t want to catch whatever it was had got into me.

I looked around the empty room. How could I have been so stupid? Sure,

I'd had my doubts about mine and Dom's future. But never enough to doubt whether I wanted to be kind to him, wanted to work through things in the right way. Vivian and Liam had made the right way seem wrong and the wrong way feel right. But now, sitting here in our empty apartment, with Sophie's note in my pocket and not knowing if Dom would ever come home, everything just felt wrong.

Chapter 36

Vivian was sitting at her desk by the window, surrounded by tasteful Christmas decorations on all sides. I walked across the floor towards her. Her hair was washed and styled, her designer clothes hot off the peg. She looked a far cry from how she did yesterday morning, but I knew no amount of clothes, shoes, toiletries or jewellery would help piece her back together again. Despite today's makeover, she still looked every bit her age. I guessed it hadn't just been the Botox keeping her young.

'Hey,' I said, as Vivian unglued her eyes from her phone. I recognised the longing I saw there. I still hadn't heard from Dom. She nodded. 'Thanks for washing up,' I said. If I'd thought partying with Vivian or running with Liam was strange, that sentence could trump them all. 'Not forgotten how to do it then?' I joked. She couldn't help but crack a smile, a proper one.

'It's the least I could do,' she said. 'Thanks for, you know...' The end of her sentence escaped her. 'He still hasn't called?' she asked instead.

'He just messaged to say he's on his way.' I looked down to my phone to confirm.

'Jason? Really?' A glimmer of hope lit up her face.

'No, sorry,' I apologised, even though I couldn't make her feel worse. 'Alek.' It was the reason we were both here, to discuss the final settlement we were hoping he'd want to sign. Vivian looked disappointed: disappointed her public 'win' had come to nothing; that things she wanted to stay secret were now out in the open. But the injunctions had been granted, her news couldn't go further than it had already. Right now, I thought a public flogging might actually make her feel better.

‘Oh.’ She sighed. He wouldn’t call, wouldn’t break his silence. Just like Dom. Except unlike Dom, they had children, a history, a family.

‘Here he is now.’ She donned a smile so convincing I thought it might be real. Vivian stood to her feet to kiss Alek on both cheeks, as I rose to do the same.

‘How are you?’ Vivian asked, smile painted on, ever the professional.

‘Better,’ Alek said, returning her smile. ‘I’m feeling better. I’ve not got too much time, so can we make this quick?’

‘Of course,’ Vivian said, taking her seat again. ‘The appellant...’

‘You can call her Talia,’ Alek objected, no longer needing to keep his distance.

‘Talia, still maintains that she should be entitled to one third of the company, valued at the time of sale. She says this represents her contribution to it, to you, throughout your marriage, and the... grey area... of your separation.’

‘Okay,’ Alek said, surrendering. Vivian handed over the new proposal and he turned it over in his hands. I got the feeling that no matter what it said, he would have been signing it today, just to be done with it all.

‘I’m so sorry we couldn’t win this for you.’ Vivian didn’t look him in the eye.

‘What’s winning, anyway?’ Alek asked, still gazing at the document in front of him. ‘My marriage is over,’ he said bluntly; a matter of fact, regardless of when the end came into being. ‘And I’m ready to move on,’ he said. I looked at Vivian; she was far from ready to stop fighting for hers. But what about me and Dom? ‘I’m not sure months and months of a contentious court case would have made that any easier.’ He sighed. ‘It was never about the money for me. But I’m ready to let go now, so’ – he turned his attention to Vivian – ‘signing this, moving on; this is winning to me.’

Vivian smiled across at him, humbled afresh to see such sincerity, such acceptance. Winning for Vivian had looked like getting everything she wanted, having her cake and eating it, along with whatever else she wanted from the menu. Now, casting her eyes intermittently to her phone, which showed that Jason still hadn’t called, winning looked a little different. Winning looked a lot like him.

Chapter 37

My phone buzzed to life on top of the kitchen table. *Dom?* I looked down to see Sophie's name displayed across the front. I had been so scared to call her after the fight with Dom, afraid of what she might say. Then I had found *that* note.

Stashing my phone in my pocket, right next to her note, I moved mindlessly into our empty living room. I knew I shouldn't keep carrying it around with me, transferring it from pocket to pocket. I should put it back, shouldn't have gone looking for it in the first place, just like I shouldn't have found the ring. It wasn't like he was going to ask that question now.

Walking the few short steps into our empty bedroom, I perched on the edge of the bed. Dom's side wasn't messy and unmade like usual; it looked pristine, unslept in. It had been a week and he still hadn't been home.

Maybe I should just call Sophie back and have it out with her? Reaching for my phone, I swiped to her messages before a key turned in the front door. *Dom?* I rushed into the living room, my heart skipping a beat, only to sink as I saw it was only Vivian arriving back from the office.

'The spare key works.' She smiled at me. I'd forgotten I'd offered her that. 'I won't be needing it much longer though,' Vivian said, as she walked across to the sofa and placed the key on top of the stack of books. 'Jason and I are going to try and make it work.' She grinned, cheeks pinker, rounder, more human. 'Like, really make it work.'

'So, he's okay with what happened?' I asked, sure it was a stupid question but no longer naïve enough to think I understood the goings-on in her world.

‘Oh, absolutely not.’ She sat herself down on the sofa. ‘But we have decades to build on, and the children to support. He says if I cheat one more time then that’s it, for good, forever.’

‘Sounds reasonable,’ I muttered, as I watched her begin to gather her belongings from around her makeshift bed. She was picking up her pieces but nothing in my life felt permanent, everything suspended in a state of flux.

‘It does, doesn’t it?’ She smiled up at me again, almost surprised to see how far she’d come. ‘So, when are you going to speak to Dom?’

‘I’m trying, I’ve...’ I began, before realising I’d not mentioned anything to her about Dom since she’d first arrived the night Dom left. ‘How do you —’

‘Hailey, you’ve been moping around here ever since I arrived. And though you might just be the most empathetic young woman I’ve ever met, I refuse to believe that’s all for my benefit.’

‘Well... no... we...’

‘That was him I passed on the stairs, right?’

‘Right.’ I nodded, a lump in my throat.

‘I can see what you see in him,’ Vivian said.

‘Yeah, he’s...’ My voice trailed off. Being around Vivian had made me feel he was so many things: boring, insecure, holding me back. She’d made me think I wasn’t thinking for myself and she was right. Turns out it wasn’t Dom I was allowing myself to be controlled by, it was her. ‘I think we’ve broken up.’

‘Then *talk* to him,’ Vivian said, once again looking like the expert.

‘He won’t let me.’ Tears made their way down my cheeks. ‘I don’t even know where he is.’

‘Yes, you do,’ Vivian said softly as I started to cry properly now. He was at Sophie’s. Of course, he was at Sophie’s. ‘Speak to her. She’s your friend.’

‘I’m not sure she is any more,’ I said, wanting to tell Vivian about the box, the ring, the note, about Liam, about everything. But Dom’s voice still rang out in my mind: *Be careful*. He’d only been trying to protect me. ‘I’m so confused.’ *About everything*.

‘And you’ll stay confused if you don’t start to communicate.’ I knew she was speaking from experience. She’d just come from fighting for her marriage. But if anything had happened between Sophie and Dom, I couldn’t move past that. I’d lose my best friend and my boyfriend in one go. I wasn’t ready to face that. I didn’t think I ever would be.

'It's too hard...' I sobbed into my hands.

'It is hard,' Vivian said. 'And talking it out will probably hurt like hell. But from what I've heard you say about Dom and your best friend over these past months they sound like real friends. And *real* friends are worth facing the messy, brutal, confusing truth.'

LIAM: *Hey stranger.*

LIAM: *Long time.*

LIAM: *Drink?*

I looked up from my phone to the empty space around me. Vivian was long gone, now only I remained. Me and this stupid phone. I swiped away Liam's messages and looked instead at Sophie's missed call again, knowing I should call her back but just not having the energy to speak to anyone. Anyone but Dom. In the silence, my sorrow rose to the surface, starting in the pit of my stomach and yet moving its way down my limbs all at the same time, weighing them down with invisible lead. It bubbled up my body, releasing itself in a single tear, then more, then more, the floodgates opening and spilling out onto the floor. *What had I done?*

Vivian had had multiple affairs and was now back in the arms of her husband. I had entertained one, had shared one erroneous kiss, and now my boyfriend wouldn't come back home. That's even if he was still my boyfriend. I didn't know whether I wanted him to be my husband, but right now I knew I wanted him to be my boyfriend. Right now, I'd even settle for having him as a friend.

