



“You make me want to do
more than kiss you.”



TO SEDUCE CALUM DISSICK

BOOK ONE OF THE STEPBROTHER DEAREST TRILOGY

MARAMARTHA



To Seduce Calum Dissick

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Playlist

You can find it [here](#):

ALL I WANT – Kodakid

ALLELUIA – The boychoir

ARCADE – Duncan Lawrence

AVA – Famy

CONTROL – Zoe Wees

FCKD IN THE HEAD – Robert Grace

HANDS IN MY POCKET – Alanis Morissette

HOTEL WALLS – Smith & Thell

ILY (I LOVE YOU BABY) – Surf Mesa, Emilee

LOVELY – Billie Eilish, Khalid

NESSUN DORMA – Andrea Bocelli

PETER PAN WAS RIGHT – Anson Seabra
REWRITE THE STARS – James Arthur, Anne-Marie
SECRET LOVE SONG – Little Mix, Jason Derulo
SOMEONE YOU LOVED – Lewis Calpadi
STARSHIPS – Nicki Minaj
STONE COLD – Demi Lovato
THE NIGHT WE MET – Lord Huron
VA VA VOOM – Nicki Minaj
YOU BROKE ME FIRST – Tate McRae

To you; you are enough.

CHAPTER 1

The dare



A CHEER BREAKS out in the pub as the local band moves to the stage for their usual Friday night performance. Rose and Taylor bang their fists on the table, and I grab one of the four cups. My best friends pick up their glasses and clink them against mine. We take a sip of the foaming gold-coloured drinks, and I shiver as the first drop of chilled beer slithers down my throat.

I hate beer. But for today, I can handle it.

“Congratulations,” they all chorus, their heads of blonde, red, and black hair bobbing as the start of an instrumental overtakes the usual chatter. We are celebrating two things: Dad’s remarriage and the new year.

The band begins with the flute and everywhere quietens. Some lads hang by the open door, bottles of beer in their hands. The only female in the band of five grabs the microphone in both hands and her head tips to the side. A smile graces my lips as her voice breaks the silence.

“*Presley, don’t leave me...*” she starts. The song is different, an original, but our reactions are the same. Our heads bob and our bodies sway as they serenade us with the music. “... *please don’t.*”

Amelia nudges me with her elbow as the second song ends. The band doesn’t start a new song, only plays the flute, and she taps me again. “Okay, Cathie. I’ve got one for you.” My eyes narrow at her side profile. She’s beside me, while the other two are across from us. I already know what my answer

will be—a big fucking no. “I dare you to walk over to that guy and kiss him.”

I turn to the other girls at the table, expecting them to laugh it off, back me up, or stop Amelia from trying to put me in that position. But nope, they do nothing but look on with amusement.

“Piss off, Amelia Greene,” I mutter.

Amelia folds her arms, and a perfect blonde brow lifts as she waits for me to do something. She is not joking. A groan escapes my lips as I grip the table, hoping she will recant her words.

Nothing.

“Why him?” I ask.

Amelia motions for us to draw near, and our heads almost bump as we inch forward to hear what else she has to say. “Who wears *sunglasses* in a pub?”

Our attention redirects to the bar, where the blonde sits alone on a high stool with a shot glass to his lips. Rose and Taylor nod in agreement. They will nod to anything Amelia says if it gets me to do the dare. I love them, but right now, I hate them for not having my back. This is supposed to be a celebratory evening, not an embarrass-yourself-in-front-of-a-stranger night.

I make a show of standing, and my miniskirt flares, hiking up to reveal my thighs. I tug it down, and the girls laugh. The first question they asked before we left my house was if I would be okay in something as short as this. I said yes. Well, I lied. It didn’t look so short until now.

“I’m leaving, Amelia,” I say. She scoffs, and my other two best friends brace their elbows on the table. “I’m leaving. I’ll walk up to the young chap and give him a bloody, fat kiss on the lips.”

“Why, yes? Do that, Catherine. Go on then,” Amelia says. She leans back in her seat, waving me off as my eyes scan the pub for any familiar faces that might recognise us. “Be a darling.”

Rose laughs. Fine. I'll do it. Kissing a stranger shouldn't—can't be that bad. I spare a glance at the man and halt. The ink on his exposed arm makes my legs tingle, and my confidence wavers. He raises his hand to brush his curly hair off his forehead, and his biceps flex. It doesn't help that he is wearing a tank top paired with ripped jeans. I can kiss him all right. Yep, I'll kiss him.

As an afterthought, I grab my ID from my purse and flip my friends off as they cheer me on to my doom. I stop a few feet from the bar and let my hair down. The boys at school say it's sexy. Hot boy doesn't look up from his drink. This might just be a terrible idea. I open my mouth to talk, but the words don't come out. Usually, the boys speak first whenever I approach them.

Hot boy finally tilts his head my way, and my throat dries up. The three pairs of eyes staring at my back only increase my nervousness. Bloody fucking cunts for sending me up here. A screech from the stage forces a yelp out of my lips. I fake a laugh when the band begins another song.

“Hi,” I whisper. I clear my throat and try again. This song is slow, so I don't have to yell for him to hear me. “Hi there, Stranger.”

No response.

“Hi?”

Still nothing from him. I touch a hand to the blonde's knee, and his head snaps up. He pushes his sunglasses into his hair, and I shrink under his icy stare that burns holes into my frame.

“Would you like to kiss me? As a dare, of course. My best friend has dared me to kiss you.”

That gets the stranger's undivided attention. I flash him a smile. I've been told I have a beautiful smile. A ghost of a grin flits across his lips. That's a good sign, yeah? It must be.

“They are watching us right now.” He cants his head to search for them, and I blurt out, “No, please. Don't look. I'll describe them. Just don't look. Or don't make it obvious you're looking.”

He slides his glasses back on, hiding his charming baby-blue eyes from me. “The table at the far end. Three girls. Blonde, brunette, redhead.” He tips his chin at the mention of their hair colours, and my fingers run through my pink hair. It was a last-minute inspiration by one of Nicki Minaj’s albums. Plus, it’s a new year and term, and I now have a stepmother. His stare makes me uncomfortable, so I ramble to fill the awkward silence. “It was inspired by Pink Friday.”

“Nicki Minaj. She is a cool artist,” he says.

“Right?” My chest sags under the weight of my relief. My best friends don’t share my opinions about Nicki, the biggest pop rapper ever, according to me. “She doesn’t get enough credit.”

“Yeah.”

“How do you spell it? With a *k* or a *c*?”

He finishes his shot before saying, “C.”

“I like you,” I say without thinking. But all I get is a blank stare. People spell it as Nikki, and they are wrong. My brain works harder to come up with words. “You’re not from around here.”

Maybe he’s a tourist. Wells Spring is quite popular in that aspect. Plus, he has a peculiar accent.

“Am I right, mate?” I say with a laugh.

The stranger folds his arms, and my gaze lowers to his tattoo. He notices that, and his lips curl.

“How old are you?” he asks.

“Here.” Instead of answering, I fish out my ID from the waistband of my skirt and offer it to him. The King’s Pub won’t sell alcohol to anyone less than eighteen. We had to improvise. He doesn’t collect it, not even a peek at the plastic card to know my fake name. “I’m nineteen.”

“Nineteen?”

Technically, nineteen is seventeen plus two, so I can pass for a sweet nineteen. “Yes.”

He motions me forward with a curved finger. I tell myself to ignore him, but my body develops a mind of its own, and my feet cover the short gap. I stand between his legs. His lips brush my ear as he leans forward, the scruff on his jaw teasing my cheek. My body thrums at the contact.

“I can do you one better.” My body loves the sound of his voice. “My room is upstairs.” The King’s Pub is the perfect spot for grabbing a drink and spending the night. “What say you?”

The alarm bells in my head finally trip off. I extricate myself from him and back away.

“How old are you?”

“Just turned twenty-two,” he answers.

A seventeen-year-old and a twenty-two-year-old isn’t the worst combo. “Your ID, please.”

“Didn’t need one to get in. You’ll have to take my word for it, sweetheart.” I swat his hand that reaches for me, and he laughs. It’s a sound as lovely as the rest of his body. One look at the girls motivates me. As long as I get my kiss, which I now want for my sake, not theirs. “What’s your name?”

Too late. I place a finger on his lips. “No names, Stranger.” Two can play this game. “My kiss.”

He shakes his head. “I only kiss in private.”

By now, the girls must be bored. A kiss takes less than a minute, and I already spent more than that time here to no avail. There is no use returning to the table without getting the kiss.

“Well, my friends don’t give a fig about your bloody preferences,” I snap. His smug smile only irritates me. I’m not going into a stranger’s room because of a kiss, even if he’s breathtakingly handsome. I place my hands on my hips and size him up. “Will this kiss be happening or not?”

His lips brush against mine. It happened too fast to be considered a kiss.

“Done,” he says. Done? My mouth hangs open in surprise, and he winks. “Now, run along.”

What a prick. “Fuck you.”

“In my room? Maybe.” The sound of his laughter vexes me. On noticing my annoyance, his eyes soften. “I can give you a better kiss in private. I want to help, but I’m not a fan of PDA.”

Without another word to him, I storm off to our table.

CHAPTER 2

Last chance



ROSE, the redhead, releases a dreamy sigh when I slump into my chair. “That was hot.”

“No, it wasn’t.”

“Yes, it was,” Taylor, the brunette, supports. Her finger shoots up to push her invisible glasses up her nose but halts. We all laugh. She ditched her glasses for contacts tonight. “But it wasn’t a proper kiss.” To me, it was. Rose makes kissy faces at me. “I wanted to watch you two kiss.”

“I think he likes you, Cathie,” Amelia says.

I ignore her. She set me up for this.

“He wants me to follow him,” I say to no one and everyone. Rose hands me my purse. Just because she can stay out late doesn’t mean I’m also afforded such privileges. “He has a room upstairs.”

“It’s only a kiss, and we are still here,” Amelia adds. “What would Nicki do? A bad bitch like her?”

“Shut up.” It is unfair to bring Nicki Minaj into this.

Amelia slings an arm around my shoulders. She knows she’s got to me. “We will wait for you here, Cathie. No one leaves.” I sigh, and she adds, “Just don’t do anything beyond a kiss, okay?”

My eyes find him. Even with his sunglasses, I still feel his stare. I hate how it bothers me.

“He’s hot,” Rose says. “You have to admit that.”

“Maybe.” Holding the glass to my lips, I add, “Hot could also mean stupid.”

“Who cares? It’s just a kiss,” she replies.

Someone clears their throat behind us. “Excuse me, ladies.”

“You are excused,” I whisper, and the rest of the table giggles.

I look back to see who ruined our moment, and my smile disappears. It’s him. Amelia stands and whispers something in his ear. His glasses shield his eyes, but I know they are staring at me because I haven’t looked away. He offers her something without looking in her direction.

When Amelia steps back, he smiles. “Last chance?” he says.

Another look at the girls, and they all give me an encouraging nod. I stand and grab my purse, but don’t move another inch. “How am I sure you won’t kill me? What if you’re a serial killer?”

“She has my number.” He nods at Amelia, who waves her phone.

“You didn’t give me your name,” Amelia says. How did she get his number? It didn’t feel like any moment had passed in the minutes we spent staring at each other. She taps on her screen, and an unfamiliar ringtone breaks the silence. “It’s correct. You do look a bit familiar, sir.”

“Sir?” He laughs. God, it’s a gorgeous sound. “Familiar? I get that a lot.”

“Very familiar,” Amelia adds. Rose, Taylor, and I share a glance. They shrug. She is the oldest in our clique, and we greatly respect her, but we don’t see the familiarity except his hotness.

“That too. I get it a lot. And you can call me C.”

“Nice to meet you, C,” the girls’ chorus. I’m the only one who doesn’t share in their excitement. Something else thrums

under my veins. Anticipation mixed with the nerves. “Don’t be late.”

Given their attitude, one would think I was doing the city a great service. I follow C outside the pub, and the chill January air hits us. I snicker at our outfits. Very inappropriate for the weather.

“What’s funny?” C asks.

“We are not dressed for the occasion.”

“Yeah?” He offers me his hand, and I slip mine into it. It’s unusually lovely. I appreciate the roughness of his palm on mine. Tugging me away from the entrance, he says, “It’s this way.”

Our footsteps echo in the dark. The empty street is a stark contrast to the pub. I’m quiet as we walk around the building, only relaxing when we approach another door. I’ve never been here.

“Your best friends really wanted you to get that kiss, huh?”

“I guess so.”

We stop at the door, and C lets go of my hand. I miss the warmth of his palm as soon as it’s gone. The receptionist barely glances up as we walk past the counter. C retakes my hand and leads me up the stairs. We continue in silence until we are at a door he opens within seconds.

A switch goes off inside, and light floods the room. C steps in first, and I follow behind. Coming here sounded like a great idea at the pub. It always sounds like a great idea when you have had too much to drink. He stops in the middle of his room and grins. I force myself to reciprocate it.

“Welcome to my humble abode,” he says.

Some of his arrogance from the bar seems to have worn off, even my confidence. C’s room is as regular as any Bed and Breakfast should be. It’s neat, neater than most guys’ rooms.

Mirror. Bed. Chair. Table. Everything is intact. I see the guitar leaning on the white wall as he stalks towards me. Does

he play? I almost ask but swallow the urge. Just a kiss, and I'll be gone.

"All right. It's time," I tell him. I force my gaze to his face, and my breath leaves my lungs. The sunglasses are gone. There's a fading bruise below his eye that I didn't notice earlier. I bite my tongue to stop from asking questions. *Just a kiss, and I'll be gone.* "It's time for my kiss, Mister C."

"Right away?" His eyes trail my body deliberately like he's studying me. Perhaps he is. I rock on my heels. This is a different kind of discomfoting excitement. "You don't want to talk?"

"Why?" Pray tell, what's he on about? We have only just met. I don't care for small talk. "Do you make it a habit of asking random girls from the pub to follow you to your room for a chitchat?"

"No, this is my first." C cocks his head, eyes taking in all of me like he can tell the secrets in my heart. I stand still. "What about you? Do you follow random guys from the bar to their rooms?"

"My first, too."

C drags a chair towards me and crumples to the floor. I occupy the chair as he crosses his legs.

"Your friend, the blonde, said I had twenty minutes." C looks behind me. I follow his gaze to the antique wall clock. "We have about fifteen minutes of that time left. So, let's talk about you."

"Me?" I point at my chest. C nods. His gaze drops to my arm and flicks back to my face. I drag my sleeves over my wrists. "No. Let's talk about you. You seem more interesting, Stranger."

Grinning like he expected that remark from me, he clasps his hands under his jaw, and his eyes flash with interest. The skin of his tattoo stretches as he switches poses. "What do you want to know?"

"What does your tattoo mean?"

“Used to be in a band,” C says. That explains his guitars, the one on the floor and the other etched on his skin. “Was so excited to belong somewhere, I tattooed the name on my arm.” He rolls his shoulder for me to get a clear view of it. I don’t see a name, but a rose at the bottom of the guitar. There’s also a date, but I need to move closer to get a better look. “We separated, so I used another tattoo to cover it up. It looks cool, yeah? No one would know it’s a cover-up.”

From here, I can only see numbers one and four on his upper arm. “Yeah, it looks really cool.”

“What about you?” He takes my left hand and pushes my sleeve up to reveal the tattoo on my wrist. His thumb circles the inked spot, and a shiver runs up my arm. “How did you get this?”

“I’m not telling,” I reply. He lifts a brow as I pull my sleeve over the semicolon. It’s a painful reminder from a foolish time. “What happened to your face, C? It looks recent. Am I right?”

C touches a finger to the purple bruise almost covering one eye, and I nod. “I’m not telling.” A smile cracks my lips. “You have a pretty smile, Miss Stranger.” I offer him a full-blown smile. C reclaims my hand and draws lines on my clothed wrist. “You really should smile more often.”

“Thanks, C?”

He rises and pulls me up by the wrists. I swallow tight, and my palms grow clammy. He closes the tiny gap between us, his fingers brushing my cheek. Seeds of nervousness and doubts germinate in my belly. I lick my lip when his head lowers and his breath warms my face.

“C? Is that really your name?”

A flick of his thumb against my pink lips, and my heart skips a beat. “No names, remember?”

“I... I do.”

He steps away momentarily. “I’m about to kiss you, sweetheart.” And I want him to. For myself. “You can say no, and your friends will never know.”

I bring his hands to cup my face. “Kiss me.”

CHAPTER 3

Kissing a stranger



THERE ARE three things you must never do. One, kiss a stranger. Two, kiss a hot stranger. Three, kiss a hot stranger you might never see again.

Why? Because if the hot stranger is a good kisser, anything like C, who has ruined my life, you will never forget about it. And for the rest of your life, you will compare the kiss with others.

I groan into the pillow and drag myself out of bed. I kissed Jackson on the first day of school, but it was different. It was just Jackson. I push down those thoughts once inside the bathroom. I need to be ready when Amelia arrives, or she will be upset. Done with my business, I hurry to the room to grab my uniform and finish dressing in front of the mirror. The dark roots of my hair contrast with the pink flowing down my shoulders. Dad hasn't got over the colour. Dani, my stepmum, thinks it's cool. We have only been acquainted a month, but I think she's fantastic.

My phone vibrates on the vanity. I'm not ready yet, but I pick up, and Amelia murmurs, "I can't make it to your house today."

Among us four, I'm closer to her than the other two. Since I don't have a car yet, thanks to my driving phobia, she is my ride to school. I loathe riding with Dad. He asks too many questions.

"Are you okay?"