ME: *Have you heard from Dom?*

NICK: *No, sorry. Nothing all week.*

Shit. The tears became harder, fatter, more ferocious. I knew he'd be with Sophie, of course he would. But it wasn't like she had a spare room or anything. The thought sent my stomach sinking. There was only one more place he could be and if he wasn't there, he would definitely be with Sophie. I swiped to his mum's number and prepared myself for whatever would come next: *No, he's at Sophie's. You had your chance, Hailey, now you've lost it all...*

ME: *Have you heard from Dom?*

DEE: *Yes, he's at home.*

I read his mum's reply, relief filling my body for a moment before I reread her words: did that mean his home was no longer with me?

ME: *Will he come back to the flat?*

DEE: *typing...*

This was Liam's fault, Vivian's, bloody Taylor, Laters and Jones...

DEE: *He says to tell you he's giving you 'space'.*

I looked down at her message, knowing the only person to blame was myself. I scrolled down my chats, my stomach sinking deeper with each and every second. MSN to BBM to text messages and WhatsApps, Dom was always at the top, always messaging when I was busy, and he was bored. There were times when I had hated that, hated that he seemed more available than me, hated doubting whether I wanted him as much as he did me. Now, with the distance scrolling further and further between us, I was pretty sure I couldn't love anyone more. Liam had felt like an irresistible risk, whereas Dom had felt like a stable shoo-in. I'd had no idea that even the most stable of relationships were one or two wrong turns away from a fall, that the dynamics could tip and twist, leaving you completely different to the way you were before. I guessed all human relationships were that fragile, masquerading as monotonous but only ever a kiss, a word, a look away from swinging suddenly and throwing you off the ground you thought was steady beneath your feet.

I looked at Dom's 'last seen online' time, hoping that I'd see he was online too, if only to feel our connection, to imagine him looking at my screen whilst I was looking at his. But I knew he wasn't that lame. All this doubt and anxiety over our future had warped our reality, making me think I was better than him, that I could *do* better than him. And now he wasn't here, maybe not even mine, I could see things as clear as day. I loved him. *I love him.*

Chapter 38

SEVEN WEEKS AFTER THE MOMENT

ME: *Dom, please can we talk?*

ME: *Dom I'm so sorry.*

ME: *Dom, please say something.*

DOM: *online*

Looking around our empty bedroom and up to our wardrobe, my stomach sank. I was sure I would cry if I didn't feel so numb. The time since Dom and I had spoken was running away – as was the time before the marathon. I looked down at my Lycra leggings. I had had every intention of going for a run. There was less than a week to go. When we booked it, I felt like I had all the time in the world. I knew I should be running, training, building back my strength. But right now, I just felt weak. And it wasn't like I could go out with the running club from work, not with Liam. No, I'd rather sit here in our flat on Lough Grove, wondering whether it was still *ours* and how we'd made so many wrong turns from our life on Love Road.

I stared at Dom's status, wondering if he was doing the same. It had been days since I had last seen him, over a *week*. I clicked onto his profile picture, letting his eyes stare back at me, squinted in a feigned smoulder. I studied his

face like I was seeing it for the first time. Had he always been that good-looking? The light cascading into the restaurant where we had shared one of our last coffees picked out the greens and the browns in his eyes – not making them dark like Liam’s, but deep – deep with memories of all of the times we had shared coffees before. How could I have taken him for granted like that? My eyes traced his laughter lines down to the freckle above his bearded lip that I so longed to kiss. Would I always want what I couldn’t have? I wandered around our apartment, sure that there were things he’d need to come back for. But Dom wasn’t tied down by *stuff*; he was made for people, not possessions. The only thing that he’d been tied to here was me. There was so much I wanted to tell him, so much I still hadn’t worked out, still hadn’t found the answers for. But one thing I knew for sure: I missed him.

Now he wouldn’t even let me explain, hear me out, thrash it out, the messy brutal, confusing truth. But wasn’t that what I was doing with Sophie? Jumping to conclusions and not even letting her explain? If something had happened between her and Dom, they were *both* in the wrong, but somehow it was harder to be angry with Dom when he had so many reasons to be mad at me. I had so wanted to speak to him, to explain myself, to let him explain too – but with Sophie, I’d not even given her a chance. Flicking to our messages together, our conversation history read like a mirror, reflecting how absent I’d been.

SOPHIE: *Hailey, when can we go running together?*

SOPHIE: *Hailey, the marathon is soon. You’ve been pretty MIA.*

SOPHIE: *Hailey, are you okay? I heard about Dom. It would be really good to meet up for a chat.*

SOPHIE: *Hailey? Are you there? I know you’re going through a lot but I really need to speak to you too.*

SOPHIE: *Hailey, please.*

When did she send all those messages? I read and reread them. I had been at work. I had been with Vivian. I had been with Liam. I hadn't been there. For Sophie or for Dom. I had taken so much of their weight on me and given them none of mine in return, forgetting friendship was a two-way street. I guess I didn't know how to not be perfect for them; now I felt so far from perfect it hurt.

Please don't tell Hailey. I looked at Dom's empty side of the bed. Sophie would never betray me like that. But then, I never thought I'd betray Dom. But I couldn't keep running from this forever. I need to speak to Sophie; we need to talk this out.

My phone buzzed to life as my heart hammered in my chest, torn between wanting it to be Dom and not knowing what the hell I'd say if it was. I looked at the name dancing across the screen – Liam. I rejected the call.

I thought I had been going in the right direction for so long: so many things ticked off my own metaphorical *before thirty* list. How was it that somewhere along the line you could take one turn and end up feeling so far away from all you'd ever known? I started to type a message to Sophie, not sure whether we'd be able to make it back to what we were, but sure I needed to try. I didn't know where to begin, other than to start with *sorry*.

ME: *Sophie, I'm sorry for being crap at contact lately. I know we really need to talk.*

SOPHIE: *typing...*

SOPHIE: *Hailey. You can't just have people when it suits you.*

SOPHIE: *I've been trying to contact you for weeks.*

SOPHIE: *Trying to tell you something.*

SOPHIE: *I've really needed you.*

ME: *I want to talk. I've been going crazy.*

SOPHIE: *It's not all about you, Hailey.*

ME: *I know, but it's not all about you either.*

SOPHIE: *I've never said it was.*

ME: *Okay, I know. Sorry.*

ME: *Are you okay?*

SOPHIE: *No, Hailey.*

SOPHIE: *I'm not okay.*

SOPHIE: *I'm pregnant.*

SOPHIE: *offline.*

Chapter 39

Standing on the starting line, I scanned the crowds in search of Sophie. Hundreds of dayglo-clad runners surrounded me on all sides, my eyes pausing at every brown-haired ponytail bouncing as they warmed up in the winter sunshine. There was no sign of Sophie.

Somewhere in the distance a starting pistol blared and the people in front of me started to move forward. I remained glued to the spot. I knew I needed to talk to Sophie. I also knew she was stubborn; that once she set her mind on something, she rarely backed out. That was exactly why I knew she'd never pull out of this race, pregnant or not. This was my chance to talk to her. But I had to try to catch her first.

Forcing my legs into action, I placed one foot in front of the other as runner after runner continued to stream past. Running on and on, my legs burned beneath me as everyone began to settle into their own pace. My pace was slow, but my anger powered me forward. *I miss you so much. Please don't tell Hailey...* That note had to mean something. And Sophie had only ever wanted love. My stomach churned. I had trusted her with my life, trusted Dom too. Surely, they'd never do that to me.

Tilting my body forward, I forced my aching limbs to run on. My eyes searched the crowds for Sophie, desperately wanting to find her, still unsure what I'd say if I did. Before starting my training contract, before meeting Vivian, everything had been so steady, so *settled*. I'd never dreamed changing one thing would change everything.

'Keep going, keep going!' I heard someone shout from the sidelines and looked up to see people waving down from Kew Bridge, the five-mile mark

in sight. *Five miles.* And Sophie was nowhere to be seen. She couldn't just drop a bomb like that and then not answer my calls. If she was trying to teach me a lesson it was working.

Forcing my legs to double their speed, I tried not to imagine Liam running alongside me, but as I pushed all thoughts of him to the pavement, thoughts of Dom rose in their place. But they would have to wait. This moment was about Sophie.

Running past one person, then three, then four, my heart beating in my chest, my thighs burning red. Why the hell hadn't I trained properly for this? Six miles down. *Only six?* I set my eyes ahead, searching the ever-changing horizon for my best friend. Seven miles passed, then eight, then nine. *Fuck me, nine.* I looked to my right to see a busty blonde prancing beside me, barely breaking a sweat. Then to my left, where a portly man was keeping a pace to rival me. I ignored them both, setting my sights ahead. I had to get to Sophie.

My eyes stung with sweat as I glimpsed the thirteen-mile mark, my stomach threatening to churn up bile. *Slow down. Stop.* My mind yelled. If only my brain had yelled the same when faced with Liam's face, his stupidly gorgeous face. Fifteen miles, sixteen. I couldn't feel my feet move beneath me, couldn't feel my arms working hard by my sides. All I could feel was pain. Pain on pain on pain. I couldn't do this; *I can't do this.* My legs grew heavier, my heart heavier still as my body began to slow, a windup toy coming to an unremarkable end, wheezing one final motion.

Drawing to a standstill, I had nothing left to give. I was done. Done with Liam, with Vivian; done with their have-it-all world, their hedonistic treadmill. Done with pressure, with demands that I should do this and ought to do that all before turning thirty. Done with bottling up my feelings just to keep up the façade I'd fashioned for myself. I was done with letting other people sway my opinions, not being strong enough to say no. No, I won't play your game. No, I won't bend to your will. No, I won't chase it all, I won't chase your idea of happy.

'Come on, you can do it,' someone called out. 'Just keep walking forwards!' *Just keep walking forwards.*

Putting one heavy leg in front of the other, I walked on. I'd never find Sophie now, there was no way she'd be this far back. Her eyes would be stubbornly fixed on what she'd set her mind on. I had thought I was the source of Sophie's stability, me and Dom, our relationship, our friendship –

but in spite of her anxiety, that steadfastness had been in her all along. I didn't know what that note meant, but I knew in my heart she'd never get with Dom.

My legs raged as I pushed them on, the smattering of people supporting from the sidelines petering out too. But I needed to keep going for Sophie. For my best friend and the little life that may or may not be inside her. Blood racing through my body, my mind filtered through the thoughts that had consumed it: I had supported Sophie so much throughout the years that I'd fooled myself into thinking it was all give, no take. But Sophie had been my consistency too, my stability, since the day we had met. A constant presence. She'd needed me and I'd needed her, but I'd never let her in. Now it was too late, too late for—

'Sophie?'

Chapter 40

‘Sophie?’ I gasped, as I saw her slight figure power-walking in the distance. I tried to pick up my pace, my feet like bricks. My eyes traced past her narrow back, down to her lean legs; she was limping. ‘Sophie!’ I called her name again, more confident this time, and then louder still, ‘Sophie!’ She didn’t turn around.

Shit. Come on, legs. Picking up one dead weight and then the other, I began to jog, then faster, until I was running, the pain screeching through every muscle of my legs, up through my torso and pulsing in my head. *You can’t do this. You can’t do this,* my mind screamed as my legs moved on, closing the gap between us.

‘Sophie!’ I called again, my voice like my body, breaking into more pieces with every move I made. This time she turned around. And then she started to run, the thought of speaking to me all the incentive she needed to find her second wind. Had I really been that bad? I didn’t need to think about that to know the answer. *Yes.* Before my argument with Dom, before finding that note, somehow all the glamour of my new role, my new life, had convinced me that Sophie’s honesty was a drain. She moved slowly though, so slowly that I had a chance of keeping up. Then she broke into a limp, managing three more strikes against the track before striking out completely, doubling over on the spot.

‘Are you okay?’ I drew up beside her.

‘Of course, I’m not okay,’ she yelled back, head still between her legs, her hands reaching down to nurse her swollen ankle.

‘Where does it hurt? We can get someone to get a medic...’ I reached a

hand out to comfort her, before thinking better of it.

‘Why, do they do abortions?’ Sophie unfolded herself to stand, meeting me eye to eye for the first time in weeks. She looked tired. Not just from her run, but life-tired. Dark rings circled her eyes.

Just hearing her say the word felt like a punch to the tummy. I looked down at her abdomen, wondering what was in hers.

‘Do you...’ I began. ‘Are you... sure?’

‘Pretty sure,’ Sophie whispered back. There was so much to say but right now this mattered most. ‘I’m six weeks late. I’ve been sick in the mornings; my boobs are sore...’ *Six weeks*. I tried to keep calm, my already hammering heart switching up a notch.

‘But have you taken a test?’ I asked.

‘No.’ She looked from me to the floor. ‘I was waiting to take it with my best friend.’

‘Sophie, I’m so sorry.’ I couldn’t help the tears from welling in my eyes as my voice began to crack. ‘I’ve been so wrapped up in everything, so *confused* about everything...’

‘You’re not the first person to ever be confused, Hailey,’ Sophie snapped back.

‘I never...’ I looked to my best friend, tears streaming down her own face. ‘I found the note you wrote to Dom and I thought that...’

‘What note?’ Sophie brushed away a tear, genuinely confused.

‘The one where you told him you missed him, and you told him not to tell me.’

‘What the hell?’ Sophie’s jaw dropped.

‘Didn’t you write it?’

‘I’ve written a lot of things to Dom over the last seventeen years, but I can safely say I’ve not written *notes* to Dom since school.’ Her expression changed from confusion to anger. ‘What are you insinuating?’

‘I don’t know, I just... for a moment... I thought...’

‘That there was something going on between me and Dom?’ Sophie’s voice rose.

‘Yes,’ I said, my own voice growing meeker by the moment. ‘But I know you wouldn’t do anything like that.’

‘The fact you even had to ask...’ Sophie snapped, starting to walk away, her legs barely able to take her weight.

‘Sophie, I’m sorry,’ I called out behind her, tears coming thick and fast

now. ‘I know you wouldn’t do that. I *know* that. I just got so wrapped up in —’

‘Just because you’re capable of cheating doesn’t mean everyone else is.’ Sophie spun around and to stare at me. Oh shit. *She knew*. Of course, she knew.

‘I know, I screwed up,’ I sobbed harder now. ‘I really screwed up. I kissed Liam,’ I confessed, but clearly Sophie already knew. ‘It was just one stupid kiss, but it never should have even been that. I made a mistake.’ I continued to sob as Sophie tried to hold back her tears. ‘But people make mistakes all the time and – news flash – I’m not perfect.’

‘You think that’s a news flash?’ Sophie said, but this time a little softer.

‘Sometimes I try so hard to be everything you and Dom need me to be. Like, to be the perfect friend and the perfect partner. And then I got invited into this world where you could just do what you wanted to do, and you didn’t feel all this *pressure*.’ I breathed, waiting for Sophie to interrupt, to object, to run off, but she just listened. ‘I didn’t realise that I’d just replaced one pressure for another; that I’ve become so scared of pleasing all the wrong people that I’ve forgotten the ones that I actually want to.’ I looked to Sophie standing before me now. ‘To be honest,’ I said again, ‘I’ve kind of forgotten myself.’

‘Kind of?’ Sophie asked, a tired smile turning up the corners of her mouth.

‘Okay, completely, utterly, undoubtedly, but I’m remembering, I promise I’m remembering.’ I gulped, wishing the words could take all our pain away. They couldn’t, but I hoped that they could help. ‘I’m so sorry for not being there, but I am now. I’m here now.’ Liam didn’t matter, Dom did – obviously – but Sophie mattered the most. She always had. Through school, through relationships, through heartbreak. ‘I’ve just been trying to keep it all together, plan your party and...’

‘My party?’ Sophie looked shocked by the thought. ‘That doesn’t matter.’

‘Of course, it matters!’ I forced a smile; she needed to know she mattered. ‘It’s just I was trying to navigate this huge bloody change while keeping everything else the same...’

‘No.’ Sophie took a little step towards me, putting a hand on my arm as my floodgates opened even more. ‘I’ve never needed you to do anything *special* to show me you love me, Hailey,’ she said softly, her kindness making me cry even harder. ‘And I never expected you to be perfect.’ She

shook her head. 'I just needed you to be there.'

'I am here,' I whispered, fixing my bloodshot eyes on her. 'I promise.'

'Good.' Sophie held a hand to her stomach. 'Cos, I need you Hailey. The real you.'

The real me. It would be so easy to pretend the past few months I'd been someone else, that it was another version of me who had got sucked into Vivian's world. But it was still me, just trying to figure it all out. I looked at Sophie, who had tears trickling down her face too. 'I'm here,' I repeated. 'I'm not going anywhere.'

'I'm scared,' she croaked. 'I've been so scared.'

'I know,' I soothed, reaching my arms around her. 'We can work this all out, though. One step at a time. Let's just find out if you're actually pregnant first.'

I wanted to know so much. What would she do? Who was the father? What would he say? But all of that could wait.

'Let's go and do a test now,' I said, ushering her towards the side of the track.

'But...' Sophie looked to the path ahead of us. Surely not?

'You want to finish?' I asked, not knowing which of us was more unlikely to be able to claw ourselves over the line.

'We've trained so hard,' Sophie said sadly. 'Well, *I've* trained so hard,' she corrected. 'And I guess part of me thinks that if I am, you know, if I'm really...' She paused and then whispered, 'pregnant.' She breathed deeply, almost like it was a relief just to say that secret out loud. 'Well, I'm going to need a lot more endurance than this. You don't have to finish it, honestly.' She smiled at me properly for the first time in far too long. 'But I guess I want to finish it to show myself I can, you know.' She placed her hand on her abdomen. 'To start as I mean to go on.'

'I want to run with you,' I said, as I put an arm around hers. Together we started to pick up our walking pace, Sophie applying more and more pressure to her ankle. She leaned on me for support and I took more of her weight on me.