“Yeah,” Amelia replies. I sink into the chair and frown at my reflection in the mirror. My blue eyes are the colour of the sky after a heavy downpour. Right now, they don’t look as entrapping as C’s. Fuck that dickwad anyway. “Just a little dizzy. My sister is staying home to babysit me.”

Her sister is a nurse in training. If anyone can take great care of Amelia, it’s Ashley Greene.

“Take care of you, Amelia.” A sound from outside catches my attention. I apply my eyeliner and rush to the window to check. Dad comes up from the backyard with his shotgun. My eye roll is instant. He loves his gun and spends more time cleaning than using it. Otherwise, it’s locked up in a cabinet with ammunition stored separately. Amelia’s grunt from the other end reminds me the call is still on. I pull the phone away from my ear to say, “Bye.”

“Bye. Don’t have too much fun without me.”

There is no real fun without Amelia Greene.

My head pokes out of my window. “Dad. Daddy,” I yell. He waves. His shotgun swings from his shoulder. We both know he doesn’t use it, but cleaning it is part of his wee hours ritual. “Good morning.”

“Morning, sweetheart.” He stops below my window. My room is upstairs. “Sleep well?”

“Yeah. You’ll be late.”

“I’m the Headteacher. *You* will be late,” he answers.

How did Dani fall in love with this bushman? I close the curtains and return to the mirror. One last smack of my lips, and I’m ready. I’ll need to call Rose or follow Dad to school. After putting on a long jacket over my uniform, I jog down the flight of stairs with my books jiggling in my backpack. My feet falter on the last stair.

Dani is not alone in the living room. She’s talking to someone seated on the couch with his legs kicked out like this house belongs to him. Her body obstructs my view of him. It’s not Dad. She never uses that patronising tone on him, and I can only feel bad for her guest. I step down, but none of them

notices me. That doesn't stop me from heading to the kitchen to grab breakfast.

I scoop baked beans into my mouth, chewing as I walk out of the kitchen with a glass of milk and a plate. Dani is gone, but her guest isn't. His finger hovers over his phone without pressing it. The man raises his head as I brush past his couch, and I spit out the beans. I know that face.

Everything slows as C turns. He stares down at the mess I made on his shirt and wipes the food particles that grazed him. My hands shake. I rush to the dining room, drop everything in my hands, and race back to him. Did he follow me? Dad can never know where I was Friday night.

C crosses his legs at the ankles and throws his arms over the couch. My heart pounds. His eyes glide over me in a slow, appreciative sweep, and I grow conscious of my outfit. My brain finally sends signals to my mouth and hand, which lift in an awkward wave. "Hello there, Stranger."

"Hey," he answers. His tongue swipes over his bottom lip, and I'm reminded of our kiss. He covers the gap and cups my jaw with one big palm. The contact spreads warmth through my face. My cheeks heat, and forgotten feelings resurrect. "Care for another kiss? It's not a dare."

"What?"

He steals the rest of my words with a kiss, a painfully brief kiss, and backs away. I release my breath when he sinks into the couch. My thoughts flood my mind in judgmental whispers.

What's wrong with me? Kissing a stranger in my house? A stranger that might as well have been stalking me. No. Dani seems to know him. I steal another look at the familiar stranger.

The bruise and beard are gone, leaving a new, different, and younger version of him. Strands of blonde hair curl over his forehead, almost touching his eyebrows. Those eyes, the hair. No. *No*.

"What are you doing here?" I ask.

C grins, and a dimple appears on his left cheek. His beard must have hidden it. My legs turn to jelly. He's so hot it's unfair. My eyes lower to his arm, and I wish he had worn the tank from that night, not a shirt hiding his tattoo. I fold my hands at my back when his gaze strays to me.

"What do you think?" C teases. "Besides, I could also ask you the same thing."

Excuse him? Dani bursts into the living room at that point, saving me from this awkward chat. She draws me in for a hug that makes me smile. Dani is nice. Maybe that's why Dad loves her.

"Good morning, Cathie." She holds me at arm's length, following my curious gaze to the young man on our brown leather couch. C's eyes light up, and I roll mine. Now, he knows my name, and I don't know his. "I see you met your brother. Oh, and Calum? Be nice to your sister."

God forbid.

Brothers don't kiss their sisters or leave them wanting for more of their kisses. That's what C did to me. He stands to hug Dani, and she laughs when he places a sloppy kiss on her cheeks. There's no trace of anger or annoyance to show she was giving him a dressing down earlier.

"Be nice," she reminds him.

He scoffs. "Mum, I'm always nice."

"Hmm, true." Dani nudges him in the ribs with her elbow, and they laugh. She mentioned a son, her only child, but nothing about him being a sexy adult male. "Pete is outside. He'll join us in a bit." She giggles at the mention of Dad's name. Me and Calum share a glance, but I look away first. I don't want him to be my brother. She grabs his hand. "He's so excited to meet you, Cal."

Guess who isn't excited to meet Calum? Me.

Side by side, their resemblance grows obvious. Identical blue eyes. Dirty blonde hair. While Dani keeps hers short, a little longer than a bob, Calum's hangs over his brows and

ears. It's hot. He could pass as Dad's son based on eye colours. Thankfully, he's not. He's not my brother.

"Where's Amelia?" Dani directs at me.

"She can't make it today," I answer, gaze glued to the floor. Our carpet is pretty. "Is Dad ready? I might have to go with him."

Pushing me by the shoulders to the dining table, Dani tells me, "Yeah. He should be here in a minute. Finish up your breakfast so he can drop you off at school."

"School?" Calum croaks from behind. My uniform is hidden beneath the jacket.

"Yeah, school. St George's." My heart shifts into overdrive. I school my face into a mask and pick up the spoon. Dani takes a seat at the head of the table. She's not doing me a favour by freely giving Calum that information. "Her father is the headteacher, what we call the principal."

A pin-drop silence settles over us. I don't dare to look at Calum, but I feel his gaze on me. I dig into the beans that have lost their taste, chugging more of the milk to push the meal down.

Why did he have to show up today?

Calum heaves my backpack out of the chair beside me. "Is this yours? I didn't know you were still in school, Cathie." My name rolls off his tongue like the first part of a song. Tongue-tied, I can only nod. His knee brushes mine when he sits, and I grip the glass. I clench my teeth when he throws an arm around my seat. "You don't look like you're still in high school, sis."

Because by nineteen, most people are in universities, not high—secondary schools.

"Weren't you in high school at seventeen?" Dani cuts in sharply in my defence, but I don't want it. I suspect she's upset with her son. "Where would you prefer she was at this age? College?"

Technically, I'm in college. Sixth form college. But St George offers both in one place.

“Wait a fucking minute. Cathie is seventeen?”

“Calum,” his mum warns.

Calum's head slowly turns to me. The familiarity in his eyes disappears, and an icy glint creeps into them. Chills race down my spine. The toast goes down the wrong pipe, and I erupt in a coughing fit. Calum jumps into action, rubbing soothing circles on my back until I calm down.

“Sorry, sis,” he says in a tone as chilly as his smile.

Fuck him. I'm not and will never be his sister. I accept the napkin he offers me with a big, fake smile.

“Thanks, bro.”

CHAPTER 4

Not my brother



“WHAT DO you think about your new brother?” Dad asks once he’s in the car. He doesn’t start it, and the relief I felt since leaving Dani and her son melts away. We need to go. “He seems cool.”

My eyes close as I take a deep breath. Opening them, I click my seatbelt into place and tuck my bag between my legs.

“He’s not my brother.” All it takes is one stern look from him for me to add, “I don’t think anything about him. Can we go now, please?”

Dad’s hand reaching for the key in the ignition drops. My head hangs in shame. “Sorry, Dad.”

“For what?”

“For raising my voice at you.”

Since that day, Dad has been conscious. Both of us. We must hold each other accountable. He doesn’t look away, and I lift my gaze to his identical blue eyes. Our hair colours differentiate us. Right now, I have pink hair, while he has brown. Dad takes my hand, the one with the tattoo. His finger hovers above the semicolon tattoo without touching it. He knew *after* I got it. There was no other way. He would have asked me to wait until eighteen, the legal age, and I couldn’t.

“I just want you two to get along, Catherine,” Dad says. Mum used to call me by my full name if it was super important, and Dad continued the tradition after her death. I chew on my upper lip to avoid speaking. If Calum and I didn’t have a history, I might have no problem with being called his

sister. But we kissed, and I want to repeat it. “You already get along well with Dani. It will be good to extend that niceness to her son. It will make both of us thrilled.”

“I’ll try.”

In a blink, he’s hugging me. I hug him back, and everything is forgotten. Or not. Calum rushes out of the house as Dad’s car backs out of the driveway, waving like someone trying to catch a bus on the move. Dad slows for him to meet up, and I stifle a groan. I hate this boy—man.

“Need a ride?” Dad asks once Calum is close to the car.

Calum nods. The wind blows through his curly hair, scattering it all over his face. He flicks it out of his forehead, showing off his toned bicep. I bet that’s the reason he keeps his hair that long, so he can show off his muscled arm any chance he gets.

“Yes, sir,” he replies, a little flustered.

Dad laughs. “Pete or Dad will do just fine.”

Oh, God. Please choose Pete. Calum looks at me, then back at Dad. “Pete will do just fine.”

I offer him my first genuine smile of the day, but Calum doesn’t bat an eye. He might be upset about my lie, but we both know he wouldn’t have kissed me if he knew my actual age. I’m not even that young. In less than two years, I’ll be the nineteen-year-old girl he was excited to kiss.

Dad says nothing but unlocks the backdoor for him. The car is silent for most of the ride. Dad is usually chatty, but I guess we don’t know how to handle the latest addition to our family.

“What do you think of Wells Spring?” Dad asks at a traffic light. “Do you know it’s the smallest city in England?”

“Second smallest,” I mumble.

Dad chuckles. It’s just our car on the road. So, when the light turns green, he takes his time to go.

“While Wells Spring is not as lively as New York, it’s more active during tourism season. Summer or Spring.”

“I vote summer,” I say, my fingers tapping my knees as I try to rehash the tune from rehearsal. I’m not sure if it’s because Calum is in the car with us, but the seatbelt feels too tight around my chest. I unfasten it but keep my hand on the metal so it looks like I’m still buckled up.

“You said you got in last night? Calum?” Dad asks. I make a choking sound at the back of my throat, and Dad cuts me a look. I’m not the only liar in this house. “How was your flight?”

“Two nights ago,” he says. Still a lie. We met on Friday. “And the flight was pleasant, Pete.”

His voice holds an underlying vibration only a singer would have. I know that because I sing in the school’s choir. I kneel on my chair, hugging the headrest to see the handsome liar.

“Catherine, what do you think you are doing?” Dad says.

The sternness in his voice should snap me back to the present, but I smile at Calum. New York, huh? He cocks his head as if daring me to counter him. I can’t without giving myself away.

“Do you have something to say, Cat?”

“My name is not Cat,” I snap and settle back in my seat. Knowing Dad expects me to be on my best behaviour, I do the necessary. “Please don’t call me Cat. My name is Catherine. Cathie for short.”

“Your sister prefers being called Cathie,” Dad chips in to save me. “Do you have a nickname?”

“No. Just Calum.” But he was C for that night. I smoothen the invisible creases on my skirt. I already ditched the jacket. Why did he lie? I retrieve my phone and login to my second GC account to post on the site. “Pete, is it common for girls around here to lie about their age?”

My phone drops to my lap. Dad honks at a Toyota trying to overtake us on this tiny road.

Calum won't implicate me. *He can't implicate me.*

"Yeah," Dad says. "Met one?"

"I think so. Said she was nineteen." A lump clogs my throat. I cough into my hand, forehead pressed against the window to avoid meeting Dad's gaze. To him, his daughter is a good girl who doesn't hang around at pubs. "I think she lied about her age. She looked like Catherine."

I erupt in a coughing fit. Dad slows the car, but I wave for him to continue driving. "Are you sure you are okay? We can make a quick stop if you don't feel good, or you could return home."

"With the pink hair and blue eyes, I would have sworn it was your daughter," Calum continues.

Shut up.

Dad slows the car by the roadside. His thick, bushy brows draw together in worry as he takes in my reddened face. I force a faux smile to my lips. "No, no need. I feel very well, Dad. Great."

My smile must have convinced him. He kicks the car into drive and resumes his conversation with the bastard in the backseat. I drum my fingers against the dashboard, trying and failing to tune them out as they talk about teenage girls wanting so desperately to act above their ages.

"You should be more careful," Dad tells Calum. I hide my face in my palms. I wish he'd drive faster. "A fella almost got done because he was caught with some girl who lied about her age."

"Didn't hear about it," Calum says.

"She had a fake ID, so they let him off," Dad adds. Two years ago, a fifteen-year-old was at a club and got with a nineteen-year-old. Everyone talked about it for months. It's why all pubs now require IDs. "Bloody lucky the bouncer had checked her ID, or he'd have gone down for rape."

“That’s fucked up,” Calum murmurs. There’s a mix of sadness and anger in his voice, and guilt hits me. I could have got him into trouble if he had been caught. Might be what he’s thinking. I slip my hands between my legs. “But it wasn’t the guy’s fault. How was he supposed to know?”

“No idea,” Dad finishes. “But be careful. A lot of wayward girls are out on the street instead of getting a good education. Good grief. It’s a pity all of that beauty and brain will go to waste.”

I almost roll my eyes. Dad is so old-fashioned. According to him, we must follow the rules, no exceptions. But in my opinion, rules are meant to be broken a few times in our lifetimes.

A few seconds later, as the car is about to take a left turn, Calum says, “Here. This is my stop.” Dad slows at the curb, and he gets out. His boyish grin is present. “Thanks for the ride, Pete.”

“No need to thank me, son.” Dad needs to stop this nonsense. He has only one child. Calum is about to walk away when Dad stops him. “Son, whatever you do, stay away from The King’s.”

“The King’s Pub?” he asks. The pub where we met.

“That one. They are the most notorious for letting kids in their bar.” False. Kids these days are more creative. With a big, proud smile directed at me and a hand on my shoulder, Dad says, “It’s a rough place, and Cathie knows better.”

“Right? Thanks, Pete.”

“Oh, and don’t forget our deal.”

What deal?

“I won’t,” Calum says. He stops by my window to give Dad a mock bow. Eyes locked with mine, he says, “I’ll also be sure to stay away from The King’s and girls who lie about their age.”

The rest of the ride is quiet. I sit up as we near the tall, ancient building of St. George’s. It’s one of the oldest

buildings and schools in the city and stretches to the blue sky. I exit the car, and Dad continues to the parking lot. Jogging up the front stairs, I step back when the door opens.

Rose grins. Taylor waves, but her hand drops to her side. She frowns and points at my uniform. Now she's back to wearing glasses, nothing will escape her. "Did your dad see your skirt?"

"He didn't notice." I made only a minute adjustment to the length. They flank me on each side, linking their elbows through mine as we burst into the hallway. "Amelia will be absent today."

"Yeah, she called," Rose answers. "Who drove you?"

"Dad." They snicker. I elbow Rose in the ribs, but Taylor jumps out of reach. "It was all right."

In fact, it was going well until he-who-shall-not-be-mentioned showed up. Just the thought of him and the teasing kiss make my cheeks warm. What if Dani had stumbled in?

"Next time, call me," Rose says and pinches my cheeks. "I'll come pick you up, all right?"

"Yeah, thanks."

The three of them might give the most ludicrous dares sometimes, but they are the best friends a girl could ever have. And I should tell them about him.

"My stepbrother came in today," I say as we continue down the hallway. "This morning."

Some students race past us, laughing. We stop at Taylor's locker. My first class is with her. Choir rehearsal with Rose is later. Rose leans on a locker door while Taylor grabs her books.

"Is he hot?" Rose asks.

"Shut up," I mumble. I was expecting a different reply.

They exchange a glance and grin. "Oh, he's hot," Taylor comments. "Banging hot or just hot?"

“I’m leaving,” I reply, but I don’t move an inch. Rose slings an arm over my shoulders. She can’t wink, so each time she tries, both eyes close in a fast blink. I release a sigh. “Yeah, banging hot.”

“Want to shag him?” Rose sings.

My cheeks grow warm at the thought of sex with my stepbrother.

“How old is he?” Taylor asks instead. She’s more logical than the other two wild urchins I have as my best friends. “If he’s hot, go for it. All in favour, say aye.” Their hands shoot up, and Taylor grins. Fine. Sometimes, she can be as illogical as they are. “Aye. It should be fun.”

We resume the walk to my class, and I don’t say anything until we are at the door.

“I’m not *shagging* my brother.”

“Stepbrother,” Rose corrects.

“You didn’t grow up with him,” Taylor adds. “He’s as good as a stranger. A really hot stranger.”

Familiar strangers best describes our relationship, but I mutter, “What time is choir rehearsal today?” Rose opens the door and follows us inside. A few faces glance up as we walk down the aisle. Taylor and I settle into the backseat. Rose plops into a seat ahead of us. “Go away, Rosie.”

I take out my physics textbook, shutting the window as the wind howls.

“But you haven’t answered us,” Rose says.

“Already did,” I tell Rose. She twists in the chair, resting her chin on the wood. I flip to the next page of my textbook without reading it. “I’m not interested in him. End of discussion, girls.”

They think something is wrong with my inexistent love life because I have not had a boyfriend since Mum’s death. As if. What’s the fun of dating anyone when they are going to die, anyway? They should be more like me. Kiss, fuck, go to the

pub and have fun. No commitments. Because life will be meaningless for a long time after their partners leave or die.