'You sure?' Sophie turned her face towards me and smiled. Well, I wasn't sure that I could, but I was sure that I *wanted* to.

'Yeah, let's do this together.' I squeezed her a little tighter as we walked a little faster. 'You know, start as we mean to go on.'

Chapter 41

Forcing one leg in front of the other felt easier with Sophie by my side. After jogging, then limping, then jogging, then limping, we'd settled into a steady walk until we were passing the twenty-five-mile mark in silence. The sky was growing darker, but the Christmas lights were starting to come on. We'd talked only a little over the last ten miles, but any time I'd dug too deep Sophie had simply smiled and said, 'Not until we've finished'. She'd needed her energy for this but now, with the end in sight, she seemed to open up a little more.

'One more mile.' She turned to me. 'Are you *sure* you're okay?'

'Of course, I'm not okay,' I snapped back with a little laugh, every step hurting more than the last. But I sure as hell wasn't going to stop; if this was important to Sophie, it was important to me. 'I'm pretty sure I'm dying.'

'Well, please don't die until we find out whether I'm pregnant or not.' Sophie rolled her eyes, but she was still smiling. I could tell she was in pain too, but somehow walking together, side by side, was helping us both. 'This child will need a godmother.' She grinned. 'She'll need all the help she can get.'

'She?' I asked. We weren't even sure if she was pregnant, never mind the sex.

'I just always imagined I'd have a girl first.' She shrugged, walking on.

'Well, I always assumed I'd be married and have about three of them by now,' I joked, the sadness underscoring my words impossible to escape.

'You do know you can tell me?' Sophie looked to me.

'Tell you what?' I said. I'd already told her about the kiss.

‘Tell me what’s going on with you, how you’re really feeling about Dom.’

‘Sophie, I think we’ve got bigger things to worry about right now.’

‘Hailey,’ she said sternly. ‘When did you start thinking only one of us could be messy at a time? I can hear your shit whilst we’re dealing with mine, always.’

‘We promised to be your family,’ I said, as we saw the finishing line in the distance.

‘And you are.’ Sophie pulled an arm around me as my legs felt like they might buckle. ‘But families don’t take it in turns to be the supported one, do they?’ Sophie shook her head, answering her own question. ‘They’re dysfunctional, dynamic, broken, messy.’ Tears started to well in her eyes again. ‘I never asked you to be the ruddy Joneses.’ Sophie smiled, only then realising what she’d just said and through ours tears, we started to laugh.

‘I bloody hope not.’ I shook away the irony, brushing a stray tear from my face. ‘Well, I think Dom and I have broken up,’ I said finally.

Sophie didn’t look surprised; clearly, she’d already heard it from him. ‘Because of Liam?’ she asked.

‘Kind of, but things were starting to feel weird before then.’

‘How so?’

‘It all began when I found that ring...’

‘What ring?’ Sophie’s jaw dropped.

‘I thought you knew,’ I said, remembering how Sophie had teased me about Dom proposing all those months ago. ‘I think he was planning to propose this Christmas.’

‘Oh my gosh, that’s...’ Sophie beamed, before she remembered that Dom and I hadn’t spoken in days. ‘What’s it like?’

‘It’s amazing.’ I grinned back at her, tears tracing their way down my cheeks. ‘But it kind of drove me crazy... and not in a good way. I know we’ve been together forever, but I’m just not ready for that yet. I think maybe one day I will be, but... now, I don’t know...’

‘And here I thought you were going to run off into the sunset.’ Sophie sighed.

‘I’m not sure anyone just runs off into the sunset,’ I said, shaking my head. ‘Not in a depressing way, just like *it’s a big decision, better wait and be sure* way? Anyway, it doesn’t matter now.’

‘It might,’ Sophie said and reached for my hand as the finishing line drew

closer.

‘I cheated on him,’ I whispered.

‘It’s okay, Hailey.’ Sophie squeezed my hand in hers.

‘No, it’s not.’ I shook my heavy head, tears falling again at the thought.

‘Well, no it’s not,’ Sophie echoed. ‘But you’re human; we all make mistakes.’

‘I guess so,’ I said, trying to tell myself that was true. *I’m only human.* Vivian was only human too. Not the goddess the magazines and newspapers had so often set her up to be. It was a long way to fall from the top. ‘Maybe we should both let go of our expectations.’

‘I guess so,’ Sophie said, limping forward, now on the final stretch.

‘You do know you’re not in this alone, right?’ It was my turn to squeeze her hand.

‘Nor are you.’ She smiled.

Dom was a question mark, so was my future at Taylor, Laters and Jones, but Sophie and I were going to be okay; that I knew for sure. Together, we walked forward to cross the finishing line, knowing that when we did, we’d be going home to look for another little line that had the power to change so much, but not everything.

‘Right, *now* will you tell me who the father is if you *are* pregnant?’ I looked up from nursing my swollen knee to see Sophie sitting next to me doing the same to her ankle. She opened her mouth to answer but then closed it. ‘You do *know* who the father is?’ I asked, carefully.

‘Of course, I know who the father is!’ She laughed in mock aggravation.

‘I don’t know.’ I put my hands up in surrender, my laugh meeting hers. ‘For a moment there, you had more notches than belts.’

‘I wasn’t sleeping with all of them all of the time,’ Sophie objected. ‘You must be thinking about Vivian.’

‘How do you...’

‘Dom told me.’

‘And here I was thinking my boyfriend could keep a secret.’ I looked down at my feet, both of us not sure whether I could call him that any more.

‘Go easy on him.’ Sophie placed a hand on my thigh. ‘He was just worried about you. And Dom knows he can trust me when it comes to you.’

I tried to bite back the tears from rising again.

‘Whether you’re together or apart.’

‘Thanks Sophie.’ I smiled, knowing now that whatever happened next, Sophie and Dom’s friendship didn’t depend on me. ‘So, who’s the daddy?’ I raised my eyebrows.

‘Now, don’t be mad,’ her voice quietened. ‘I didn’t tell you because you told me not to go there...’

I racked my mind for all of the advice I had given to Sophie over the past months. Some of it good, some of it unnecessary, some of it downright *awful*.

‘I thought you’d be mad, so I just wanted to buy myself some time, see how it would pan out first. I wanted to know how I felt before causing any drama; I knew you were already struggling to find the balance between work and pleasure...’

Just say it, Sophie, spill.

‘It’s Daniel,’ she said and looked away.

Daniel who? Fifty is Daniel?

‘Not *Daniel* Daniel?’ I asked, sure I’d misunderstood her. ‘Daniel from my work? But how? Why?’ Of all the guys online that she could have swiped right, it was actually someone I knew?

‘Sorry,’ she said cautiously. ‘I asked him to keep it on the down-low for now. You know, he’s your work colleague, he’s a little younger than us...’

‘You’re the older woman?’

‘Only as old as you,’ Sophie quipped back in defence.

‘No sorry, I don’t mean you’re old, it’s just...’ I trailed off, trying to make sense of it all. ‘I thought he was seeing someone else.’

‘Well I *know* he wasn’t seeing anyone else,’ Sophie said. ‘Because he asked me not to. He guessed I was dating other men – Pete, Jesse, and I told him I didn’t want to be exclusive – and well, he said he didn’t want to see me any more whilst I was seeing other people... kind of bold, really.’

I studied Sophie’s face, unable to stop the smile spreading across mine. This was the woman Daniel had been moping about, the one who had asked to keep things quiet, the one that couldn’t just be his.

Sophie looked at me with trepidation.

‘Seriously Soph,’ I said. ‘He’s one of the good ones.’

‘Yeah, maybe. But we’ve not spoken for a week or so. He might not want to speak to me again, I was trying to do the whole polygamy thing, never saying no...’

‘Yeah, turns out that’s not as simple as it sounds.’

‘Is pregnancy any simpler?’ Sophie asked.

‘I guess we should find out.’

‘Now?’ Sophie looked up at me as I stood to my feet.

‘Now.’ I nodded, offering her my hand and helping her to stand.

‘Has it been three minutes yet?’ Sophie looked up from her pacing. I peered outside the bathroom, for just a moment thankful that Dom hadn’t come home. It made taking a secret pregnancy test with your best pal just a little less tricky.

‘Not yet,’ I shouted from my watch.

‘I can’t wait any longer.’ She glanced across to the sink where her test lay to one side. I tried not to look concerned; she’d be waiting longer than that if she was expecting a baby. With Daniel. *Daniel*. The thought kept resurfacing in my mind. It was weird, but it was great.

‘Okay, it’s time,’ I said, as Sophie stopped pacing.

‘You look; I can’t do it.’ She looked at me with desperation, handing the test to me. With shaking hands, I dared myself to look down. ‘It’s negative.’ I looked down at the stick in my hand, double-checking it was only a single line. ‘This is good news, right?’ I asked, looking into her tear-filled eyes before opening my arms and pulling her close.