Rose's eyes narrow, and I imagine the wheels spinning in her head. She twirls her hair around an index finger. "He might be better than you think," she says. I used to think Amelia was the worst of our girl group, but Rose is as dogged. "You will find no one new around here, Cathie."

If a boy from this place could have got me out of this funk, it would have happened long ago. Besides, everyone is always in each other's business around here. If people find out, they'll talk.

Rose pinches me, and I shake my head. Her idea is appealing, and I don't want it to be. He makes me feel, even if it's just a rush of short-term excitement.

"Dad sees him as his son," I finally say. Making a disgusted face, I add, "It will be scandalous."

They agree with a nod. "Yeah," Rose says. "But you still need someone more stable. We will have to find you another boyfriend. Wait, there's Jackson. You have good chemistry, Cathie."

The door opens right in time. Mrs Preston, our physics teacher, walks in. I shoo Rose off, and she stops in front of the class to blow us a kiss. The entire class laughs, even the teacher.

Taylor taps me when Mrs Preston looks away. She pushes her glasses down the bridge of her nose, and I glimpse her brown eyes laced with worry. "Are you all right? We mean no harm."

"Yeah, I know."

For the rest of the class, we don't speak. Rose joins us on our way to lunch. She chats on her phone while Taylor calls out warnings to prevent her from running into walls. She finally looks up when we enter the dining hall. We grab our trays and join the queue. Taylor doesn't. She brings lunch from home. Rose breaks out of the line to show us something on her phone.

“Someone posted on our page this morning,” Rose says. “Her post is getting attention. Lots.”

We run a website. GC. Girls Code. All four of us. It was my idea, and Taylor brought it to life. Rose and Amelia shared it on their Instagram pages, and it has been up and running ever since.

Rose passes us her phone to peek at the post by Nikki Stan. My pulse races as Taylor collects it. I wait for her to call me out, but she is too busy reading the comments under my post. I can't be the only one among us who has an anonymous account to post stuff we can't ask each other. GC is like my online adviser. Girls post rants, boyfriend tales, breakups, wins, and family issues.

Taylor drops the phone on Rose's outstretched hand. “I don't know. Act like it never happened? Jump off a cliff? Pack out of the house?” Taylor lists. Rose snorts. The last and first options are more like her, not me. I didn't do anything wrong but lie about my age. Girls here do it all the time. “*What will you do if you find out the chap you kissed at a bar last night is your stepbrother?*”

That was my question, edited by a few details, so they wouldn't connect it to me. I glance at Rose's screen. There are more comments on the post, and most are awful ideas like: *kiss him again*.

Why would I do that?

But I can't say the thought isn't pleasing.

Rose returns to the line but turns her back to the girl ahead of her to resume the conversation. “I think Krystal is right. It's what I'll probably do.” She shows us Krystal's comment, the only reasonable one so far. “*I'll talk to him about it to avoid any awkwardness, then move on*. I agree.”

Talking about it sounds like a good idea until I picture my stepbrother's face when Dani told him my age. He meant it when he told Dad he would stay away from girls who lie about their age.

The line cuts to our turn, and we make our orders. Rose is still talking about the post when we reach our table. We sit, and I change the subject to the upcoming inter-school singing competition.

“It’s starting this month,” I say.

“We are winning it this year,” Rose tells me. She holds her fist to her chest. “I can feel it.”

Taylor laughs and brings out her lunch. She has a sweet-talking voice, but her singing voice is horrible. She sounds like a dying cat dragged through a dark alley. And that’s me being nice.

I’m not as enthusiastic as I was last year about the competition. But I don’t show it.

“Yes. We will win,” I say more to myself. “We have to.”

A warning bell rings to remind us of our next class, and three of us hurry out. When the last bell of the day goes off, I’m ready to see Mr Prescott, our music teacher and choir director.

Taylor doesn’t wait for us. Rose and I head to the music hall, where students camp on the stage. Based on my voice type, I should be among those in the first row. I recognise a few when we near the stage. Mr Prescott waves his wand, and a symphony breaks out as they start a familiar hymn. A smile forms on my lips, and my worries melt away. Music is life. My life.

We stop behind Mr Prescott, smiling at the choristers. We are late, but since it’s the first week of practice, he won’t scold us. I frown at his frame. He is unusually tall and lean today. Rose also notices. She nods towards him. I see it, too. Mr Prescott has never worn jeans to school.

Mr Prescott lifts his wand and their angelic voices lower. The singing stops when he closes his fist, and my grin disappears when he turns to us. Blimey. It’s not Mr Prescott. It’s him.

CHAPTER 5

Out



“YOU’RE LATE. BOTH OF YOU,” Calum states. His expression doesn’t crack as his gaze rakes over us. I’m newly reminded of his handsomeness, and a blush rises to my cheeks. It’s unfair to be tortured this way. *What’s he doing here?* Rose grabs my hand. Calum’s head jerks up. “Excuse me?”

Did I say that out loud?

“Yes, you did,” Rose whispers. Her cheeks redden. Body flush against mine, she asks, “Do you have a death wish?”

Calum watches our interaction for a bit. “Are you done, both of you?”

He keeps saying *both of you*, but I think he means only me. “Yes, sir.” Sir feels so wrong on my lips, but I’m not sure how to address him. Rose pokes me. “We’re sorry we are late. Sir,” I add.

“It must not repeat itself.”

“Yes, sir,” we chorus.

“Join them.”

Finding a spot should have been easy, but our positions are taken. We settle for standing on the elevated bench behind the alto singers. Sopranos usually are at the front. But since we are both tall, we can easily see above the heads of the other choristers and Calum’s annoyed expression.

The singing doesn’t resume. Calum asks a girl in the front row to pass us the score. Each row holds four students, except ours. My eyes skim the music sheet, and I sing under my

breath to familiarise myself with the lyrics. Rose looks up, and we grin. She was doing the same.

“Like Mr Prescott said earlier, before those two arrived,” Calum says. A few of the choristers snicker. It’s not our fault he got here too early. Mr Prescott was always late by five minutes. “I’ll be helping him prepare you guys for the open singing competition.” He holds up the sheet, and his eyes move over each of us to pass his point. “We’ll begin practising these songs today.”

“You didn’t tell us your name,” Rose blurts out. I facepalm. She leans in to whisper, “He’s hot.”

“The name is Calum Dissick. Mr Dissick,” he says.

Murmurs break out in the group. Calum claps, and the chatters transform into whispers. Rose tightens her grip on my hand. A glance at her, and I know she’s a goner for Calum. She’s not the only female here who fancies him. I can’t blame them. Calum is the type of teacher every teenage girl dreams of having in class. If he weren’t my jackass stepbrother, I’d be drooling.

“Remember him?” I ask.

“Err... nope,” Rose replies in the same whisper.

Seconds pass, and Rose doesn’t laugh or tickle me, as is her style if she were joking. She really doesn’t recognise him. Yes, without the beards and sunglasses, Calum looks like a whole new person, but she should be able to tell. Then again, I’m the one who spent more time with him.

“He’s my stepbrother.”

Rose lets out a loud fucking noise, and heads turn to us. It doesn’t help that we were both late. I feel the stares of the remaining sixteen choristers, but my gaze remains on the wooden block.

“No side talks, please,” Calum states at last. “Does everyone have their score?”

A chorus of ‘Yes’ fills the room, and then a calm takes over.

“We can start,” he adds.

And so we do. The alto girls open the opera. Rose doesn't say another word to me, not that I give her a chance. Our voices carry on to the high ceiling. I pretend Mum is watching me from the empty seats in the audience, so I sing harder and better. We are on the third stanza when Calum cuts us off. His face gives nothing away as he asks Christie, a soprano, to step forward.

Christie stops beside him. Her glasses hang on her nose like a second thought, and she slides it up to keep it from falling. Calum points out a line on the music sheet, and she nods twice. She's so tensed I want to jump down and snatch the sheet from her. Music should free you.

“You'll take this first part,” he says.

Snapping his fingers, Calum sings the first line in a much slower voice than the original classic, and my heart dances. I close my eyes, and the melody washes over me. If I didn't understand why Mr Prescott handed over the choir to him, now, I do. Calum's voice is like melted butter. Smooth and slippery, gluing the cracks of my poor heart. He stops, and the pieces split open.

“Here, you try it,” Calum tells her in a voice missing the annoyance he used when speaking to me and Rose. Christie's hand holding the sheet shakes a little. Calum touches her shoulder, and a red ball of anger curls my gut. He wasn't this nice to me. “Take your time. Breathe. No rush.”

My hand shoots up. I have a better range than her. “I can try, sir.”

“Thanks. But let's give Christie a chance.”

It might have been my imagination, but he smirked right after saying that. I loathe him.

Rose tries not to laugh, but a peal of muffled laughter escapes her. I stomp on her foot, and her laughter dies down. We return our focus to a shy Christie. She's never this nervous to sing in front of an audience. Putting her brown hair in a bun, she takes a breath and belts out the lyrics of Puccini's *Nessun*

Dorma. Calum stands at the side of the stage, head bobbing in approval. No insult to Christie, but I can do it better. It's why Mr Prescott always has me take the solo parts.

She's awarded a smile after singing. Calum's eyes roam the stand. "Who else wants to try?"

A few hands raise. I raise both. "Ten quid says he'll ignore you," Rose says. At my glare, she adds, "I'm just saying." Her hand shoots up to join the others, and Calum picks her. "Called it."

"I want to try," I say when the hall falls quiet. Rose stops moving and frowns at me. I mouth an apology to her. She returns beside me so I can go ahead. Down on the same level as Calum, I put my hands together. I want my stepbrother to hear me sing. "Please, can I have a go at it?"

He stares at me like I'm a pesky fly he can't wait to stomp. "Your friend was about to sing."

Rose's gaze darts between the two of us. She points at herself and says, "Me? No, I'm good, sir." I try too hard not to smile. I owe her a new set of drawing brushes. "Cathie can try if she wants to."

Calum loses his composure. He stalks towards me with a tight smile, and I put a foot on the block from behind, half-ready to bolt back up to my former spot. "That's not how this works."

"But I raised my hand first," I say to support her point. "And Rose doesn't mind if I go first."

Our eyes lock, but I look away first. He is being irrational. We can settle our disputes at home.

He returns to the front of the stage, his hands sliding into his pockets. I offer him a smile, waiting for the command, but all he has to say is, "I didn't see your hand up, but I saw Rose's."

"Liar," I whisper.

Calum ignores me. Rose tries to drag me to the back row, but I don't budge. I raise my hand for him to see me, but he

points at another person behind me. I crumple the score in my grip.

“Everyone, be gentle with the sheet. No folding.” I exhale at his words and flex my fingers. It’s a ploy to frustrate me. This is his revenge. To the other chorister, he asks, “What’s your name?”

“Regina,” she answers.

I dislike Regina. The feeling is mutual.

“Please, step forward.”

Regina stands in front of everyone with a big smile. When our eyes meet, she winks, and I see red. That tight ball of anger unfurls inside me. I storm towards Calum and jut out a finger at him without saying a word. He eyes me from top to bottom, and my self-control shatters.

“Really?” I yell in my stepbrother’s face. I can hear the whispers and even picture Dad giving me a lecture, but I’m too upset to care. “We—” I stop myself before I spill it. “You need to grow up.”

Calum cocks his head. The iciness of his glare sends shivers down my spine. I’ve lost this fight, but it’s too late to back down. He points to the door, and my anger disappears faster than it came.

“Out.”

He’s joking, right? The first round of the competition is this month. We need to practise.

“Sir?”

“You’re done here, Catherine. Oh, and you can forget about joining the competition.”

No one intercedes for me. I look up, but my best friend turns away before our eyes meet. I don’t know where the tears come from, but they blind me as I snatch my bag from the floor and race out of the hall. Rose is my ride home, so I spend the remaining minutes of rehearsal pacing in the parking lot. Calum cannot take music away from me. Dad can and will not let that happen.

A door opens, and familiar voices break me out of my reverie. I pass a glance at my reflection in Rose's car window and wipe any trace of tears. Rose comes up from behind, her tie swaying. She slings an arm around my shoulders and plasters a smile I can't bring myself to reciprocate.

"Sorry. Try not to piss him off next time." Rose pushes me into the passenger seat and tries to fix my seatbelt. I slap her hand and do it myself. "What's got your knickers in a twist, anyway?"

"Nothing," I answer. She joins me in the car. "Who does he think he is?"

He's a nobody.

But later that night, as we sit for dinner, I painfully realise he is someone, and Dad can't help me. Lesson number one: never upset the choir director if you have already lied to him once.

Dinner is tense. Calum sits beside me, with Dad and Dani on the other side of the table. I roll the spaghetti around my fork, half-waiting for Dad to say something in my defence or use his position as the headteacher to overturn my punishment. He's the final authority, not Calum.

"Calum," Dad finally says. I try not to get too excited, but a grin spreads to my lips. Dani catches my eyes and looks away, but I see her smile before it disappears. "Don't you think her punishment is too harsh? Kicking her out of the choir weeks before the competition is quite..."

My stepbrother takes a bite from his dinner and then drops his fork on the plate. He clasps his hands on the table and levels Dad with a look that would get me into trouble if I did the same.

"Would you appreciate it if someone told you how to do your job?" Too low. Dad raises his hands in surrender, and my heart dips to my stomach. Dani doesn't look up from her plate, and the sinking realisation hits me. I am alone in this. "Thank you, Pete. And no, it's not too harsh." Stepbrother dearest cuts me a side glance. "If she's willing to disrespect her teacher and

mates, she should have no problem accepting the consequences. Play stupid games, win stupid prizes.”

“Quite right,” Dad says with a sad look thrown my way.

The spaghetti loses its taste. I might as well have been eating dust coated in tomato sauce.

“Dad,” I mutter. “He’s lying. I didn’t really raise my voice at him. I was not shouting at him.”

“Who were you shouting at, Cathie?” Dad asks.

“The...” I trail off without completing the sentence. My leg bounces nonstop, and my grip on the fork tightens when three pairs of eyes turn my way. “The air?”

Calum doesn’t even try to hide his disgust. He finishes up his dinner and excuses himself. For the next few minutes, the only thing I hear is the sound of him racing up the stairs to his room.

The rest of dinner is quieter. Dad and Dani finish eating, but I still have an almost full plate.

Dani points to my plate. “Are you eating that?”

Shaking my head, I pass it to her. She stacks our plates, leaving me and Dad alone to discuss my recent punishment. I still think Calum overreacted. Teenagers are twats. He will have to get used to it if he wants to be around us for long. Mr Prescott wouldn’t have sent me out. In all honesty, I would never have lost my cool if Mr Prescott directed the choir today. I miss him.

“Ask Rose,” I start before he admonishes me. “I wasn’t shouting at him.”

Rain or sunshine, my girls will always have my back. Dad knows that. That’s why he says, “No. She will try to cover for you. You should have known better.” We eye each other, and our similarities jump out at me. The fullness of our lips, the sharp cheekbones, and nearly invisible freckles dusting our noses. I look away first. “Your teacher says you are failing chemistry.”

Come on. It's Mr Andy's fault for giving us an impromptu test on the first day of resumption.

"It was just one test."

"And you got an E." When your father is the Headteacher, you're cursed with lectures like this. He's up to date on all your grades. "You're the only one who got an E out of twenty students."

Footfalls from the stairs invade my ears. Calum appears behind my chair and grabs his phone on the table. He doesn't leave. I wish he would. He started this. He drops to the seat on my left, and I press my legs together to avoid any form of body contact. Hasn't he heard of privacy?

This is a father-daughter moment.

"If your chemistry grades don't improve, I'm sorry, but Calum will not be letting you back in the choir." Fantastic. Our extracurricular activities aren't dependent on our grades. This is unfair and all Calum's fault. To Calum, he asks, "Has she apologised for raising her voice at you?"

Oh, God. No. Please don't make me do this.

"She hasn't."

Standing, Dad says, "You know what to do."

We find ourselves alone in the room. Calum places his hand on the table. "Well?"

"You should have just let me try."

"I believe you have more than one reason to be sorry." Calum tilts his head in that unconscious way that makes him look hotter, and his hair falls into his eyes. It's shorter at the back and longer in front. One swipe at his hair, and I'm taken back to that night. Does he think about the kiss like I do? I doubt it. With a face like that, it's easy to get tons of girls and kisses. The chair scrapes against the floor as he rises to his feet. "How do you plead, Cathie? Guilty or guilty?"

"Not guilty."

His receding footsteps as he walks away are all I'm left with. I might as well prepare to sit with the audience, watching Christie or Regina sing in my place. I stomp all the way to my room. If I'm not back in the choir by tomorrow, I'll put a dead rat in Calum's bag. No, I'll put rat's poop.

The door to my room creaks open as I'm getting ready for bed. I stand straighter. Dani waves from the doorway, the rest of her body hidden. I wave her inside. She's a sweetheart, but her son is not. She sits on my bed, and I mimic her. Her arm slides around my shoulders. For a few minutes, neither of us talk. I think I know why she's here, but I don't want to talk about him.

"Your son is a dickhead," I blurt out. To my pleasant surprise, Dani laughs, and I find myself wanting to tell her more. About everything. "I think he's upset and trying to punish me for it."

"Upset about what?" she asks.

"Upset about the—"

The kiss.

Snatching my pillow off the bed, I scream into it. My anger bubbles to the surface, but I shove it down. There's so much inside me that needs to be let out. And I can't tell anyone, not even my best friends.

Dani draws me in for a side hug. I sigh softly. "You don't have to talk about it if you don't want to, okay? It's fine." That's what Mum used to say to get me to spill everything. "I'll talk to him."

"My dad or Calum?"

"Both of them, I guess."