‘It is,’ she whispered into my hair before pulling away, her hands still shaking.

‘What is it?’ I asked, my hand on hers, for once knowing I was where I needed to be.

‘You know what?’ Sophie stammered. ‘If I *was* pregnant, I think Daniel would have made quite a good dad.’ There was a flash of sadness across her face.

‘I think so too.’ I smiled softly.

‘I think he’d actually make quite a good partner.’ She looked surprised by the thought.

‘I think so too,’ I repeated again, my hand still holding her arm.

‘I think I *like* Daniel.’

‘You think?’ I pulled her back into my embrace. ‘And *I* think you should tell him.’

‘Yeah, maybe.’ A smile spread across her face. ‘Crazy how it sometimes takes something so complicated to figure out the simplest of things.’

‘Yeah.’ My words lost themselves in the mess of her hair. ‘Crazy.’

Chapter 42

EIGHT WEEKS AFTER THE MOMENT

I let the mulled wine warm my insides, as I watched red-faced runners dash past me. The running club was out in full force, but I wasn't among them. I knew Liam wasn't there either. It had gone five but was before midnight, so I assumed he'd be rubbing shoulders in Later's and doing whatever else he needed to get ahead, to climb the ladder, wherever the hell it might lead. I, for one, was happy to be on the ground. I'd left Sophie and Daniel putting the finishing touches to her birthday party and, as I figured I didn't want to spend my evening in an empty apartment wondering whether Dom would ever want to come home, I'd decided to go out on my own.

I took another sip of wine, enjoying people-watching from my table beside the river.

A bunch of girlfriends around the same age as me and Sophie were shouting over each other trying to be heard, their laughter ascending until another woman reading her book alone looked up in their direction. She smiled to herself, content to be disturbed, before catching my eye: just two strangers sharing a moment of solitude.

I missed Dom like mad, but I didn't hate this. I had cursed myself for feeling whole without him, felt guilty that my world wouldn't totally crumble without him by my side. But I wasn't a half. I never had been, and that was okay. We were two wholes, who could choose to be together or choose to be apart. Right now, Dom was choosing apart.

'Hailey?' I heard my name as I turned to see the person who had just called it.

'Alek?' I smiled, unsure as to the etiquette of seeing a former client out in

real life. It had only been a fortnight since I last saw him, when he signed his divorce settlement.

‘I thought it was you!’ He beamed. ‘How have you been?’

‘Well...’ I said, feeling like I owed him some honesty after seeing so much of his. ‘I’ve been better. My boyfriend and I...’ I trailed off, not wanting to overstep the boundaries. I had learnt that lesson too many times.

‘You don’t have to tell me.’ Alek raised a hand, clearly thinking the same. It was nice to be with someone who wanted to act their age. And I was now starting to feel mine, learning that acting your age wasn’t about the milestones you’d met but more about your heart.

‘But for what it’s worth, I know you’re much stronger than you think you are.’ Alek grinned, glancing towards the sky as it turned from blue to pink; change was in the air. ‘Take it from someone who thought my life would be over without my partner,’ he said slowly. ‘Being alone isn’t the same as being lonely.’ He looked happier now, more alive. ‘Anyway’ – he nodded towards the sunset – ‘I’ll leave you to your moment.’

Chapter 43

I hugged a cushion to my chest as Sophie walked across her living room to stand before me.

‘You look gorgeous,’ I said. And she did, a vision in bright fuchsia trousers and a matching crop top, popping perfectly against the tropical background that we’d created for tonight’s big event. Her bold blue eye shadow balanced the look perfectly, as did the two champagne flutes in her hands. ‘Thirty looks good on you, friend.’

‘It feels pretty good on me, too.’ She seemed to sparkle. *I knew that sparkle.*

‘Because of Daniel?’ I asked, eyes darting to the ludicrous amounts of house plants we’d managed to fit into the room.

‘No, not because of him.’ She stood tall. ‘It’s still early days. I guess having a few dates over the past year or so—’

‘A *few*?’ I laughed. Yeah, and Vivian Jones has a *few* pairs of shoes.

‘Ha, okay well, loads of dates,’ she corrected. ‘It kind of taught me something.’

‘Pray tell. I could use some wisdom.’ A flash of concern darted across her face as we both thought of the one person who should have been here too: *Dom.*

‘Novelty is great and all, but sometimes intimacy is better.’ She smiled. ‘Novelty has a habit of wearing off pretty quickly. I guess I just figured I’d start focusing on the things I did have, rather than the things I didn’t and I’m not saying it’s cured my anxiety, I know it doesn’t work like that, but it’s kind of made me feel, you know, that the glass is half full... Anyway, class

over, drink up.’ Sophie thrust a flute of prosecco in my hand. I raised my glass to hers. Even wearing a sundress in late December in the middle of my best friend’s house share, this drink tasted better than any top-shelf champagne I’d tasted at Taylor, Laters and Jones.

‘Are you sure he’s not coming tonight?’ I couldn’t help but ask.

‘He’s still a maybe. Trying to decide whether he’s ready.’ Sophie looked sad for a moment before rallying. ‘But don’t worry Hailey, you guys will work it out, if you’re sure that’s what you want?’

‘It is.’ I nodded. ‘I don’t know how I’ll feel later, but right now it’s all I want.’

Sophie came to sit down beside me on her L-shaped sofa.

‘Take it from someone who has spent the last few weeks stressing out about a future that never happened’ – she took a large gulp of her prosecco – ‘it’s sometimes good to not try and plan too far ahead.’

I knew Sophie was right, but I couldn’t help but chew over the facts again: I had kissed Liam and Dom had left. And I had no clue what would happen next.

I knew Alek was right, that I was strong, that I’d be able to get through a break-up, but still. The thought of being in the same room as him but not being with him, not being able to hold him, was enough to send my heart into overdrive. Perhaps the very real risk of losing him was exactly what I had needed to make me see what we already had.

‘What did the doctor say in the end?’ I asked, happy to divert the conversation away from Dom’s undetermined arrival.

‘Not a whole lot, really.’ Sophie took another sip. ‘Definitely no baby, this time. We talked about how much I’ve been running lately, and she mentioned that the exercise and weight loss might have interrupted my cycle.’ She paused, reaching for her phone as it buzzed to life in her pocket. ‘She didn’t seem concerned.’

‘Then neither should you,’ I assured her, as Sophie’s eyes drifted to her phone.

‘He’s just outside,’ she said.

‘Dom?’ My heart skipped a beat.

‘Daniel.’ A little glimmer flashed across her eyes. She’d contacted him on the day of her test. Not to tell him what had happened but to tell him what she had discovered: that she wanted to give it a go, tentatively, *exclusively*.

Sophie jumped to her feet to let him in, perching on her tiptoes as she

offered him a sheepish kiss on the lips.

‘Hailey.’ He welcomed me with open arms. ‘How are you?’ I embraced him whilst muttering something about how nice it was to see him outside of work. *This was so weird.* I looked at him and my best friend, fingers now intertwined, until I couldn’t hold it in.

‘This is so weird,’ I said.

‘Bad weird?’ Sophie asked, already sure of my answer.

‘No.’ I laughed. ‘Just weird, weird.’

‘Sorry we didn’t tell you earlier.’ Now it was Daniel’s turn to look sheepish. ‘I was just waiting for this one to work out what the hell she wanted.’

‘That’s okay,’ I said. ‘Sometimes it takes a while to work out what you want. But where the hell have you been?’

‘Didn’t Vivian tell you?’ he said. ‘She sent me off to see some new client at his holiday home in Dubai.’ He beamed. Maybe now she didn’t have so many balls in the air she was actually bringing both her trainees in on some good work. I watched as he reached an arm around Sophie who smiled back at him; thirty may look good on her but *Fifty* looked pretty good on her, too.

Sophie’s front room was filling with party guests, mingling around, sharing hugs and glasses, all the colours of the rainbow and not a Christmas tree or star in sight. The chatter from the kitchen drifted into the background music as the minutes passed and I started to wonder whether Dom was ever going to show. I wouldn’t blame him if he didn’t.

‘That’ll be the takeaway,’ Sophie shouted into the room as there was a knock at the door. She was buzzing, the hostess with the mostest. I kind of got the impression she’d been waiting for me to relinquish the control of her party planning for years. All eyes looked hungrily in the direction of the door as it opened.

‘Oh, it’s just Dom,’ one of our mutual friends said, as he walked into the room.

Dom. He looked great: tall and broad and handsome in a grey jumper – one I hadn’t seen before. I figured being away from the flat might prove the push he needed to finally go shopping. He’d had his hair cut too, longer on the top, short at the sides, his thick-rimmed glasses folding around the ears my fingers had traced the shape of whilst he’d slept beside me. I had spent so

much time looking at him, wondering what love should feel like. Whether I'd always known it was there or whether I'd recognise if it was gone. Now the rush of static through my body felt like evidence enough.