"Thanks."

"It's fine. We women must stick together."

When Dani leaves, I tiptoe to Calum's room right beside mine. The door is ajar, so I slip in unnoticed. The corner light illuminates a side of the bed. A song plays, but it's too low for

me to identify the lyrics. His legs dangle from the edge of the bed, his forearm covering his eyes.

Just an apology, yeah? I can do that.

I take another step forward and tap his knee. His forearm shifts to his forehead. His eyes remain closed, but he says, "Close the door on your way out."

CHAPTER 6

Just a kiss



CALUM

HOW DO YOU PUNISH A LIAR? By ignoring her or taking away her most valuable possession. In this case, the choir. With her dad on my side, there's no pressure to put that miscreant back on the team.

In her absence, today's practice goes by with no hiccups. The students are already warming up to me. I didn't think that would happen so fast. But everything has been moving so fast since I agreed to come here. All Pete wanted to know after Mum told him about letting me assist with the choir was if I had any music experience. I had a shit ton of that, and it almost ruined me.

This is my first real gig since Mending Hearts crashed.

The choir wasn't part of my plan. My plan was to be low-key until I sorted my shit out and decided on my next move. But Mum hopes it will get me to sing and play again. So far, it's working. Being a choir director means showing off what you've got so the choristers can believe in themselves. I haven't played the guitar. Not since I ruined the band. Maybe one of these days, I might.

I scrub a hand through my messy hair while watching the video of last year's performance. She has a great voice, but her attitude overshadows it. Christie and Regina also have lovely voices, but she has a better range. If we want to win this year,

it's either she returns to the choir or I overwork those two until they are at the level I want. Sighing, I make my way out of my office.

Thanks to Pete, I'm not sharing the tiny cubicle with anyone.

The dead winter air rustles my hair and tickles the 5 o'clock shadow on my jaw. I need to shave. The lot is empty. I always wait until everyone is gone before leaving. It gives me a chance to think before I have to face that lying little scumbag at home. As always, the thought of her stirs something in me, annoyance mostly. In the US, they would have had me in front of a jury, ready to be crucified for kissing a seventeen-year-old. But she acted like it was nothing.

Thinking about it as I drive down the lonely road to the house, I wonder how many older men she has deceived this way. A bitter laugh escapes me. On my third night in a new town, someone that young scams me. I step on the accelerator, and the car lurches forward. Mum's letting me use her car until I save enough to return to NYC and begin a music-less life. If I have to survive on only this pay, I might never get to do that. Teaching is cool, but the pay sucks.

I drive past the road sign pointing to Jenae's street—my destination, ignoring the urge to go the opposite way. Maybe I'm too used to the skyscrapers and crowded brownstone townhouses in New York, but the tired brick, block walls, and metal-framed houses lining the streets pale in comparison. An architect might find beauty in their ancientness, but all I think is *they are old*. The silence, though, is comforting. It's one part of New York I don't miss.

The house comes into view. It's a single-family home like what we left behind. There is no car out in front. Pete must be out, probably with Mum. The man acts like it's his first marriage, and it's cute. I guess I should be glad to see someone fall so helplessly in love with my mum after life dealt her with sour, tasteless lemons, but I'm too tired to feel. How can people that old be falling in love again, and I can't even keep up with my best friends or get a girlfriend?

I park in front of the house and enter. It's not quiet. Cathie is relaxing on the couch, watching a TV show. She shoots up to her feet once she sees me, and the familiar pang of annoyance sinks into my guts. She annoys the shit out of me.

"Welcome." There it is again. That damn accent that got me the first time. Cathie licks her lips, more out of nervousness than anything else, but it does sinful things to my body. This is why she annoys me. Because even if she's seventeen and I'm twenty-two, I still want to kiss her. In a few strides, she bridges the gap between us. "I think I'm ready to apologise, Calum. I mean, sir."

Unfortunately, I'm not ready to accept it. I head to my room without a glance or reply to her. Dropping my bag into the chair in the corner, I pace the entire room. What's wrong with me?

I'm irritated, and I'm not sure why anymore.

The feeling of irritation comes with a nagging urge to roll a blunt. It's baffling that I quit drugs to fall into the terrible habit of not-smoking. But I won't lie. It brings an unexplainable calm I haven't felt since I stopped writing new songs. A quick search reveals the weed stashed under my suitcase. I throw the doors leading to the mini balcony of my room open. There are two chairs. I sit on one and cross my legs on the other. I light the blunt without smoking it. It's what I do.

Lucas will term it stupid. He's right. Don't waste a good weed if you won't smoke it.

The tip burns. Only a few more minutes, and I'll be drowning in second-hand smoke. Being high makes me forget what it was like to be the popular Calum from a while ago. I hold the blunt away from my face, watching the smoke drift to the sky as I inhale an unhealthy lungful of tainted air. I've never understood smoking, but I've always understood the need to be high.

My door opens.

“Calum?” The smell of the weed overpowers her scent. I breathe in the smoky air to forget that fruity scent associated with her. “Wow, are you smoking? You’re not allowed to do that here.”

My eyes open. They are watery from the smoke. I don’t look at her when I say, “Then try to stop me.”

“I’ll report you to my dad.”

“Go ahead.”

“Dad?” she screams, just like she did when I picked her friend and those other girls over her. That might have been a hasty decision, but the glare, the annoyance written all over her face, was worth it. She would know better than to lie to anyone. “Dad. Calum is smoking up here.”

I toss the blunt to the floor and step on it. “I wasn’t smoking,” I tell Cathie as I enter my room. She pulls her pink hair away from her face to reveal her natural beauty. At school and the pub, she was wearing makeup. She’s beautiful with and without it. “And your dad is not home.”

“Says who?”

My gaze drops to her lips. I drink her in. From the swell of her breasts peeking out of her white tank to the curve of her wide hips in the blue jeans glued to her body. She’s beautiful in a mature way. Like an adult instead of an unruly teen. I’m so fucked if I’m thinking of her in this light.

“What do you want?”

Cathie gulps audibly. I take a slow, calculated step towards her. She stands her ground, but I glimpse the slight tremble of her arms before she hides her anxiety behind a tight-lipped smile.

“What do you want, Cathie?” I repeat, placing stress on every syllable to get the point across.

What point? That she’s unwanted here.

Without warning, Cathie begins the song we have been practising at rehearsals. Pavarotti and other opera singers would be proud of her. Her voice is perfect, sweet like maple

syrup dripping onto a heap of pancakes. It flows into my ears and waters my soul, silencing the voices and doubts in my head. Her voice calms me in ways the weed has never done. I fucking hate it.

“Shut up.”

“I’m sorry,” Cathie breathes. Her voice is raspy from the singing, and her eyes are teary. The emotions she expended on singing flash across her face. “Can I please come back to the choir?”

“No.” Not until her chemistry grades are better.

“It was just a kiss.” The fire returns to her eyes. No more innocence or little girl act present, like when she apologised. “Come on. Don’t take the music away from me. It was just a kiss, Calum.”

Not anymore. It was a curse, a plague, because I’ve spent nights replaying it over again in my head. And now that I know what she sounds like as a singer, I want to kiss her again. It’s wrong.

Our eyes meet and hold in a silent dare. Blue to blue eyes. Something in my expression scares her. She backs away as I come for her. Her back hits the wall, and she lets out a small groan. Her eyes fly around my room, searching for an escape. I block out her path by placing a hand on one side of her head.

My bad.

The blue of her eyes is clearer up close. Clear and gut-wrenching. I can see into her soul, a certain sadness that’s only present on a second look. Why is a seventeen-year-old this sad?

Beneath the impenetrable sadness is a flicker of interest. Interest in me, I believe. I’m interested in her too. In ways an adult shouldn’t be interested in a teen, and my fingers almost reach up to touch the faint freckles scattered across her nose and cheek. She’s stunning. She’s interesting.

Shame soaks my frame at those thoughts. I push back so we are both standing and watching each other.

“You lied to me about something so important,” I say. “I could have gotten into trouble for it.”

“But you didn’t,” she interrupts. That pride that swallows up her other good characteristics rears its ugly head. “We didn’t even have sex.”

I study Cathie’s face for any signs of remorse. Maybe her teenage brain cannot comprehend the extent of the potential damage. She’s not sorry. Given a chance, she might do it again. That knowledge solidifies my decision to keep her off the team until she passes her next chemistry test.

“The age of consent here is sixteen,” she continues in my silence. “I also checked for New York. It’s seventeen. You’re angry about something else because the age wouldn’t have mattered.”

Maybe not to her. To me? It does.

The pad of my thumb traces the outline of her lips, and her breath catches. Her gaze locks on my lip, and my tongue does a slow sweep over it. She shifts her gaze to my face. Without breaking eye contact, she bites her upper lip the way I did during our kiss. A torturous groan follows the act. Lust clouds her eyes. She’s thinking about our kiss. I’m also thinking about it.

I lean in close enough for my lips to brush her ear. “Get out.”

CHAPTER 7

To seduce Calum Dissick



ONE WEEK LATER, I'm still not allowed in the choir. This was not how I envisioned my sixth form turning out. Rose claims practice is going fine without me. How's that possible when their lead solo singer is missing? Calum is a motherfucking, fanny farting, cocksucking arse. But my stomach tightens at the thought of him. He has been ignoring me. He's gone before I wake up and only returns late in the evening to smoke. I should have reported him to Dad, but I haven't.

He wanted to kiss me again that day. As much as I strongly dislike him, I like his lips.

I force one foot in front of the other until I'm at the door of my chemistry class. Seated behind his desk, Mr Andy waits for the remaining students. I am too early for the class, and as I watch the bald man through the narrow pane of the door, I seriously consider running out of school.

Chemistry is too complicated. Maybe if Calum taught chemistry, I might understand it. I open the door before I can change my mind. It's my last class of the day. I might as well suck it up.

"Catherine." Mr Andy's eyes light up once I'm inside. Why is he smiling? He's a rat. I muster a fake grin and make my way down the aisle to the backseat. He curves a hand around his mouth and whispers, "We'll be having a snap test today." Great. "You didn't do well on the last one."

And I don't need a reminder. He already ratted me out to Dad. I retrieve the textbook from my bag. It's not as if I don't

try, but it's too complex. I cannot sing my way through it like I do with some maths formulas. The door opens, but I don't look up. I'm trying to cram as much as I can before the test. The class fills up with more students. Someone sinks into the seat beside me.

Amelia.

My grin is automatic. A familiar face makes it better. Sadly, we are both shit at chemistry.

"We are having a test," I whisper to her.

"Again?"

We follow Mr Andy's movements as he struts to the tall bookshelf behind his desk and extracts a bulky textbook. I. Am. Fucked. If I don't pass this, then it's goodbye to the choir. Heading to the front of the class, he writes: *Test* on the board and circles it. A groan of protest ripples through the air.

"What the fuck is wrong with him?" Amelia says, so only I can hear her. I wish I knew. She drags her seat closer to mine. "I'm going to fail, and it's this flat-chested horse fucker's fault."

After making everyone get rid of incriminating materials, Mr Andy distributes the tests to us. Thirty minutes for five questions. I am not sure what I'm doing as I scribble on my worksheet.

I peer at my seat partner, and Amelia is writing. Everyone in class is. Do they really know what they are writing, or simply winging it? Thirty minutes fly by so fast, and he asks us to submit. From the excited look on everyone's faces, I'm the only one who seems to have written rubbish.

The rest of the class is a painful blur. Amelia and I are the last to leave. She's my ride home. I nod in agreement with everything she says as we start for her car. The only coherent thoughts in my head are the answers to the test. Out of five questions, I knew the solution to only three.

Amelia snaps her fingers in my face. We are already in the parking lot. I walk around to the passenger side. "Were you listening to me?"

“Yes.”

My best friend sees through my lie but doesn't counter me. Amelia unlocks the door, and I open it. She doesn't start the car when we're in. Her eyes close, and her head rests on the window.

“What are we waiting for?” I ask.

“Your stepbrother.”

I prop my elbow on the open window. Sure, Amelia knows I've been kicked out of the choir but also doesn't remember Calum is the dare from that night. He cleaned up really well. “Why?”

“Don't know. Maybe we can find something to use against him.” So far, Calum has stayed out of trouble. His routine is simple. House. School. He hasn't made any friends. She breaks down her genius plan to me. I can only nod since I have no better idea to offer. “But he looks familiar.”

“How was the test?” I ask to distract her.

“Cool.”

I click my seatbelt into place, a signal for her to get the car moving. But she doesn't look at me.

“What was your answer to question four?” I ask.

“Forty-five.”

Her answer slaps. I open and close my mouth without voicing my thoughts. My answer was 2.5, and number four was one of the three questions I answered. Bloody lucky me. I am never getting back in the choir. I can already see the E circled in red ink at the top of my test. This is *his* fault.

The backdoor opens to reveal Calum. Amelia's finger drums on the steering wheel as he makes his way to his car. If he knows we are watching him, he doesn't show it. Amelia lets out a sigh.

“What are you thinking?” I ask her.

“I'm wondering if what they say about the Americans is true.”

My brows furrow. “What do they say?”

“That they have big dicks.”

I snort with laughter. “Amelia.”

“What?” She grins, whisking blonde hair out of her face. “You asked.”

“Next time, keep your intrusive thoughts to yourself.”

“Then don’t ask, you twat.”

“Plonker,” I mutter. My gaze drifts to my stepbrother. “Why is he standing there?”

Calum hasn’t entered the car. I sink my nails into my knees when he throws a look around the parking lot like he can sense us watching him. Amelia taps me. “I can’t place his face. Can you?”

I shake my head. I don’t want them to know he is the lad from the pub. Amelia makes an annoyed sound and returns to watching him. In a few minutes, Calum zooms out of the school.

We follow behind the red car, keeping some distance between us. The wind whistles through my hair, sending them all over my face. Amelia turns on the radio, and I reduce the volume. She glares at me, and I glare back.

“What if he’s not up to anything?” I ask.

Amelia’s plan no longer makes sense. *Find out what he does between closing hour and the time before he returns home. If it’s illegal, we use it against him.* When the traffic light turns green, he swerves to the left instead of driving straight ahead. Amelia follows. Where could he possibly be going?

“Then you’ll just have to seduce him,” she replies at last.

“To seduce my stepbrother?” I mutter, utterly dumbfounded. To seduce Calum Dissick. The idea is so stupid I want to smack sense into her. Amelia rolls her eyes and makes another turn, this time onto an empty street. Calum’s car is ahead of us, but she keeps up. “I told you to keep your

intrusive thoughts to yourself. Where the bloody hell are we headed?”

“Do you want to get back in the choir or not?”

I cross my legs at my ankles. “I want to. But...”

“No buts, Cathie. Play nice, pretend to like him. Anything until he gives you what you want.”

On second thought, it sounds good. I’m likeable, and so is Calum when he’s not being a dickhead. His lips are also very likeable. In fact, the most likeable part of him. I really want to kiss him again. I shake off those silly thoughts. Seducing my stepbrother sounds like a bad idea.

“What if I fall in love with him?” I ask.

In all the romance novellas Rose reads, it always starts as play pretend. Then, the female lead falls in love with the male lead for real. That can’t be us. I only want to kiss him, nothing more.

“You won’t.” Amelia’s car slows to a crawl. “This is not a book or a movie.”

“You give the worst advice.”

“I know,” she replies with a laugh. “That’s why we are besties. You love bad advice.”

A grunt escapes me as I scan our surroundings. The road stretches on forever without an end in sight. Empty houses line each side of the road. I haven’t been to this part of town in ages.

“Where are we?” Amelia whispers.

There’s not a car in sight, not even Calum’s. Did he deceive us?

Fear curls through me. Amelia and I share a glance. We need to leave. Right now.

From a distance, the headlights of a red car blink to life, and it charges towards us at an angry speed. I fasten the seatbelt I undid moments ago and shove Amelia’s knee. “Go, go, go. Now.”

Amelia shifts gears, but it's too late. We are sitting ducks. I try to play it off with a smile, but my heart skips. Sweat breaks out on my temples as Calum's car slows to a stop beside Amelia's.

"Are you stalking me?" he asks, still in his car. We are in big trouble.

This is our chance to race out of here. But Calum pushes his door open and storms towards my side. No, I'm not the one driving. He should face Amelia, but he wrenches the passenger door open.

"Get out of the car."

I plant my feet firmly on the car floor. "No."

"Well, I asked nicely."

He unclicks my seatbelt and attempts to pluck me out of my seat.

"Wait," I scream. My hands shoot up. "I'll get out."

Swallowing my fears, I exit the vehicle. He doesn't give me much space for movement. I force my face into a neutral mask when our gazes meet. His eyes are wide with anger, and I know I have something to do with it.

"I'll ask again, were you stalking me?"

"No. We came here for Rose."

"Rose, huh?" I nod again because it's all I can do with my back pressing into the car and his harsh breath fanning my face. I still have my hands raised like a common thief. "Your phone."

"What?"

"Your phone," Calum replies through clenched teeth, allowing me to slide down to retrieve it. Amelia shrugs and offers it to me. I accept and give it to him, but he doesn't collect it. "Unlock it."

Why does he need my phone? I don't ask questions, just do as he says. Amelia finally steps out of her car. He lifts a

finger to shut her up before she speaks. “You came here for Rose, right?”

“Yeah,” Amelia answers with confidence. Her arm sweeps across this deserted street. Calum already knows we are lying. She needs to shut up. I try to straighten up, but Calum’s glare has me leaning back on the car. He taps something on my phone. “She is waiting for us back there.”

“What are you doing?” I ask.

Calum smirks, followed by another tap. “You’ll see. Hey, Rose,” he adds when the call connects. Rose clears her throat, and I swipe my palm across my skirt. “It’s Mr Dissick. Where are you?”

“At home. Why? Wait. Sir, where’s Cathie?”

Holding my gaze, Calum replies, “She’s here, and she says hi. Bye, Rose.”

He ends the call with a smug smile, and my heart races faster. Dad will temporarily ban me from seeing the girls if he reports this to him. He moves a step back and points to Dani’s car.

“Get in the car. Now.” No. I’m not going in there. I clench my fists at my sides and jut out my chin. He will not push me around because he’s older or the choir director. “Get in there, Catherine, or I swear to God, you’ll never see the walls of the music hall until you graduate.”

“We don’t really ‘graduate’ secondary schools, only universities.”

He pauses. “You think this is a joke?”

That’s all it takes for me to scramble to the car with my bag barely hanging on my shoulders. Amelia offers me an apologetic smile as I disappear into the car, but fuck her. This foolish idea was hers to begin with. This place is a dead zone. If anything had happened to us, no one would have heard us if we tried to scream for help. I was stupid, too, for allowing it. I hum a familiar tune under my breath to calm myself. But as soon as Calum yanks the door open, all the calmness escapes

through the window. He doesn't start the car, and I'm forced to think about my actions.

For the next few minutes, all he does is tap the middle console in a beat that drives me crazy with the need to yell at him to stop. I plug my fingers into my ears, but the sound worsens.

"Fine. I would like to start with an apology. I'm sorry, Mr Dissick," I blurt out. *Tap. Tap. Tap.* Why won't he stop? He needs to stop. "I'm sorry for stalking you. For lying about my age."

He stops. There's silence as he turns his head in my direction, like he's noticing me in his car for the first time. Amelia's Ford drives slowly past his car. She honks, then zooms off, leaving me alone to sort out the mess we both created. I'm never taking ideas or advice from her again.

Calum starts the car, turning into corners that lead us back to familiar streets. I grip the handle of the door, tempted to open it and escape this quietness. The silence is worse than the tapping.

"Did you hear me the first time?" I whisper. Rows of similar houses come into view as we head onto Jenae's Street. Mum says they named it after one of the first female Americans who lived here. Calum's Street also sounds nice. I touch his arm and mutter another apology, "I'm sorry."

"Okay."

That's... suspicious. I lean on the door to give him all my attention. His muscles flex each time he steers the wheel in the direction we should go. I know where those hands would fit perfectly.

What were we talking about again? Right. An apology.

"Do you forgive me?" I ask.

The car grinds to a stop in front of the house. I fiddle with the straps of my schoolbag to fill the silence. "Forgive you for what, sis?"

"Stop calling me sis," I say without looking at him.

“Is sister much better?”

“No, brother.”

He barks out a short laugh that ends as soon as it starts. I like his laugh. The way he tilts his head back and allows it to take full control of his body. He should laugh more often around me.

“What were you even doing there?” I ask.

For someone new to a town I was born and bred in, Calum’s familiarity with the lands is suspicious. What if Amelia is right about my stepbrother, and he’s indeed up to something? Something like drugs. He smokes. Does that mean he’s a drug dealer, or he went there to buy weed?

“None of your business,” he finally replies and crosses his arms. If he says so. I’m not helping him if he’s in trouble, and I’ll convince Dad to stay away. “Why do you keep failing chemistry?”

“None of your business,” I fire back.

For the first time, he faces me squarely. His gaze scrolls over my body, peeling every layer of clothing with those blue eyes. He stops at my face and shakes his head slowly.

“Your hair is ugly.”

“Your face is ugly,” I answer with less venom.

“Why do you keep failing chemistry, Cathie?”

I twist my hands resting on my lap. No one has ever asked me that. They just assume I don’t put enough effort into studying, but it’s not the case. I pop my knuckles before answering him.

“Because I can’t sing my way through it.”

“What do you mean?”

I can’t tell if Calum is genuinely interested in my reply or simply curious or wants a change of topic. I close my eyes so I don’t have to see the disgust in his when I say, “I guess I’m slower.”

Calum lets out a sound I take as an approval to continue talking.

“If it takes you a minute to understand something, it will take me a minute and thirty seconds or even two minutes to understand the same thing. So, I try to form a tune with everything, but I can’t do that with chemistry. There are too many bonds and symbols involved.”

When my eyelids flutter open, Calum is staring at me with a strange emotion. His elbow partly hangs outside the car, and a frown has his lips upside down. He must think I’m stupid. I think I’m stupid sometimes when I have to sing out a formula before I remember how to use it.

“Can’t you drop the subject or change it?” he asks.

“No. You can’t change or drop it after choosing.” I drag a finger along my skirt as the silence extends. Sixth form chemistry is more complex, and it’s too late to switch. Music is my escape from the educational madness. His gaze narrows. He opens and closes his mouth twice without a word. Before he tells me what I already know, I whisper, “I keep failing because I’m stupid.”

“Nope, I disagree. You’re not stupid, Cathie. You’re just different,” he says with a slight shake of his head. If he had forgiven me, I would have thrown myself at him in a hug. “And you sing better than anyone I know.”

Two compliments in the space of one minute. My cheeks pink with embarrassment. I tuck a piece of stray hair behind my ear and lower my gaze. “Not as good as you. You sing better.”

“If you get a grade higher than F, I’ll put you on probation after you apologise to everyone.”

My head raises. “F? There’s no F grade. It’s A to E.”

“Oh. It’s A to D, then an F for us.”

That’s interesting. I like their grading system. “What do you mean by everyone?”

“The entire team, chorister, whatever it’s called here.”

“Any grade?”

He nods. “As long as it’s not an F.” His eyes close, and he sighs. “I mean an E.”

I stretch out my hand, and he takes it. A jolt of electricity runs up my arm at the contact. “We have ourselves a deal.” Looking everywhere but at him, I add, “I’m sorry for shouting at you.”

“Anything higher than an E, and you’re back.”

CHAPTER 8

Not stupid, just different



I'M NOT STUPID, just different.

Standing in front of the mirror in my bathroom, that's what I tell myself as I apply a new batch of pink dye to my hair. Is different good? Is it bad? I don't know, but I like the way Calum said it. I finish up, and the dark roots of my hair are completely pink by the time I wash off the dye.

"Cathie. Calum. Lunch is ready," Dani yells from downstairs. "Be down immediately."

I exit my room and wait by the door for Calum to show up so we can go together. He doesn't. If he had gone downstairs, I would have known or heard him, all thanks to the not-so-thick walls. He has to pass by my room since it's closer to the staircase. I start towards Calum's room. I'll only tell him lunch is ready and leave. Easy to do.

His door is slightly ajar. I slip in and pause, trying to adjust to the darkness. The curtains are drawn, and the lights switched off. I know he's in the room. Calum doesn't go out on Saturdays.

A phone vibrates from the nightstand. The screen light illuminates the room, and I see a shirtless Calum sprawled on the bed with his arms folded over his face and a pillow under his head. His phone vibrates without interruption. He has a call, but he makes no move to answer it.

I wait a few more seconds, then push closer to the bed. He doesn't stir.

“Calum?” I whisper. “Lunch is ready, *bro*,” I add to tease him. “Are you coming?”

No reply. I leave his room as quietly as I entered. Dad and Dani are already eating when I join them downstairs. They share a strained glance, and their gazes return to my hair. It’s a dark pink that can be noticed from a mile away. Dani is the person who breaks the awkwardness.

“Your hair looks lovely, Cathie.”

Her compliment seems genuine, and I return it with a smile. Dad doesn’t look as pleased. I tug on my skirt to stop myself from saying something to wipe off that disappointment on his face.

“I thought we were over this stage,” Dad says.

This stage that started after Mum died. She liked colours. Everything around here, from the green wallpapers of the dining room to the pink and blue of Calum’s room, reminds me of her.

“Apparently not,” I reply, scooping some stew into my bowl. “Sorry. It’s not ending soon.”

Dad clenches his hand on the table, and Dani places hers over his. “It doesn’t look so horrible.”

“Gee. Thanks, Dad.” I stare at the food on my plate, then at our parents. I’d rather eat with my stepbrother. I stand and lift the plate. “Can I take this up with me?” That earns me a frown from Dad. “I’ll take mine and Calum’s up. Dani, what better way to bond than over food?”

My gaze rests on my stepmother alone. If Dani says yes, it’s an automatic yes from Dad. She purses her lips, and then her head bobs in a semi-nod. That’s enough for me to rush into the kitchen to get bigger bowls and a tray to carry our lunch. Dad is grumbling on my return to the dining room, but I’m too excited at the thought of eating with Calum to appease him.

What will we talk about this time? My hair? Calum couldn’t have been serious about it being ugly. It’s loud and attention-demanding but not ugly.

“Thanks, Dani. You’re the best.” I blow her a kiss, and she chuckles. Dad glows with instant jealousy. I set the tray down and plant a kiss on his cheek. “You too, Dad. You’re the best.”

Before he replies, I’m already bounding up the stairs. I knock once and enter his room without an invitation. Nostalgia hits me hard. My eyes roam the walls painted in two different colours. I wanted pink. But Mum thought blue would be better. So, we did a different colour on each wall.

From here, I can see the holes made by the nails we used to hang the portraits of us on the pink walls. They are all in a box now, and my current room is painted white. A sad smile touches my lips when I see Calum seated at the study table a few feet from the balcony door. We used to do homework together there. Every item here holds a memory with her. That’s why I moved. It still hurts.

I miss her.

Calum looks up. Since he’s wearing a tank top, I can see his tattoo. He balances the guitar on his leg. I expect him to play. I’ve never heard him play.

“What do you want, Cathie?”

A cloud of tiredness hovers over him. It was present when I came in earlier. I take another step in, and he motions for me to stop. There’s no trace of anger on his face, but I still have to play it safe.

Another step inside, and he blatantly ignores me. I raise the tray to my chest. “I’ve got food.”

According to Rose, Friday’s practice went okay. Rehearsals are intense but fun, so something else must be bothering him. I push the thought aside and take one more tentative step towards the unhappy man. I know he can be nice, and I want him to be in a good mood when we eat.

“Not hungry.”

Covering the gap, I place the tray at his feet and sit on the rug with my legs folded. “Too late.”

“Go away, Cathie.”

“Nope.”

The sweet aroma of the stew filters into the air when I open the plate. My mouth waters, but I force myself to serve Calum first. Before Dani, I was stuck with Dad’s mediocre cooking, so I’m eternally grateful to her for her cooking skills.

Calum looks on helplessly as I heap more white rice on his plate. I let him have the biggest beef in the bowl, and he mutters a sheepish gratitude that elicits a smile from me. Our fingers brush when he accepts the plate from me, and a tingle shoots up my arm, spreading down to my toes.

My cheeks are as pink as my hair when I eventually serve myself. I need to get a grip.

He’s my brother. My stepbrother.

After his first bite, he says, “Not bad.”

“Your mum is a great cook,” I reply. To that, he winks. “Do you still think I have a beautiful smile?”

“Yeah.”

We eat in silence. At intervals, Calum taps on his laptop, and the screen comes alive. I can’t see his screen clearly from my position on the floor, but I glimpse a YouTube channel. I hope to have one when I grow a bigger TikTok fanbase. Right now, I’m at six thousand followers.

“What were you working on before I came?”

“Nothing, really.”

“Calum.”

His eyes squeeze shut, and he lowers his empty plate to the table. My eyes trail his perfect physique hungrily. I’m newly starving, but not for the food Dani cooked. I push my plate aside and kneel between his legs, trapping myself between him and the table. This position is... *No*.

“Will you play the guitar for me?” I whisper. “I’ve never heard you play.”

“No.” My hands sneak into his shorts, and his eyes jerk open. I dare to move my fingers another inch above his thighs

that are so smooth to my touch. He sucks in a breath. “Cathie, stop.”

“I’ll stop if you say yes.” I lick my lips, and his gaze follows the movement. His blue eyes narrow ever so slightly, and a flush rises to his cheek. “Calum, will you please play the guitar?”

“Fine. I’ll play.” Calum attempts to yank his shorts from my grip, but I only tighten my hold on it. His face is so close to mine. I’m super tempted to lean in and kiss him. “Now, get off me.”

Fully aware of our position and how easily it might be misconstrued if anyone—our parents—stumble inside, I retract my hands. “Sorry.”

“You’re intense,” he mumbles under his breath, but I’m certain he didn’t mean for me to hear it.

Shame and excitement battle inside me, but shame wins. I pick up my plate and twirl the spoon.

“Sorry,” I mumble again. The food is cold. It has lost its taste, like I lost the boldness that prompted me earlier. “It’s part of the stupid package.”

Calum pries the plate from me and sets it down on the tray. His finger curls under my jaw to tilt my head up. Our eyes collide, and my heart slows its thumping. I don’t know what I feel now.

“You’re not stupid, Catherine. Stop using that word to describe yourself.”

“Will you play the guitar?”

“I will.”

A comfortable silence reigns over us. I push the tray under the table and hand him his guitar.

Calum laughs. “You’re not giving up on this.”

“Nope. I really want to hear you play.” His face softens. He fingers a chord and stops. I try not to say anything, but my

mouth sometimes works faster than my brain. “What is it? I liked it.”

“Oh, please. I didn’t do anything.” Making a zipping motion across my lips, I toss the keys out the open door, our only source of light, minus the fluorescent bulbs. “I haven’t played since...”

His lingering statement piques my curiosity. I forget everything about keeping quiet.

“Since when?”

“Since the band broke up. Don’t expect much.” When the music is in you, it doesn’t matter how long you stay away from it, you’ll feel it when you return to it. Calum leans forward, cradling the guitar in his hand as he readies himself to blow my mind, I hope. “This song is not mine.”

“Just play already.”

“Don’t say I didn’t warn you,” he says. Head hanging low, he strokes the guitar with delicate precision, and it evokes a sound that surrounds us in a bubble. He beats the guitar once, then again, and starts singing. The softness of his voice pulls me in, and the familiar lyrics sinks in.

Goosebumps scatter across the back of my hands as he talks about being poor but kind, short but healthy. But the only short person in this room is me. And that’s because of how tall Calum is compared to me. Memories of Mum and I singing this song flood in. I whisper the next line about being high but grounded, sane but overwhelmed because it explains how I feel right now.

Calum’s head snaps up. “You know the song?”

“Alanis Morissette.” Mum used to play her songs around the house a lot. *Hand in my pocket* was from her favourite album. She was convinced Alanis was ahead of her time. I touch Calum’s knee, but it’s nothing sensual. Rubbing my thumb over his knee, I say, “Keep singing, please.”

His eyes latch onto mine, and he nods. There is something different about this nod. It’s like an acknowledgement from one singer to another. I don’t interrupt him again. He makes

the song his own, pouring raw emotions into it, and I'm convinced the lyrics are exactly how he feels.

As Calum nears the end of the song, his eyes find mine. He sends me a warm smile that turns my heart inside out, and the only thing I can do is breathe. Live in this pure moment because I know it won't last.

The silence that follows once Calum is done singing says more than our words could have. I clap to show my amazement because words won't do it justice. He lets out a nervous laugh.

"Hand in my pocket. It's one of my favourite songs. Maybe even my favourite," Calum offers. The guitar is still in his grasp. He returns it to its position against the wall. Knowing I won't hear his beautiful rendition again today saddens me. "She's such a beautiful artist."

"Yeah." I bounce my foot, working up the nerve to ask him the question that plagued me since the beginning of the song. "Are you broke?"

"I'm twenty-two, living in my stepfather's house, with a job at a high school, which I only got because he's the principal and married to my mum." It takes a second for my brain to do the translation from high to secondary and principal to headteacher. He spreads his arms open, and I would have hugged him if he so much as whispered it. I hug myself instead. "What do you think, Cathie?"

"But you're happy," I remind him.

"Happier than I was when I left New York."

Another subject I'm scared to talk about. New York is a popular city. I want to visit. I inch closer to him, so nothing we say is lost in the air. He crosses his leg at the knee, subtly dodging my touch. It stings a little, but I get why he did it. We can't get close. We are stepsiblings.

"Why did you leave?"

"Fresh start," he answers.

He fingers my hair with a soft smile playing on his lips. My mouth dries when his fingers move to my scalp. I don't know what he's doing, but I love it. Pulling gently on my hair from the roots, he locks a pink strand around his forefinger and caresses my cheek with it. I gulp tight.

"You fixed it," he whispers.

"Had to show you that pink wasn't ugly."

His smile broadens. "I didn't mean that."

"I know," I reply.

"Before you came in, I wanted to make a cover of that song to upload to my YouTube channel."

"And I ruined it," I finish for him.

"No. I was struggling with it until you came." Is that a compliment because I'll take it? He runs a hand over his face. I twist my hands, eyes firm on his mouth set in a cute frown. "Thank you."

The silence progresses into something more tense and awkward. I want to say something, but I don't know what. I shift a little so the rug isn't brushing my thighs, and Calum drags in a sharp breath that grabs my attention. He's staring at me. No, not at me, at something on my body.

My gaze lowers, and heat crawls up my neck at the wet spot on my red knickers. His singing made me wet. I peer at him. My skirt must have hitched up my thighs when I shifted. It wasn't deliberate, but I don't try to rectify the error. Not with him looking like he wants to kiss me or do something hotter than a kiss to me. I don't mind us doing more, but I won't be the one to tell him that. He snaps out of his trance and pinches the bridge of his nose. I close my legs.

We exchange another heated glance. "You should leave," he says.