'Just go and talk to him,' Sophie whispered in my ear, but then a cheer filled the room: the food had arrived. Huddles of people filled the living room floor as I looked at Dom across it, so close and yet so far.

'Hey stranger.'

Dom moved through the crowded room to stand beside me and it suddenly felt like the most natural thing in the world. I had watched him across the room for twenty minutes, my heart caught in my throat.

'Hey you,' I said, nervously. 'Dom, I've... I'm...'

'I know.' Dom smiled, soft and sad. So much had happened between us, I wasn't sure that we could go back now. I wasn't even sure whether we should. It might be better for Dom if we didn't. 'We gave it a good go,' he went on, as I studied his expression.

'Are you ever going to come home?' I whispered, biting back the tears.

'Yes.' He nodded, a bubble of hope rising in my stomach. 'We need to talk.'

I never thought it would be him uttering those four dreaded words. I bit my quivering lip, challenging myself not to crack.

'I'm free tomorrow evening,' I said, not wanting to waste another moment.

'I'm busy, I'm afraid,' Dom said as my heart dropped. 'But Monday?'

'I can do Monday,' I said, not letting a second of silence stretch between us.

'What time do you finish work?' he asked.

'Whatever time you'd like me to.'

Chapter 44

The early evening sunshine flooded into Taylor, Laters and Jones, illuminating every empty coffee cup and tired eye. It was hard to think that anything ever stayed hidden here. The decorations were already becoming tired, it was most people's last day in the office before Christmas, but no one was showing signs of leaving. Walking across the open-plan space, I glanced in the direction of Vivian's office. Door left ajar, open for business. She was back, and better than ever; not that anyone milling around the office would know any different. Apart from, perhaps, Liam. I could just glimpse her figure, sitting upright at the glass desk. If it hadn't been Daniel with her that night, *who was it?*

'Hey.' Daniel grinned, leaning back in his chair, the light outside dancing across the Thames visible through the window behind him. It was weird not having to ask him how his weekend had been, strange not to see him swiping frantically on his phone. *It couldn't have been him, could it?* I knew better than to think just because someone said they were committed it meant they weren't seeing someone else.

'Hey.' I mirrored his smile, eyes searching his expression for anything suspicious.

'Fun weekend.' He stood up from his seat to place a takeaway coffee cup on top of my desk. 'I really hope you didn't find it too weird me being there.'

We hadn't really been able to talk about work or about our text-mix-up with Sophie there. And Dom. I had seen Daniel chatting to him at the party, soon after we had set a time to meet. Dom wouldn't have told him anything about us; he knew I didn't like to blur the boundaries between my personal

and professional life. Well, used to know. *But did Daniel?* I looked at his floppy dark hair and broad torso. That moment felt so long ago but if the man I'd seen her with wasn't Jason, wasn't Liam, it *had* to be someone else, someone who looked a lot like Daniel...

'So, we're okay?' Daniel went on. 'It's okay that I'm dating your best friend?'

'Provided you don't screw her over,' I said, as Daniel resumed his position behind his desk. He looked more relaxed than I'd seen him in weeks.

'You've got nothing to worry about there.' He laughed. 'I'm a serial monogamist.'

'Are you?' I had no hope of hiding the accusation in my eyes.

'Yes!' Daniel raised his voice a little, his tone still light and laced with laughter. 'You heard how I asked her to be exclusive embarrassingly soon after our first date, right? But wait...' He paused. 'You said you already knew who I was seeing, that she told you... But Sophie said she hadn't mentioned anything until the marathon...' His eyes searched mine for answers, trying to work me out. 'You thought I was seeing someone else, then. Who?'

'No one,' I lied through my teeth, already pink in the cheeks.

'Hailey?' Daniel narrowed his eyes and lowered his voice.

'Okay, but you can't say anything, to anyone.' I glanced towards Vivian's office and lowered my voice even further. 'And you have to tell me the truth, okay? I promise won't tell anyone.' I crossed my fingers under the table.

Daniel placed an open palm to his strong chest. 'I promise to tell the whole truth and nothing but the truth, so help me Sophie.'

I couldn't help but laugh. 'I thought you were sleeping with...' I glanced meaningfully over at Vivian's office once again.

'No!' Daniel placed a hand to his mouth, 'Oh, you're *serious*? Now, call me old-fashioned, but I do not have sex with married, forty-something women,' Daniel whispered furiously, but smiling from ear to ear. *Try sixty-something*. I wondered for a moment, whether Sophie had told him about Vivian. But I already knew she hadn't.

'But I bet there's a few people in this office that do,' I said and raised my eyebrows suggestively.

Daniel shook his head in agreement, knowing exactly who I was talking about – well, one of the people I was talking about, at least.

'Perhaps.' Daniel turned his attention from Vivian's office back to me.

‘But I’m not one of them. Trust me, I’m the child of a messy divorce.’ He put his hand back on his heart. ‘Sometimes saying no to one thing can help you say yes to something else. A no to someone you kind of fancy, can be a yes to a deeper, longer-lasting, less flipping *frantic* relationship.’

I stared at him, unable to look away as I tried to let his words settle in my mind. Would I always be flitting from one idea to the next, never able to settle on this career or that, this man or the next? I had seen a freedom in Vivian that I had wanted to find. But I wasn’t sure freedom meant having whatever you wanted when you wanted it any more.

‘You think I’m profound, don’t you?’ Daniel puffed out his chest with pride. ‘Like a young Ernest Hemmingway...’

‘I think you’re a dick,’ I said, turning back to my inbox. ‘But yes, maybe, *just* maybe, that was a little bit profound.’

ME: *Still on for tonight? 6pm at ours?*

DOM: *typing...*

‘Hailey? Can I have a word?’ Vivian asked.

I glanced at Daniel, before following her out of the room and away from our office. She turned right, pushing her manicured hands against a plain white door. I had thought it was just a cleaning cupboard, but I should have known that Taylor, Laters and Jones still had secrets to discover.

The door opened onto a dark corridor. Vivian led me up a narrow staircase, pushed open a large industrial fire door and led the way out onto a thin sliver of balcony, untidy and unkempt. Where the immediacy of our surroundings left much to be desired, the view was everything, the iconic London landscape sprawling for miles.

‘I never take anyone up here.’

‘I can see why,’ I breathed, my eyes savouring our surroundings. It was nothing you couldn’t see through our office. But there was something about the secrecy of this spot that made it all the more special. ‘But why...’ my sentence trailed off as I looked at Vivian, searching for answers she’d never

been able to give.

‘I wanted to say thank you.’ She struggled to say the words, not turning to look at me. ‘For the past couple of weeks, for being so discreet.’

My stomach sank before I reminded myself again that I could trust Dom and Sophie not to say anything. What a feeling to know you could tell someone everything and your secrets would stay safe.

‘And that I’m sorry.’ Vivian turned to me now. ‘Sorry for getting you all caught up in my messy world...’

‘That’s okay,’ I said. ‘Some parts of your world are pretty exciting.’ I smiled, not ashamed to admit it.

‘I hope you don’t mean Liam?’ she quipped, raising an eyebrow.

‘No... I...’ I began, my cheeks burning red.

‘You’re better than men like that,’ Vivian said, stern and assertive again. ‘Men who never stop being boys, who always want what they can’t have. Truth is, I’m a bit like that.’ Vivian sighed, as if it was a confession. ‘The older I get and the more I achieve, the more I just have to keep *winning*, just to show I can...’

I nodded along. Maybe we were all just big balls of desire, some chasing short-term highs, others playing the long game.

‘I spend so much time trying to encourage young women that they can be all they want to be, but I guess, even I’m a bit scared that they’ll come and take my place.’ Vivian looked at me. ‘I tried to avoid it, but it happens to the best of us.’ She was still backing herself, the way she always had, the way she had needed to, to get here. ‘Then there was that stupid thing in the media, the feeling that someone’s always trying to take you down.’ She sighed. ‘That stupid “potentially” landmark case. Do you know how much I wanted to prove that I could still do more than just “potentially” achieve something? But it almost cost me everything. When Marcus told Jason, I thought there was no coming back from that...’

Marcus? She didn’t even like him. He was the annoying client’s son who got in the way.

‘Marcus?’ I asked, trying to keep my voice measured. I thought of his floppy hair, not too dissimilar from Daniel’s, though his cocky interior couldn’t be further away from Sophie’s new boyfriend. *And thank God for that.*

‘Ever since he started wanting more and I told him I’d never leave Jason, he’d started to mess with me. I knew it was him leaking information about

the case to *The Chirp*.' Marcus? Marcus was the one who was leaking information, the one I...

'Was that who I saw you...' My voice trailed off. In all our discussions, she'd never once actually acknowledged the very reason I was here, standing before her now.

'That's not the point, Hailey,' she said dismissively, as if she hadn't been the one to bring him up in the first place. But I could tell from her face that I was bang on the money. 'My point was far, far more profound.' She turned back to face the view. I looked out across London, the once-heavy silence sitting comfortably between us, her 'point' still left unsaid. I bet it was something about integrity, redemption, starting again. But after all we'd been through, all I'd almost risked, I was really happy not to know, to be kept firmly out of the loop.

DOM: *Yeah, 6pm sounds good.*

I looked at my watch. It was almost five. Time for everyone to enjoy the city who wasn't too busy *owning* it, to relax into Christmas and remember all that mattered most. I gathered my stuff. For once I was going to be at home on time and *in* time to invest in my personal life, a life that existed far, far away from anything going on here. I turned to leave, but first, I *really* needed to pee.

I dashed across the office in the direction of T. Pushing the door open, I struggled to push the memories from my mind. Just four months ago, I was running around the office on my first day with no idea where the bathrooms were and no idea of what lay behind this, or any other door, for that matter. In a few weeks, I'd be moving to a different department for the next placement of my training contract. Then in another four months, I'd be moving on again. They say variety is the spice of life.

Entering T, I found the room blissfully empty. In the safety of the stall, I pulled out my phone and swiped to Dom's profile picture for the thousandth time since he'd last left our apartment. Tonight, he'd be coming home. My stomach churned as I wondered whether he'd be back for an hour, a night or

maybe a lifetime. I still didn't know what I wanted, not really, not forever. But I guessed after everything that had happened, I knew I wanted to find out. Before Taylor, Later's – most definitely before Jones – I'd thought that relationships happened one way. You had a few years of dating, then living together, then got engaged, then married. One big happily ever after. Anything else was getting it all wrong. But that was when marriage was the finishing line, an end point rather than the beginning of a journey. If *that* journey was so utterly unique to each and every couple, why should the route to or away from it look the same?

'Liam!' I jumped as I pushed the cubicle door open to see him standing there, sorting out his hair in the mirror. 'You scared me.' I put a hand to my chest.

'Always making your heart race, right, Kidd?' He winked, still annoyingly able to pull it off.

'No,' I objected, the blood pounding in my ears making the word feel like a lie.

'Not seen you around as much.' He turned away from the mirror to face me.

'Yeah, well it's all settled now, isn't it?' I wasn't sure whether I was talking about Aleksander and Talia or *Hartman v Kidd*.

'Yeah, enjoy working on it?'

I knew he wasn't talking about the case. I'm not sure what my answer would have been if he was. Though the circumstances had been far from ideal, being thrown in at the deep end wasn't all that bad. That's where you learn.

'In parts.' I smiled, walking past him to wash my hands. 'Look, about that kiss...'

'Thank God.' Liam smiled. 'I thought you were just going to pretend it didn't happen.' He studied me with eager eyes that had once made me feel so special. Now I knew he had been doing the same with Vivian, they had kind of lost their power.

'It happened.' My serious tone wiped the smile off his face. 'But it shouldn't have. It was a mistake, okay?' His face morphed into confusion: *How could kissing Liam Hartman be a mistake?* 'I have a boyfriend,' I said, reiterating what I'd told him countless times before. *You had a boyfriend.* 'What you do in your relationship is entirely up to you, no judgement.' I put my hands up. 'But that's not for me.'

‘Suit yourself.’ Liam smiled again, his dismissiveness not a little cocky. He still thought he could have me in a moment, if he really wanted to. Some guys always would. He looked at his watch – too flashy, too expensive – and smiled. ‘Old Fashioned o’clock, fancy a drink in Later’s? My treat.’ He beamed. Man, he really didn’t know when to stop.

‘No,’ I said, not even thinking of apologising. ‘I’m heading home.’

Chapter 45

A NEW MOMENT

I sat on the green sofa, the one that had *chosen us*, many years since Dom and I had chosen each other. Butterflies circled my stomach, the same ones that I had so often questioned when I was around him: *Were they still there? Had they ever been?* Well, they were now. I looked at the door, that damn sticky door, wondering when it might open, whether Dom would use his key or buzz from downstairs.

The living room was tidier than it had ever been during our time together. Far tidier than it had been with Vivian's mess sprawled across it. Our stack of books was reassembled, two cool beers resting on top. I walked across the room to check my reflection, hair tied up, the way that Dom liked it. I'd never needed my lucky scrunchy more than I needed it now.

Three knocks sounded on the door. He was here. *My Dom*. Maybe. I waited for a second to see whether he might kick it open. He didn't. But this was *his* home, or it was meant to be. Trying to calm my shaking hands, I turned the latch and opened the door.

'Hey.' Dom offered a weak smile, so familiar and yet so unknown.

'Hey,' I said, reaching up to give him a hug, his body awkward at first but softening into my embrace. In the silence, I could hear him breathe in my hair. That was a good sign, wasn't it?

'Can I get you a drink?' I asked, surprised by the woodenness of the words. Dom nodded and accepted the can, opening it and sitting on the edge of the sofa, much more formal than I had ever seen him be. 'You can relax, you know?' I couldn't help myself from saying.

'You haven't put the Christmas decorations up?' His eyes scanned the

room.

‘It didn’t feel right without you here,’ I replied.

A silence stretched between us until Dom asked the one question we were both thinking. ‘How the hell did we end up here?’ He turned to face me, fixing his eyes on mine.

‘It’s actually pretty simple,’ I said, perching on the sofa beside him, reaching for my own beer and taking a sip despite the fact my stomach was already brimming with bubbles. ‘Your girlfriend is a dick,’ I said. ‘She just got so caught up in her new job, and new people and new world, that she—’

‘Can she stop speaking about herself in the third person?’ Dom interjected, but he was smiling.

‘She can, I mean... I can...’

He laughed.

God, how I had missed that laugh. There had been times when I’d found it annoying, when I’d wanted nothing more than for him to shut up. I guess it’s true what they say about absence. Dom inched backwards, relaxing further into the couch.

‘Look, I’m sorry, Dom.’ My eyes searched his face hungrily, seeing if my boyfriend was still there, whether the distance had turned to indifference. ‘I really don’t know what happened. I was just so in awe of Vivian and anxious about us, and then, what with trying to be there for Sophie while not letting her be there for me, and the thought of you proposing...’ My sentence trailed off. *Please speak Dom, please say something. Anything.*

‘I’m not proposing...’ Dom began slowly, forehead crinkled in confusion. ‘Well, not yet, anyway. I...’ He hesitated, trying to gauge my response. ‘I didn’t think we were there yet.’

‘Neither did I!’ I agreed, my confusion matching his own. ‘But then I found the ring. Dom, it’s a beautiful ring, and one day I think I might like to wear it, but I’ve just started a whole new career and...’ My eyes started to prick with tears, but Dom smiled softly.

‘Hailey,’ he said. ‘That’s my grandma’s old engagement ring.’ He smiled. ‘Mum gave it to me when she died last year. I was keeping it safe for when it felt right, but it wasn’t on my radar for right now. To be honest, I kind of forgot where it was.’

‘It’s in a box in the wardrobe with loads of papers, all those old messages we wrote...’ I wiped the tears from my eyes.

‘Oh shit,’ Dom exclaimed. ‘I forgot about those. I found the messages on

my old computer back home and printed them for that scrapbook idea you had last year for Sophie's thirtieth. I completely forgot about it.'

'So did I,' I said slowly, thoughts swirling and settling in my mind: *How had I got it all so wrong?* 'But what about that note from Sophie? *Please don't tell Hailey...*'

'What note?' Dom asked, as I scrambled in my back pocket to find it, sure it was still hidden in these jeans. He opened the paper to read the words out loud. 'I think that's from when we planned *your* twentieth birthday together.' He smiled. I had forgotten that there was once a time when the party planning was the other way around.

'I can't believe we're all turning *thirty*.' I sighed, heart still throbbing in my chest. 'Don't you think we should want to get married by now? Loads of our friends are.'

'You do know relationships aren't a one-size-fits-all thing, right?' he said.

'Yeah, I'm beginning to get that.' I grinned at him, testing more and more of the water. 'I think I might like to get engaged one day though, I'm just not ready right now.' I took another sip of my drink.

'I think I'd like to get engaged one day too.' Dom grinned. 'But not yet, not today.' He pushed his glasses up the bridge of his nose.

I looked at my hands, clutching my can close to my chest. I wanted nothing more than to wrap my arms around him, to tell him all I'd learned, and all I was still unsure of and all I really, really hoped we'd be together long enough to find out. But I needed to tell him about Liam. If we were going to start again, he deserved to know the truth. That was one thing I'd learned I wanted in a relationship at least – honesty.

'Probably not to me,' I said, more tears tracing their way down my face.

'Huh?' His eyebrows raised, sending his glasses straight back down his nose again. 'Oh I...' Dom stiffened again, retreating a little to his side of the sofa. 'I kind of got the impression... you know, from Sophie, that maybe you wanted to stay...' Dom's words drifted off as an expression of painstaking realisation spread across his face.