Calum's voice lacks conviction. I kneel and spread his legs open. I'm doing what I thought I wouldn't do. Trying to seduce my stepbrother. His hands circle my wrists, and a flash

of electricity shocks us both. He lets me go, and I return my hands to his thighs. No movement.

“Do you think about our kiss?”

“I’m not answering that,” he grits out.

“I’ll leave if you answer.” Frustration crosses his face. He sighs but says nothing to my request. Still on my knees, I straighten up so my nose is inches from his. If I want to kiss him, all I have to do is slide my hand behind his neck and pull his head down to claim those beautiful lips that sing beautiful songs. “Do you regret it?”

“No.”

My inner muscles clench. Calum looks away, unaware of the effect his answer has on my body. I press my legs together. One more question. “Even after knowing that I’m seventeen?”

Calum holds my gaze. “No.”

My nipples harden beneath my white tank top, straining against the cotton material like two beady dots. I know Calum can see them. They are hard to miss. I stroke his thighs and purr.

“I don’t either, Calum.” He nods to himself, and my head tilts to the side as I suck on my lip like he did during that one passionate kiss that has ruined my kissing life. “I keep thinking about it. If, and when, we will do it again. I want us to do it again.” His head moves left, then right, but his refusal does not deter me. I palm his cheeks, forcing his blue eyes to my face. “I want you to kiss me again, Calum.”

“Stop thinking about it. It won’t happen again,” he says, “and I didn’t need all that information.”

A blatant shrug later, arms back to my sides, I reply, “I wanted to share it. I want to kiss you.”

“The answer is still no.”

As promised, I exit the room after his reply. My next stop is the drawer in my bathroom. When I find what I’m looking for, I hurry inside the room and lock the door. On the bed, legs wide open and red underwear tossed to the floor, it’s my

stepbrother's face I imagine between my legs. His hands and mouth on my nipples as the pink, vibrating dildo stretches my inner walls, hurling me to an earth-rocking orgasm.

CHAPTER 9

Death sucks



TODAY, I'm more covered in a grey sweatshirt and tracksuit as I bridge the distance to my sexy stepbrother's room. Heart thumping harder than before, I stop in front of Calum's room. He has not stepped out since lunch. I can't help trying to convince myself that this is a horrible idea. But my fist meets his door twice. If I enter on his invitation, he'll see I have good intentions.

I knock again, then try the knob when there's no response from inside. I find the door unlocked and the room empty. Damning the consequences, I take another step inside the dim-lit room.

The glow from the tip of Calum's blunt is what guides me to the balcony. He doesn't have time to process my appearance. I snatch the blunt from his hand and stomp on it. His gaze flickers to mine.

"You shouldn't be smoking here. Or at all."

"I wasn't smoking," he answers.

I rest my hands on my waist, my eyes flying up and down his body. "Yeah. Horses can also fly."

He is also covered in a tee shirt and joggers. I didn't get a chance to really look at him during lunch. Legs pushed out, he crosses his arms on his chest and sizes me up. My nipples are hard all over again, but my bra hides the evidence. I should say something to diffuse the tension.

"What do you want, Cathie?"

“I...” I scratch my tattoo out of her nervousness. The idea had sounded so good in my head, but now, not so much. “I wanted to know if you... if you recorded the cover. I don’t think you did.”

“No. I didn’t.” Hunching his back, he leans forward on the seat, elbows digging into his knees. I am the one standing, looking down on him, but he still holds the power. “Why are you asking?”

Shifting my weight to the other foot, I reply, “I wanted to help.” Another once-over and my nerves fray. Now is the best time to run. Instead, I lean on the balcony door. “If you don’t mind. I won’t do anything you don’t like but help to make the recording better.” The words rushing out of my mouth must have made no sense to him. He’s still gawking at me. “Christ. Forget it.”

“How?”

“How what?” I ask.

Calum stands. I’m acutely aware of him, the finger that grazes my cheek when he tucks my hair out of sight. He backs a step away like he did nothing, and I remind my silly heart to function.

“How are you going to make the recording better?”

Safe topic. Yes. That’s the reason I’m here. To help, not picture how good his lips will look on mine. I take a minute to collect my thoughts.

“I have a ring light.” Calum’s face says it all, that he doesn’t know what I’m talking about. I eye the space between us. The distance is keeping me sane, but I need to show him what it can do. Braving it, I pull out my phone and cross over to him. His lips twist in that cute pout, and the only thing I can do to avoid a kiss is tap on my phone’s screen. “I use it for my TikTok videos.”

“Nice.”

But he doesn’t sound impressed. And I want to impress him. He returns to his seat, and I follow behind, kneeling by

his side. My TikTok profile is open. I tap on my latest video and show him.

It's a cover of Mariah Carey's new single that has gathered one hundred thousand views. Calum grips the armrest once the video plays. I want to believe he doesn't loathe my singing, but his face remains blank. Last time, he shut me up when I tried singing my way back into the choir.

I pause the video. It was recorded in my room, in front of the window. I used to record out here on the balcony until I switched rooms.

A huge part of me awaits his compliment or a comment about my singing, but nothing comes. My smile fades. I already received tons of comments and suggestions for my next cover, but it feels like nothing if the great Calum Dissick doesn't acknowledge my vocals. Anything will do.

"Do you have anything to say?" I have to ask. His lips purse, and he shakes his head. "Really?"

"Something like what, Cathie?" He's genuinely confused. He sweeps his hair out of his forehead and frowns when he notices my confusion. "Well, I'm not sure what I'm supposed to say."

I swallow my pride, the hurt, and annoyance and tap on my screen.

Why do I need a compliment from him to feel better? I'm a brilliant singer. My knees hurt from the kneeling, but I don't stand. The least he could have done was to offer his stepsister a seat.

"This is the effect of the ring light," I tell him. His fingernail grazes my screen, tracing a line on my lip. I wish he would touch the real me beside him. "See that thing, the white circle around my eyes? It's from it. I have one in my room. We could use it to record your YouTube covers."

"Oh."

"It will come out nice and professional."

"Who's we?"

Did I say that? We are not a team. “I’m sorry, I mean, you. Just you. You can use it to record.”

“Okay.”

I rise to my feet, still half-expecting the remark about my singing. Nothing.

“Uh, I’ll go get it now.” I breeze in and out of my room within minutes. The ring light feels heavy in my hand, but I don’t show it as I slow down in front of him. “It’s here. Ta-da!”

“Ta-da,” he says with a straight face that knocks my smile off. “We should get to work then.”

“Yeah.”

Calum hasn’t laughed today. I want him to laugh. I attempt to kneel, but he shakes his head. He points to something behind me, the chair on the other side of the balcony. If I sit, I won’t be as close to him or feel his body heat. I head for the chair and stop behind it. My fingers brush the railing as I try to push it forward. The cold shoots signals to my brain, and I eventually relax.

With his curious gaze trailing every single move I make, I set up the ring light. I stretch out my hand to him. “Your phone, bro,” I tease, but something in his expression shifts. My stepbrother becomes more guarded. “Please give it to me. I need it.”

“For what?”

I motion to the gaping hole in the centre of the ring light. “Don’t you record with your phone? I need to put it here to get the full effects,” I tell the stubborn young man. Calum doesn’t give it to me. He lowers it himself to the ring light, and I fix it into place. “Thank you.”

In silence, I arrange the seat, ruffling his hair in the name of creating the messy look that suits the song. Calum says nothing to me, and I take that as approval to help him look the part. I finish up, and the only thing missing is the guitar. I know where it is, so I don’t bother to ask.

I'm one step inside his room when he stops me with a question. "Cathie, where are you going?"

He sounds annoyed. I spin to face him, a smile playing on my lips. "To get your guitar."

To that, he says nothing but visibly relaxes. I grab the guitar and place it on his lap, giving him a thumbs-up. He laughs. For the first time today, he laughs. My grin is automatic, and it almost wanes when I realise I must leave. The plan was to lend him the ring light and let him record in private. But the other part of me wants to be here when he does his magic. Still, I must go.

Pointing behind me, I walk backwards. As much as I want to put on a bold front, my smile doesn't form. "Okay, Calum. Have fun."

"Have fun?" His fingers pause on the guitar. I halt, charmed by his gaze. "You're not staying?"

I shake my head. "I didn't think you wanted me to stay."

He gestures to the empty chair, and my pulse quickens in anticipation. "Please, have a seat."

"Are you sure?"

His arm drops, and he fingers his guitar once more. "I'm sure I won't ask again." In a flash, I'm seated. He laughs again. Lifting his gaze to mine, he murmurs, "Yes, Cathie. I want you to stay."

After a nod, he begins. His voice transfixes me. I heard him sing yesterday, but the emotions are new, touching me in all the places Mum's voice used to touch me. I cross my legs on the chair, too stunned to do anything more. Here, with nature and his voice, is absolute perfection.

The singing slows to an end. Calum strikes the guitar once, and earth-shattering silence follows. I'm too stunned to shoot to my feet in a standing ovation, but my smile is permanent.

He smiles as he tells the camera, "All right, guys. That's it for today." Before he began, he made an announcement and apologised for his long, unexplained absence. I suspect it has

to do with his band's breakup. "See you next time." He blows a kiss to the camera, and my stomach knots with jealousy. I must find his YouTube channel immediately. "Love you all. Um, stay safe. Bye."

As his blues meet mine after ending the recording, I can't help thinking about what it would feel like to be loved by him properly, not as siblings, but as a man loves a woman, his lover.

The clapping from somewhere in the room tears his eyes off me. We dart a look at our guest, and he jumps to his feet. Dani waves, opening her arms to Calum, who whispers, "Mum. You're here."

"I'm here," Dani says with another nod. Her eyes mist, and she tilts her head back as if holding in her tears. Calum engulfs her in a hug, and she sniffs. "That was so, so, *so* beautiful, Cal."

A pang spears through my heart. This moment between mother and son feels too private for an outsider like me. It's a sad reminder that I have not been hugged like that in six years, that I'll never get to see this proud look on my mother's face anytime I sing. Death sucks. I try to brush past the duo without calling attention to myself, but Calum sneaks a hand around my wrist.

"Stay," Calum mouths. I nod, giving them as much space as they would need. Dani doesn't notice our interaction. She's too enamoured to look away from her son. Touching his jaw, she smiles again. I miss Mum. "I didn't do it alone," he says, but Dani only nods. "Cathie helped."

"It was all him—"

But I never finish the statement. Dani sweeps me in a hug so tight it melts the walls around my heart. Something wet touches my shoulder.

Dani is crying. She's crying and saying, "Thank you," like a broken player. "Thank you, Cathie."

"It's no big deal," I say when we break the hug. She scowls, and I add, "You're welcome."

Touching my shoulders, she replies, “That’s much better, and…” She dabs the under of her eyes to wipe the evidence of her tears. “I’ll leave you two to sing more songs or something. Have fun.”

Calum’s laughter follows her as she hikes out of his room. She’s like a kid with a candy. Mum is the same when I sing. His gaze finds mine, and he grins. My heart leaps. I think I might like him.

“Thanks.”

Emotions race through me, and I stretch my hand for a handshake. Calum stares at the hand without taking it. Before the awkwardness sets in, I step onto the balcony. I need to leave here.

“You’re welcome, C.”

Ready to get out of here, I squat in front of the ring light. He taps me. “Cathie?”

I look over my shoulder to see the tall mass of anxiousness. “Yes, Calum?”

“Do you want to sing for me?” he breathes out.

Oh. Wait, did Calum say... *for him*? I stand. Of course, I will do anything for my lovely, sexy stepbrother. Hiding my excitement behind a small smile, I ask, “Will you play the guitar?”

“If it will get you to sing—”

“It will.”

I sit, and Calum pushes the ring light out of the way. A lump climbs up my throat when he drags his chair closer. He picks up the guitar. I release a nervous laugh when his leg brushes against mine as he sinks into his seat. He frowns, and I wave off his concern with both hands.

“What will you be singing?”

“Alanis. Head over feet,” I answer. A ghost of a smile plays on his lips. “You know it?”

Calum nods. I spread my arms and let the breeze caress me. There's nothing better than having someone who loves the songs you do, even better when they are sexy and can play the guitar.

“Okay.”

“Okay,” he murmurs.

Calum starts with the guitar to ease me into it. He didn't have to. Singing comes easily to me. I close my eyes, and the music flows through my veins. Midway through the song, he joins me in the chorus. The blend of our voices sends chills down my spine, and goosebumps erupt on my skin.

My eyes seek his. I want to know him better. His voice drops so I can have the centre stage again. But I don't want it if I'm not sharing it with him. He joins me to sing the final chorus, and my heart refuses to stay still. My voice catches towards the end, and we finish together.

The air thickens with consciousness, tension that's not unbearable. What we have shared is magical, and trying to describe it will ruin the moment.

“We should do more of this. Do a duet together,” I say, watching my stepbrother caress his guitar. Wordlessly, he rises to his feet, and I swiftly add, “If you like.”

I get no reply until Calum returns to the balcony without the guitar. He leans on the railings, rocking on his heels as he takes in the large expanse of greenery in front of him. I don't know why he won't look my way, but I want to see his face when he talks to me. I love his blues.

“Maybe next time,” he murmurs. “Next week?”

“Is fine by me.”

Without an invitation, I join my stepbrother by the railing. I'm smart enough to leave some space between us. He notices. I redirect my gaze to the open space. There's a wooden fence at the back of the house. If I look further, I will see the short gate leading to Dad's spot. A tiny shed he spends most mornings cleaning his gun. I guess it's his way of dealing with the loss.

Calum massages his forehead and sighs. “Back there, my mum gets so emotional sometimes.”

And I think I know why. Calum hasn't played since his band broke up. It's a huge deal to her.

“It's fine.” Bracing his elbows on the railing, he looks at me. I'm determined not to focus on his arms and how easily they can lift me off the ground and into his bed. “Can I call you Cal?”

“No.”

“Why not?”

“It's reserved for my loved ones,” he whispers. My brows almost hit my hairline. “Mum. Band. Lovers.” Rage burns my insides at the idea of another woman kissing or hugging him. He is my stepbrother. I can't have him, but I don't want another woman for him. “*And* close friends.”

By virtue of Dani's marriage to Dad, I am a loved one. So I can call him Cal. I don't do that, though. “Are you dating anyone?”

If I know about my competition, I can fight them off. *What competition?* I can't have him. Calum is off-limits, forbidden. But I like the forbidden.

“That shouldn't concern you,” Calum replies.

“Single. Got it.” I'm single too, never dated, only flings. Now, I want him. I trail a finger over the railing as he watches me. I want to say more, but I won't. “When did your band break up?”

His fingers drum against the railing. “When I was twenty-one.”

“And you're twenty-two?”

“Twenty-three by December,” he answers.

“What have you been up to since then?”

A lot must have happened. Calum offers me a tiny smile, and I surprise both of us by slipping my hand into his shaky one to stop his constant jerking. His eyes tell what his lips

won't say, and they are asking me what the fuck I think I'm doing by touching him without his consent.

No single idea. But I like the body contact. I think Calum does, too, because he doesn't stop me. I roll his sleeve to reveal his tattoo. My thumbnail hovers above the date under the bigger tattoo.

"What does this mean? Fourteen. Zero. Two." It's a day that holds bad memories for me. We are still holding hands and my free hand dances across his inked skin. "What does it mean?"

As to be expected, my stepbrother turns it on me. Calum takes my hand and presses a fingertip to my tattoo. Old memories tumble in. "What does your tattoo mean? Why is it a semicolon?"

"A pause." His brows raise, and I clear my throat. It's hard to explain. "A semicolon represents a pause. When I'm writing an essay and I use a semicolon, Mr Jameson, my English teacher knows it's not the end of the statement." He squints, and I can't help feeling that I heightened his confusion. I huff a breath and force out the words: "It means I paused, then continued."

Facing each other with only a foot of distance between us, Calum asks, "Continued what?"

"Life."

CHAPTER 10

Fresh start



I'M PREPARING for school on Monday morning when someone knocks. My first thought is to check whoever is at the door until I see the new post on Girls Code open on my screen.

I tilt the screen of my laptop so it won't be visible to whoever is at the door when I open it. "Who's that?"

"Calum," my stepbrother answers, followed by another knock. "Are you ready for school?"

That's unusual. Amelia or Dad usually drives me to school. I shuffle to the door and wrench it open. Calum's lips part in a silent curse, and my gaze lowers to my chest. Oh. Blush rushes to my cheeks. My breasts are almost spilling out of my black lacy bra. My shirt is on the bed.

It's unintentional, but I don't try to cover up. Instead, I fold my arms under my boobs, pushing them up to catch more of his attention. His hands slide into his pockets, and my cheeks redden at the thoughts that sneak into my mind. I lean on the door, using this chance to assess him.

He's dressed as casually as he always has since he moved here. Dark jeans matched with a long-sleeved shirt that hides his tattoo. I'm still yet to know what the date tattoo means. He doesn't fully grasp what mine means, so I guess it's fair to both of us.

"You should cover up," Calum says when his eyes finally find their way back to my face. I tip my chin in a silent dare for him to back off. This is my territory, not his. "Catherine, cover up. Now."

That tone of finality does the opposite of what my stepbrother intended. Curious to see what Calum can do, to test his limits, I cover one step, and he takes one back to maintain the balance.

Shaking my head with a small smile forming on my lips, I say, “No. My room, my rules.”

“Fair enough.”

Just that? No smart comments. No retort that will provoke a snarky comeback from me.

Calum retreats down the corridor, and I hear myself saying, “Wait.” He cocks a stupid brow, wearing a smug smile to show he has me where he wants. But I don’t give him the satisfaction of doing what he wants. Pushing my chest out, I step into the corridor. “Why did you come?”

“Your dad wanted me to drop you off. He won’t be in school until later today. But...” he trails off deliberately, and I grow slightly conscious of my outfit. “I’m not sure I’ll be able to do that.”

“Why not?” The answer is on his face. He can’t wait up if I don’t put on my shirt. “If I cover up, will you come inside and wait for me?”

“If you cover up? Yes.”

I enter the room and push my hands into the armholes of my white shirt. Calum joins me once he confirms I’m dressed. He takes a seat on my bed, looking a bit out of place with the pillows. I catch him staring at the white walls of my room. Like his room, I have a study desk in a corner, but mine is hardly decorated. The only portrait on the wall is from my last birthday with her.

This room used to be for guests, and most times, that’s how I feel. I never decorated it for that reason. Now that Dad has Dani, I don’t have to worry about him. I can finally leave this house and the memories behind. Turning away before he asks the questions most people are prone to ask when they notice the frame, I apply my eye makeup and lipstick. A

shadow falls over me as I'm about to straighten up. Calum. He lifts my laptop on the table, and I release a breath.

“What’s this?” he asks.

The front page of Girls Code is still open. The last post is so stupid I don't want to think about it. Sometimes, we offer ‘advice’ to some posters, but this poster is a dumbo.

“It’s a site. A website,” I reply.

“Okay...” Calum drags on, unwilling to drop the subject. Taking a seat I didn't offer him, he drops the laptop to his legs and swipes to another post. “What does this site do?”

“Stuff.” One glare later, I grudgingly drag the seat in front of the mirror close to him to explain how Girls Code works. His arm brushes mine, and a familiar current zips through me. I pretend not to feel it as I pluck the laptop from his lap to place it on my study table. “For girls to rant. Talk about boys without judgements from anyone. Do anything and nothing. Stuff.”

“Cool.” Calum kicks out his legs and splays his hands on his knees. My fingers curl around the armrests of my chair. I think my hand will fit in his, but today is not the day to find out. “Who runs this site?”

“All of us.” I explain to him how it works, how it came to be, and our plans. All four of us have admin access to the website. His genuine show of interest encourages me to say more, to win him over. I tap on the green upward arrow on the screen. “This one is for voting. When someone replies to a post, most users vote. The comment with the highest vote stays up here.”

Calum leans in to get a better view of what I'm pointing at, and his warm, minty breath tickles my cheek. I lose my train of thought for a few seconds, and it's his fingers snapping in front of my face that draws me out of my haze. I blink away the confusion. He stares back, unimpressed.

“As I was saying,” I murmur, trying too hard to hide how flustered I am by his presence. “The comment with the least vote goes down. That red button? For users to downvote a

comment.” One peek at the antique wall clock, and I rise. Time to get to school. “Can we leave now?”

“Sure.” He offers me my schoolbag and our damn fingers brush again. I swear it’s deliberate, but when I look up to confirm, his eyes are elsewhere. “You girls can make a men’s site, too. Call it Boys Code or something. No one pays as much attention to men, and they have a lot to talk about.” Not sure what to say to that, I smile. We step into the corridor together, and Calum continues, “Men keep a lot in their heads. It will be good to let it out, knowing there won’t be any judgements.”

I lock the door to my room before saying, “Like you?” My remark earns me his famous frown. “You look like you bottle up a lot of things.”

“You don’t know what you’re talking about.”

We start for the stairs. Calum is walking faster, and I have to speed-walk to keep up. I glare at his back. One second, he’s cool. The next, he’s hot.

“Why are you so defensive? Will you please slow down?” That makes him hurry faster down the stairs. “I’m only trying to get to know my stepbrother. Cal.”

Calum spins to face me, and an angry storm gathers in his eyes. “Don’t call me that.” I’m a stair above him, but he radiates this intimidating aura. My hands clamp around the straps of my bag. “I’m not sure what you think this is, but get it into your head, sis. I’m your *stepbrother*. Stop. Playing. Games.”

My mind blanks, then my thoughts rush back in a furious wave. Games? We had a great time singing and talking. Way for him to ruin it. Our honest moments from yesterday and Saturday now feel like untouchable memories from the past. I clench my fists and count to fourteen in my head before talking. The only silly mistake I made today was to open the door without a shirt on.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” I reply, staring him down with equal intensity.

“Of course you don’t.”

“Maybe if you stopped speaking in parables, I’ll be able to understand you better, Mr Game Dissick. Do not kid yourself,” I quickly add. He’s making me ramble. “I don’t want anything from you.”

His jaw tics. If he was angry before, now he is furious. He takes another step away from me, and the stupidity of my words dawns on me. Who am I kidding? I want everything, something from my stepbrother. Something I’m not sure of yet.

“Calum, please wait up.” He slows long enough for me to catch up, and we walk down the rest of the stairs in awkward silence. “Fine. I’m sorry.”

“It’s cool.” At the foot of the stairs, he stops, and I do the same. Facing each other, he starts, “I came here for a fresh start, Catherine. I won’t let anything get in the way of that. Not even you.”

That being said, he walks out of the house. I follow quietly and enter the car without a word. He starts the car, and I reach for the radio knob to fill the silence, but he shoots me a look. I hate Dad’s nosiness, but I would rather be in his car than sit in silence with my stepbrother. My elbow juts out the window, my head pokes out, and the morning air whips through my hair.

“Do you have a YouTube channel?” Calum asks at the traffic light. I’m surprised he’s talking to me after his ominous warning at the house. I shake my head. The light turns yellow. “Okay. I can help you set one up if you don’t mind. You can post some of your singing videos there.”

“Okay. Thanks, bro.”

One. Two. Three. The light turns green, and we speed off. We sit in silence, not as awkward as it was earlier. I toy with the button of my jacket for a minute. “Do you have a TikTok account?”

“No.”

“You should,” I say in a whisper and clear my throat. “It will help your music. It’s one of the best platforms to get fans. I can help you set up an account. For free, of course, you don’t have to pay.” A small smile tugs on Calum’s lips. I’m eager to get a bigger smile. “No, wait. Not free. You can pay by singing or playing your guitar.” He laughs. Some of the tension that followed us into the car fly out the window. “I was joking. But if you don’t mind, I’ll do it for free.”

“Okay. Thanks.”

It’s quiet again but comfortable while I admire his side profile. Not once does he spare me a glance.

“Calum?” I call out to him when we are almost at school. My nerves are racing. I tug on the end of my tie peeking out of my school jacket.. “I... I won’t get in the way of your fresh start.”

He only looks at me after parking. “Thank you.”

Someone knocks on my window. Amelia. She waves at Calum, and he waves back. Opening my door, she drags me out, and we start for the entrance without a chance for me to bid Calum goodbye or a nice day. I’m partly glad she showed up before I said something to ruin the peace.

Amelia’s boots pound against the tiles, and her bag swings from her hand as we strut to our lockers. Since we are early, the hallway is empty. I look behind a few times to see if Calum has entered. No signs of him. He might have gone through the back, or he’s waiting for me to leave.

Amelia notices me throwing glances at the door, and she asks, “Are you two all right now?”

“I’d like to think so.”

“So you’re back in the choir?”

We stop at my locker, and I use the door to hide my face. “Nope. But I will if I get a good grade on my chemistry test.” Amelia hums under her breath as I push more books into my bag. Her grades never affect her spot on the cheerleading team. I shut the door. “It’s a fair condition.”

“As long as it gets you back in the choir,” she replies. A *C* or *B* will guarantee my return. We stop at her locker for her books and continue to class. “Jackson is throwing a party this Friday.”

Jackson is always throwing a party any chance he gets.

“What’s the party for?” I ask as we slip into the empty class and sit beside each other.

“For our win. I’m cheering.” I snort, and Amelia shrugs. They are celebrating a win that hasn’t happened yet. But they haven’t lost a match in so long that winning feels normal. I doodle on the back of my maths notebook, and she taps my elbow with her pencil. “So, are you coming?”

“I don’t—”

“Jackson misses you. You should come.”

Or he misses the sex and stolen kisses. Jackson is suitable for a casual fling, but he is not a boyfriend or lover material. With him, I don’t feel seen beyond the few minutes we are in bed, fucking or kissing. Sometimes, he finishes too fast, and I have to use my fingers or the dildo.

I doodle some more. “I guess.”

Jackson and I are an unofficial couple, *if* you count the number of on-and-off flings we have had. We haven’t fucked this year, and we kissed only once. I’m certain he wants to rectify that with this celebratory party. I wouldn’t have an issue with that if I weren’t thinking of someone else.

Someone whose name starts with a *C* and ends with an *M*. Someone who is off limits to me.

Amelia claps, more excited than I am for this lame party. All we will do there is drink and dance to loud, annoying music while the boys smoke weed or anything available. I hate smokers. But I don’t hate Calum. I’m full of contradictions. The class fills up as she rambles on about the party and the people who will be there. Amelia only stops when Mr Babs, the maths teacher, enters.

A groan rips through the class when Mr Babs locks the door. He laughs but leaves it closed. It's his policy to lock the door once he's inside. He scribbles today's topic on the board, and I open my textbook to that page. Maths with Mr Babs is fun and interactive. The next hours roll by so fast that the only time I catch a break is when the bell for lunch goes off. I am the last person to leave the class but instantly wish I didn't when I step out to see Jackson in front of the door.

The tall centre forward of our school football team flashes his perfect dentition, and I crack a smile. My eyes lock on the features that first attracted me to him. Brown eyes, short brown hair, crooked nose, thin lips, and a square jaw. Sadly, I didn't miss him. He's one of the most handsome boys in school, and he knows it. If he ever forgets, the girls are there to remind him.

"Hey, babe." Pinning me to the wall, Jackson slides his thick arms around my waist and places sloppy kisses on my cheek. "I missed you. Did Amelia tell you about the party after the game?"

He slings my bag over his shoulder like a boyfriend would do for his girlfriend. But I'm not his babe. He knows that. I know that. I don't want to confuse or complicate our situation-ship. His free arm slides over my shoulder as we continue to the dining hall. I'll be meeting the girls there.

Some students brush past us in a hurry, even Mr Prescott, and, on instinct, I look behind to see if his assistant is in tow. Calum is the first and youngest teaching assistant we have ever had. He's not exactly a teacher since he doesn't lecture but only assists during choir practice.

A few steps away from the hall, Jackson halts. "Cathie? The party? Are you coming?"

"Yeah," I answer with a nod. "Yeah. I am."

For the second time today, Jackson presses me against the wall, his hand by the side of my head. I lick my lips, strangely overwhelmed by the memories of me and Calum in this position. I pretend Jackson is Calum and touch his hair. His head lowers, and his breath hits my face. He smells good but

different. That's because he's not my stepbrother. He will never be. His lips skim mine. I feel nothing. It's not unusual for students to kiss in the hallway, but this irks me.

“Great. Looking forward to seeing you.”

I can only nod. We have done this before. Kiss and make out in the hallway or dining hall. This time, it feels wrong. I dart a glance around us to be sure no one witnessed this stupid mistake, and my heart slams against my ribcage. Calum is staring at both of us with a blank expression.

CHAPTER 11

Don't do that again



WAS CALUM UPSET? Jealous? Does this affect our budding friendship? I did nothing wrong, but it feels like I cheated on him. And that's all I can think of as I head to my last class for today.

Amelia waves me over to a seat at the back. We haven't seen each other since lunch break, but I don't want to talk to her. She must have sent Jackson to my class, and the idiot kissed me. I drop into the seat she reserved for me, and she slides her phone over my desk. I look to the door, my only means of escape. Mr Andy should be here soon, but until then, I'll have to indulge her.

"You two looked so cute," Amelia says.

I pick up the phone, and my frown deepens to a sneer. "You took a picture of us? Really?" The girls in the row ahead of ours toss us a glance. I click my tongue. "Mind your own business."

"You need to relax," Amelia mutters, but I'm not listening to her. I'm trying to understand the images on her phone. There's one of me sitting on Jackson's lap with his arms hooked around my waist. I was frowning. He wouldn't let me sit on the bench, and the girls were cheering too loudly. I had to shut them up by allowing him to carry me. "The pictures are all right. Cheer up."

"Why would you take pictures without telling us? What if I didn't want a picture?"

Amelia grins. Her blonde hair flows down one shoulder, and she curls her fingers through it.

“You’re welcome, Catherine.” I return her phone to her before the urge to smash it against the wall swallows me. She had better not send it to Jackson. “The pictures are magnificent, if I do say so myself.”

The pictures look good but feel wrong. “They are not bad,” I whisper.

Mr Andy walks in with our tests, and I forget about her. This is it. I sit upright, back stiff as he distributes the sheets. Stopping in front of me, he flashes me a smile. That’s good, right? He places the test on my desk, but fear keeps me from flipping it to know my fate. Ignorance is bliss applies so much in my case, so I delay the inevitable, watching others collect their tests.

Amelia snatches the sheet from my desk. “What’s the verdict?” I ask.

Her face pales, and my stomach clenches. No more choir for me.

“Don’t say it.”

“You got a C,” she whispers.

Relief zings through me. I pry the script from her to see it for myself, and my C is circled in red ink. *Any grader higher than an E.* I’m back. Well, I’ll be on probation, but I don’t care as long as I’m allowed to sing.

“That’s a good thing?” Amelia asks.

“Yeah. A great thing.” She laughs, and I nod at her test. “What did you get?”

“B.”

Mr Andy snaps his fingers to get our attention. He rants about the poor performance of the test and encourages us to do better next time. Next time? Doesn’t he tire of these tests? When he turns to the board, Amelia and I share a glance and roll our eyes. Most of the class is a blur. I spend more time thinking about my stepbrother than listening. Amelia pokes me

to call my attention as Mr Andy ends the class with a stern reminder for us to study more and play less.

“Are you going to tell him now?” Amelia asks. She is packing up. “Or when you get home?”

“Now,” I answer.

As the good friend she is, she walks me to the staircase leading to the rehearsal hall. Leaning back on the railings, her bag hugging her chest, she asks, “Do you want me to wait?” I look up the stairs I have to conquer and shake my head. I’ve got this. “But who will take you home?”

“Him?” Amelia’s face reveals her concern, and I push her towards the main entrance. The school bus will be gone by now, so Calum is my only option. No, Rose is also in the choir. “Rose can drop me off if he doesn’t, but I’m sure he will. He brought me to school. He will take me home.”

Still unconvinced, Amelia says, “If you insist.”

“I do, lass.” We stop in the middle of the hallway. I pinch her cheek, and she grins. “Go.”

Hugging me for the last time, Amelia mumbles something about letting me know how it goes and exits the building. I retrace my steps and jog up the stairs. Each step I take echoes in the silence, and my pulse quickens. I halt a few steps to the hall and draw in a calming breath. The note on the door catches my attention, and my heart does a downward slide to my stomach.

NO PRACTICE TODAY!

They can’t be serious. I ignore the note and push the door open. The hall is empty. If there’s no practice, then I have no ride home. I race down the stairs and burst out the front doors to catch Amelia, but the only thing left of her is the whiff of her perfume. Blimey. I am officially doomed.

The thought of walking home doesn’t appeal to me. Calling Dad, Amelia, or Rose is also out of the question. I brush a hand through my hair and fall back against a locker. A minute later, I start towards Calum’s office. If he’s not there, I’ll have to walk. Taking a turn into the teachers’ quarters, I

stop in front of his door. It's isolated from the other offices but on the same line.

Unlike other teachers' doors, Calum's has no window for anyone to look inside, so I can't tell if he's in or not. A sound from inside stops me from leaving. Can he tell it's me? I look around for hidden cameras. There are none, and the only visible one no longer works. I knock twice and open without notice.

Calum looks up from his desk, and his lips pull into a grim line. "Who asked you to come in?"

"I knocked twice," I say in my defence.

There's a pile of music sheets on his table with a pen atop it. At the corner of his office is an ancient TV showing the highlights of last year's singing on mute. Rising to his feet, he uncaps his water bottle and takes a swig from it. Water trickles down the corners of his lips, making a slow descent to his jaw. My legs move before my brain processes it, and I'm in front of him.

"What are you—"

I cut him off with a hug, no idea why. He freezes in my embrace, but I hug him tighter.

Stepping away from his stiff arms, I tell him, "I'm not stupid." My smile is big. While he's still trying to recover, I bring out the test sheet and press it to his chest. "I did it, Calum. I got a C."

In a bland tone, he says, "Good for you." My enthusiasm fizzles, but I don't let his bad mood ruin mine. I wait for him to say more, but he creates more gap between us. "Don't do that again."

"Do what?" I breathe out.

"Hug or touch me," Calum clarifies. I ignore the hurt that fleets through me. He offers me the sheet, but I don't accept it. Prying my hand open, he drops it on my palm. "Don't touch me again without my permission. Got it?"

"Yeah."

“Congrats on your grade, Cathie. You did great,” he says. I do my best to smile, but it appears as a grimace. He looks above my shoulders at the door. “You should leave now. I have stuff to do.”

The excitement vanishes, but I don’t want to leave. I return to the front of his desk and drag an empty chair. His glare stops me from sinking into it. “What kind of stuff? I can wait. I’ll wait.”

“No.” I shake my head. “Cathie, please leave.”

“I don’t have a ride home.”

Calum drops to his chair and resumes work on the music note. I sit. When he looks up, I grin, expecting him to say something positive, but his hand disappears and reappears with some cash.

“Here. Find a cab. Get an Uber or something. Go.”

Ignoring the hand stretched out to me, I ask, “Aren’t you going home? I don’t mind waiting.”