'No, no,' I interjected, reaching a hand to his arm. 'I *do* want to stay together.' I urged, unafraid to say it and just a little afraid of what might come next. 'It's just, I've got something to tell you and I'm not sure you're going to want to stay with me after I do.'

'You kissed Liam,' he said.

‘I kissed Liam,’ I whispered through my tears. I couldn’t even say it didn’t mean anything, because at the time it did. It meant that I explored the grass on the other side and found it wasn’t greener. It meant that even though I didn’t know what the future had in store for my *own* grass, I wanted to keep watering it and see. ‘But you already seem to know that. So why are you here?’ He was going to break up with me, I knew it.

‘Because my girlfriend’s a dick.’ Dom reached a hand out to mine. He looked me in my mascara-stained eyes. He said girlfriend, *my girlfriend*. ‘And she put way too much pressure on herself, to keep everything the same when so much was changing, thinking that to be strong she had to keep her worries to herself and well, she kind of just lost her shit.’ Dom looked at me, soft but serious. ‘And her best friend is a bit of a dick too and got drunk and worried and told me everything...’ Damn Sophie. ‘And she explained in no uncertain terms that said girlfriend was heartbreakingly sorry and loved me and wanted to make it work.’

‘She does.’ I nodded through tears. ‘I really do.’

‘Don’t get me wrong, I was pissed off,’ Dom went on. ‘I still am. I might be for a while. But that doesn’t mean I don’t want to make it work, too.’

‘But I’m still scared,’ I said. ‘I mean, I can’t promise I’ll feel this way forever...’

‘I never asked you to,’ Dom said, now taking hold of both my hands in his.

‘I can promise to love you today, and love you tomorrow,’ I said.

‘That’s a good start.’ Dom laughed. ‘One day at a time.’

‘But I’m almost thirty,’ I cried, not knowing whether that even mattered any more. Sophie had got over that by now anyway.

‘Yeah.’ Dom laughed again, ‘Even thirty-year-olds have to live one day at a time. That’s the only way you can do this life thing, no skipping ahead.’

‘But aren’t I supposed to *know that I know* by now?’ I held his hands tighter still, his body a little closer to mine.

‘Did your clients “know that they knew” when they got married?’ Dom asked, as Talia and Alek, and Vivian and Jason jumped into my mind. ‘I think maybe sometimes it’s not about knowing that you know.’ A smile pushed up the corners of his mouth. ‘Sometimes it’s about knowing that you know you want to *try*.’ He inched further towards me, deliciously close, as I let go of his hands to pull his body against mine, warm and safe, his arms around me familiar and complete. ‘Well, do you?’

‘Do I what?’ I asked.

‘Do you want to try? Even though we don’t know what the future has in store?’

‘I do.’ It might be the only ‘I do’ we ever say but for right now, it’s enough.

‘Yeah?’ Dom tilted my chin up to his, my mouth lingering just inches from his lips. I had spent the last year feeling like I knew him so well, knew every little bit about him but all of a sudden it felt like there might be more, more to discover, more to come.

‘Yes,’ I nodded. ‘Yes, I do.’

He reached his hand to the back of my head, pulling my lucky yellow scrunchy out of my hair and throwing it across the apartment. ‘*That* scrunchy.’ He looked at me and laughed, shaking his head in amusement. I didn’t need a damn scrunchy for my luck anyway; life might be fragile, but I knew I was strong enough to face whatever came my way. Pressing his lips to mine, Dom’s fingers traced their way to my sides, filling my stomach with warmth. It felt like the first time he’d ever kissed me. A different man, one that had grown so much over the years I’d known him, through everything we had been through. And yet, as he wrapped his arms around me, his familiar scent felt like home. Maybe monogamy didn’t limit you to one person but a thousand different versions of them; everything they are and the promise of all they’re yet to be all wrapped up in one. I pulled away and looked into Dom’s eyes, now filled with fire and hope. Neither of us knew what the future would hold, but for now, for this moment, I refused to let the maybes of tomorrow steal the joy from my yes today.

* * *

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A Letter from Elizabeth

Dear Reader,

Thank you so much for reading *Never Say No*; after years of subjecting my parents to story after story, it still blows my mind that I have been given the opportunity to write for you. If you did enjoy it and want to keep up to date with all my latest releases just sign up at the following link. Your email address will never be shared, and you can unsubscribe at any time:

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The idea for this book was first sparked by a number of conversations I shared with people who seemed to deny themselves nothing they desired – and I mean, *nothing*. As somewhat of a people-pleaser, I found their guts to go after what they wanted inspiring, but in some cases their reaction after they got the ‘thing’ they went after was surprising: it just wasn’t enough. This got me questioning: Is saying yes to every desire the key to contentment?

You don’t need me to tell you, this is a *huge* question and I’m not even going to pretend that I’ve found the answers, but I do hope you’ve had fun journeying with Hailey as she’s wrestled with what some of these questions mean for her, now. As with the majority of my writing so far, I have tried not to draw hard and fast lines or neat happy endings, but instead to explore a diversity of happy endings of people finding contentment in the messy middle as this is still very much where I find myself (I am starting to think maybe no one ever feels like they have *arrived*, anyway). People are dynamic, they grow, they change, and although I may not have set out to write a book about change, I think in many ways that’s what this story has become.

It is about wanting change. From the change Vivian wants to see in her industry (Amen to that!) to the change Hailey wants for her own career, knowing what we want and chasing after it can undoubtedly be a good thing. Even when we *don’t* know what we want, it’s okay to want change, to reassess and start again, like Sophie lifting her one-date rule or Alek eventually wanting his fresh start.

It is also about embracing change – particularly in relationships. I have always loved writing about friendship, and the three-way friendship between Hailey, Sophie and Dom is one of my favourites. I have had best friends that are for a time and a place, where once the ‘thing’ that holds us together is gone, the friendship no longer really makes sense. I have also had friendships that have defied time and space, which have been safe and surrendered enough to allow each friend to change their minds, change their hearts and change themselves. This book, in many ways, is about Hailey’s journey from seeing her friendship as something fragile – where one more shift in dynamic might see it break – to something expansive enough to weather any storm and still find each other in the midst of it.

Then, it is about shunning change – or rather, sticking with the same. For the best part of my twenties, I have wanted the extraordinary, the exciting, the new, the next; I have sometimes struggled not to think that a more perfect home, or perfect job or perfect partner is simply another swipe away. And I’m not alone. This ‘hedonistic treadmill’ is felt by so many of us and is something I explored in an article for *Cosmopolitan* at the same time as writing this book; you can read the article [here](#). Within

this book, Hailey gets invited into a shiny new world that makes hers look dull in comparison and when her status quo isn't so stable any more she begins to discover the joy in it, seeing the beauty in the small everyday developments rather than the big, life-defining moves. And of course, all these little moments come together to build a life. She learns that even when it looks like nothing is changing, things rarely stay the same.

Above and beyond Hailey's journey with change – wanting it, embracing it and finding it in the familiar – there has been so much change behind the scenes. I began writing this book as a woman in my twenties, sitting in a busy coffee shop in London. I am now adding the finishing touches as a woman in my thirties sitting in my parents' garden in the Midlands in the midst of a global pandemic. Things have changed and they will change again but I hope we will always have stories, to swap and share and make us feel a little less alone, regardless of what changes we are facing.

I'm so thankful that you chose to read this one.

All my love,

Elizabeth x

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Acknowledgements

Every story needs a backdrop and Hailey's has two: the (very) fictional world of Taylor, Laters and Jones and the wonderfully real city of London. Though so much of the law in this book would *never* stand up in court, I did get a glimpse into the legal world whilst studying Law at university, an experience made all the richer by doing it alongside Grace Beecroft, Tom Benjamin and Matt Hart; I have always loved making memories with you – and now your partners too.

Then, there is London, the city so full of life that it can make you feel both alive and tired just thinking about it. From wandering down Brick Lane and drinking on rooftops in Shoreditch to running across Tower Bridge at dusk to sharing a bottle of red on Bermondsey Street, life in this city would be nothing without the people I have shared it with; you know who you are. For their support throughout the writing of this particular book special mention must be made to Katie Pickard, Grace Newby, Hannah Chambers, Lindsey Armstrong, Emily Thomas, Juliet Trickey and Nick Stevenson-Steels. To the wonderful staff at Hej – thank you for letting me make your coffee shop my second home. Of course, things look a little different at the time of writing with the city in lockdown, and I hope that in some small way, this book reminds you of some of the best bits of our city.

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remarkable. And to the book bloggers and early reviewers – thank you for all that you do.

And last but not least, Mum, Dad, Thomas and Rachel, thank you for always being my biggest fans; and to the one that brings contentment in all this obscurity, I am forever grateful.



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