“Why don’t you ever listen?” His icy gaze rakes over me. My mouth clamps shut, and my arms tremble. I don’t want to be in a stranger’s car. “Don’t wait for me. Go home. Leave my office.”

Head cast down, I whisper, “Okay.”

“Cal?” a feminine voice calls from the door. Miss Gates, our PE teacher, steps in, and her smile fades once she spots me. I stop in the middle of his office. With the three of us inside, it feels too cramped. “Catherine Jenkins. What are you doing here?”

“I was about to leave,” I tell her.

“All right.” Walking over to Calum, she places a hand on his shoulder. “Cal, are you ready?”

Cal.

The name reserved for lovers.

I don’t wait for his reply. I storm out of his office and begin the long walk home.

Cars honk around me. I ignore the noise and hum songs from rehearsal. Rose keeps me updated. I haven't been practising as much as I would if I were still in the choir, so I mix up the words. When a car horn sounds closer than it should, I halt, expecting the black Ford behind me to drive forward, but it only slows beside me. There's a couple in the car with the lady driving.

"Mr Jenkins lass, innit?" the man in the passenger seat asks. A sliver of grey hair covers his scalp. He looks at his partner, and she nods. His beady eyes crease at the corners. "How be on?"

"Very well, sir. How do you do?"

The man and his partner laugh. I don't remember them, but I'm not surprised they recognise me. Dad is popular, thanks to his job and active role in the cathedral. He likes to talk about me. He even has a picture in his wallet to show off. My dark pink hair also makes it easy to spot me.

"She said, *how do you do?*"

I clear my throat. "I be on very well, sir."

"Very well, Cam, Clara." I open my mouth to correct him, but he shakes his head. "Don't. It will come to me."

"Of course."

Looking up at the sky, he says, "It's a bit dimpsey, innit?"

My gaze shoots upward. The sky is still clear. It might be a while before it gets dark.

"Not really." His hand stretches back to open the backdoor, but I quickly say, "I'm all right, sir."

"Are you sure?" the woman asks. This is why I would rather go with my friends. I can't be on my own during the day without someone bothering or worrying about me. I'm fine. "We can take you home."

I nod, and the man says, "Well, doan go valling auver on yer way home."

“Of course.” I pull out my phone and wave it. “My friend is on the way. I’ll be all right.”

They nod, honking one last time as they zoom off. Other cars drive past me without stopping. The only way to get a taxi home is by ordering one. I hate taxis. I tap on my phone screen to call Dad, but it’s dead. Hate for Calum grows, but I stomp on it and resume the journey home.

CHAPTER 12

Go away



CALUM

“CAL, ARE YOU READY?” Alice asks again.

“Yes.” Another uncertain glance at the door Cathie angrily walked out of, and disappointment spears my inside. I might have fucked that one up with my reply to her. I rub a finger over my nose. “Miss Gates?” Alice perks up. If I hadn’t agreed to take her to the clinic, I would have said yes to Cathie’s request. I try not to feel bad. She can ask *that* Jackson to take her home. If he can kiss her, then he can drive her home, too. “I would appreciate it if you called me Calum. Just Calum.”

“And you will call me Alice?” she asks.

Her eyes say more than her lips do. And it is obvious she’s attracted to me. I grab my water bottle and briefcase. I thought having an office to myself, no matter how small or cramped, would save me from mingling with other teachers who share one big office. I was so wrong.

“Yes, Alice. Can we go?”

“Sure, Calum.”

Together, we exit my office and step into the chill air. I zip up my jacket, wondering again if Cathie has found a cab. Alice’s arm brushes mine twice. I know it’s deliberate, but I don’t give her the satisfaction she craves. This is not a date. It’s one friendly teacher helping another.

The parking lot is empty, and I breathe more easily. Cathie must have found a cab already. I do the nice thing by opening the door for Alice. She turns to me with a smile. “Thanks, Calum.”

Once inside, I turn on the radio to end a conversation that hasn’t started. I slide the key into the ignition and grip the steering. Fuck. Eyes closed, all I see is Cathie, and the hurt written on her face when Alice entered my office. I replace that image with that of Jackson kissing her, and the guilt ebbs, replaced slowly by an anger that seeps into my soul. I don’t care what she does.

“Calum?” Alice touches my arm. My eyes open, and I stare straight at the wall in front of us. I did my best by offering to pay her cab fare. “Cal, are you okay?”

“Calum,” I correct, and she smiles sheepishly. I chose *this* over Cathie. It’s all my fault. “Yes, I’m okay.” Shifting gears, I steer the wheel to the route I want to take. “Just give me directions.”

The car backs out of the parking lot and glides to the main gate. Alice turns down the radio, and the hip-hop song fades to a hum. I cut into the road, my pace steady. I don’t care what Cathie does or who she kisses, but I want to be sure she found a cab. There’s a familiar figure on the sidewalk. I react without thinking, matching hard on the brake. The car jerks forward, but the seatbelt keeps us from lunging out the windshield. Alice curses, and a car behind me honks.

“Get off the road, you prick,” a driver screams from his car.

Fucking moron. Guiding the car to the sidewalk, I slow down beside Cathie and get out. She looks up when I’m near and quickens her pace. Jesus Christ. I hurry after the stubborn human.

“Cathie, wait.” My stepsister stops. My hand hovers in the air as I contemplate touching her. Alice is watching, so I shove my hand into my pocket. She steps back. I find it funny because she’s the one who can’t get enough of me. Disgust rolls off her in suffocating waves. I want to shake some of the

annoyance out of her, but I settle for asking, “What are you doing here?”

“Waiting for my taxi. Go handle your stuff.”

Cathie’s steel eyes lock on mine in an ice-cold stare, and her voice cracks on the last word. She’s jealous. Good. Now we are even. I stand in front of her to block her view of Alice.

“Are you sure? I don’t mind. I can take you home, but you will have to be patient.”

Cars hurry past us in a calm frenzy. There are no signs of the yellow cabs associated with NYC. The wind dances around us, rustling Cathie’s hair. She looks good with her hair down but even better with it all over her face in reckless abandon. I succumb to the urge to touch her. My hand lowers to her shoulder, and she jumps back like I’m a predator. It stings. The words I said to her earlier rush back in. I guess I’m also not allowed to touch her without her permission.

Peering at me with sad eyes, she replies, “Go away, Calum. I’ll get a taxi like you told me to. Leave.”

It feels more like a dismissal. I offer Cathie a curt nod and zoom off. She made her choice; I’m making mine. If the brat wants to wait, good for her. But that feeling of guilt continues to nag me. This is why I must stay away from her. Less than a month here, and I’m already a mess.

We are almost at the clinic when Alice speaks. She is so easy to forget with her fake smiles.

“What was that all about? Was your stepsister being a little...?”

Her tone sets me off. *A little what?* I’m the only one allowed to talk about Cathie like that.

Really?

I park. “Cathie is fine. I wanted to give her a ride, but she’s waiting for a cab. So, yeah.”

Everyone here knows my relationship with the principal—headteacher. It’s taking me a while to adjust to the changes. Over here, rumours spread like wildfire. Another reason I

shouldn't get involved with Cathie. It will lead to a scandal, and I'm not ready for another one. I'll never be.

Alice grimaces. I can't tell her Cathie denied the offer because of her. She is pretty, a pretty face, and a delightful conversationalist when she tries. But there is no spark.

"What? What is it, Alice?"

"It might take a while for her to get a taxi, Calum. A *very* long while."

What? How? My head jerks up. Laughing, Alice gets out of the car. The door slams shut, and her head sticks inside through the open window. "Maybe your sister is waiting for her friend?"

Cathie is not my sister, and all her friends have gone. I'm a giant prick.

"Yeah. Thanks. Take care," I tell her.

Instead of driving home, I double back to St George, nearly drowning in my thoughts. What is that girl doing to me?

I need my blunt, a long satisfying whiff of that slow killer. Women never get me this riled up. I arrive at the spot I left Cathie, but she is nowhere to be found. Maybe she found a cab. Even as I think that, I know it's false. I drive slowly for the rest of the ride home, praying that Alice was right and one of her friends came through for her.

The driveway is empty. Pete will be home late because of an emergency. That leaves me, Mum, and Cathie. My heart does a crazy flip as I cover the distance to the entrance. I ring the bell, but no one answers. I knock for the sake of it, half-expecting a different outcome, but it's the same.

No response.

I use the spare key Pete left me to open the door and enter. The house is unbelievably quiet. I don't want to worry, but my stepsister is not here. I jog up to drop my things and rush back downstairs to wait for her. She might be at her friend's place, the blonde. They seem closer.

Pacing in front of the closed curtains, I tap on Pete's contact. You must wait twenty-four hours to file a missing person's report. I don't know if the same rule applies in the UK, and it has only been minutes since I last saw Cathie. Fifteen minutes later, someone knocks. I race to the door, almost tripping over my feet. The knock sounds more urgent, followed by a jiggle of the knob.

"Hold on. I'm coming," I say as I unlock the door.

The door opens, and Cathie staggers forward, steadying herself before I do. She breathes heavily, leaning on the doorframe for support. I step away from the door for her to enter, but she doesn't.

My voice is gentle when I ask, "Where were you?"

"None of your business."

My stepsister might be tired, but the fight is not gone from her. Tiny white particles dot her boots. Guilt creeps in again. "Did you walk?"

"None of your business, Calum," she spits out with so much hate that I take another step back. Her anger scares me, but I reach for her, to console her, to do something. I don't know, maybe to take away her hurt. My fingers caress her cheek, and she smacks my hand. Tears fill her blue eyes, but they don't fall. "Don't do that again. Don't ever touch me without my permission."

"Cathie."

Her body vibrates with anger. She closes her eyes, and a tear slides down her cheek. My heart shrinks in its cage. I stare at my hands, unsure what to do with them. "I don't want to hear it."

On that note, Cathie walks out on me. I follow her up the stairs, but she is faster. She locks the door before I reach it. I knock once, but the loud metal music playing from inside hints at the futility of my efforts. Back in my room, I lay in bed, focused on the ceiling. I think I fucked up.

The tick-tock of my wristwatch comes alive. I press it against my ear and count the seconds until dinner so I can try

to talk to her again.

CHAPTER 13

Stepbrother dearest



I SKIPPED DINNER LAST NIGHT. The next day, I grab only an apple from the kitchen and rush out of the house to meet Amelia. When she asks how I got home, I tell her my stepbrother drove me.

After school, I lock myself in my room. My plan is to talk to Calum only if it is unavoidable. I bury my face in the pillow and scream into it when my stomach growls again. The only proper meal I ate today was at school. I can't skip dinner again. He's not the one affected by hunger. I am. Maybe I'll eat in my room instead. My phone vibrates. I place it face down without checking it.

Eyes squeezed shut, I try not to picture the two of them together, but that's all I see. A slow motion of the scene as Alice raises a hand to his shoulder, minutes after he told me never to touch him again. I hear her voice on repeat when she calls him by the name reserved for lovers.

I roll onto my back and plug my fingers into my ear. Miss Gates used to be one of my favourite teachers, but not anymore. Calum has only been in school for two weeks, and she is already his lover. That says a lot about her. Why didn't she date someone her age? More importantly, why am I so bothered? I don't care about them or his love life. I don't want to see him again.

A bang on my door jolts me awake. I must have fallen asleep. A yawn escapes me as I check the time. Time for dinner. Throwing a top over my bra, I put on the first pair of shorts I find and open the door.

Dad.

I lunge into his arms, and he staggers, surprised by my reaction. He hugs me back, and I smile into his chest. I don't have Calum, but I have him. Wait, I don't even want Calum. Rubbing random patterns on the small of my back, he slowly pulls away from me with a bigger smile.

"That was unexpected," he comments. I roll my shoulders to pass it off as nothing. But I feel so much better. Sliding his fingers into mine, he tugs me towards the stairs. "How was school?"

Boring. I stupidly kept checking to see if Calum would show up to apologise again. "Fine."

"I made dinner," Dad murmurs. Since Dani entered our lives, he hasn't cooked. Sometimes, I feel like I'm losing him to her, and it leaves me conflicted. I'm tired of worrying about him. But I still want to always be his first option. "It's something new, but I think you'll love it, Cathie."

We climb down the stairs. As we approach the dining room, my heart drums in my chest, and sweat forms on my palms. I haven't seen my stepbrother since I walked out on him yesterday.

It felt good to use Calum's exact words against him, to watch his face pale and his hands fall. Stepbrother dearest didn't look as pleased as he did when he told me to keep my hands to myself. I can do that. I will do that for as long as he wants. Two can play this game he started.

Who wants to touch his handsome face or soft lips or firm arms, anyway?

The table is set by the time we arrive downstairs. Mother and son are present. Dad takes his place beside his wife. I leave an empty seat between me and Calum, earning a pointed stare from Dad. His stepson is an asshole.

Dad opens the bowl. A sweet, foreign aroma wafts into the air. I rub my hands together, and my stomach rumbles. Our parents laugh. I feel Calum's concerned stare, but I don't bother him with a glance. Dad dishes the meal of spaghetti and

a weird whitish sauce. It's new. Dani takes her first bite and nods with her eyes closed. I roll the spaghetti around my fork without eating.

"Dad, what's this?" I finally ask.

"Tetrazzini," he replies with a mouth full of this mystery in front of me.

"Huh?"

"It's an American dish," Calum volunteers. "It's a great sauce for spaghetti. You should try it."

With a forced smile, I tell him, "I was not talking to you. Stay out of family matters."

Calum's fork drops to the table. He opens his mouth to speak, but Dad beats him to it. "Cathie."

"What, Dad?" I push the plate full of spaghetti towards my father. He can eat this with his new family. Since when do we make American food? I slam my fist on the table. "I don't want him in our house. Who wants to eat some American tetra-whatever nonsense? I want regular sauce."

Dad's mouth falls open. His wife slowly drops her fork on her plate, and her chair scrapes the floor as she stands. Tears well up in my eyes, and I have no idea why. Dad cuts me a look, and I gulp down the lump growing in my throat.

"Dani, I'm sorry. Please don't leave." Putting my hands together, I bat my lashes. "I want you, not Calum." That gets Dani to sit. Dad gives me another look to keep going. I drag the plate back to my front and take a bite. It tastes good, better than the regular sauce. "This is lovely."

My stepmother laughs. She laughs like her son. We settle into a normal family routine and resume eating. Calum hasn't said another word. It's better that way. No one wants to hear his voice. Dad looks up a few times from his plate, and I promptly look away. I'll get the talk from him later. He'll demand an explanation for my outburst. Well, his stepson is the reason.

“Cathie?” Dani calls out. Her plate is almost empty, the same as her son’s. I’m the only one who has barely eaten. “Why don’t you want Cal in the house? I thought you two were getting along?”

“I thought so, too,” I reply and avert my gaze.

“Did anything happen?”

A lot. I shove another forkful of spaghetti into my mouth and shake my head. Dad sends me a worried glance. I’m fine, but my eyes seem eager to shed tears. Thankfully, the tears don’t fall. When everyone looks away, I wipe my eyes before the tears make an embarrassing appearance.

“Is it because of the choir?” Dani adds.

Dad perks up, and my plan to ignore his wife flies out the window.

I toy with my food. “He won’t let me in the choir.”

“We had a deal,” Calum grits out.

“Cathie, we also had an agreement,” Dad murmurs.

My tear ducts are in control now. “I didn’t agree to it. And I did okay in my last chemistry test.” Dad tries to interrupt, but I continue, “Dad, is a teacher allowed to date another teacher?”

Everyone stops eating. Everyone but me. For the first time, I grin at Calum, but he returns it with a glare. His knuckles whiten from gripping his fork too tight, and I almost point that out.

“No. But I’m not so against it, and I doubt the other staff will mind,” Dad finally says. Wrong answer. My initial excitement vanishes. I make the mistake of glancing at Calum, and he smirks. Dad is too busy grinning at his wife to notice us. “Love can happen in different ways.”

“Uh-huh.”

Eventually, Dad’s attention returns to me. “Why? Is Calum interested in any of the teachers?” It is my chance to inform them about Miss Gates, but it will be pointless. He won’t

reprimand them or end the relationship. “Are you trying to tell me something, Cathie?” My throat goes dry. I don’t want to talk about this anymore. He turns to my stepbrother. “Calum, are you?”

Calum crosses his arms. His lips quirk in that arrogant smile I want to wipe off his face. But with Dani and Dad watching us, I remain composed and hide my hands under the table. I already know I’ll hate my stepbrother for the words he’s about to spew, and he proves me right.

“Maybe your daughter wants to enlighten us.” I hate him. I hate this food. I mutter something under my breath, and the table laughs. Was it funny? I stab the chicken and take a big bite of it to avoid talking to them. “As a matter of fact, Pete, I think I might like one of your teachers.”

He is lying, right? Of course not. She called him Cal. He let her touch him without his consent. That’s what lovers do, and I’m not his lover, just a silly little stepsister he wants out of the way.

Tears swim in my eyes. I’m so stupid. What did I think would happen? That the singing would make us close? Those moments don’t count. They meant nothing to him. Calum can get anyone he likes, and he has got Miss Gates. I keep my eyes on the table mat, scared to look up. I don’t want to see his face when he confesses his true feelings.

“Already? Who?” Dad tries so hard to sound uninterested, but I know him too well. He wants to know. Then, he will offer unsolicited advice. “Is it someone... nice?” Everyone knows Miss Gates, she’s *nice*. Dad will approve. Calum says nothing, and Dad proceeds to list out all the female teachers in our school. I hate this. Dani laughs as he sputters out names. “Just tell me.”

Betrayal settles in the pits of my stomach. If Dani had asked these questions, it would have been better. Dad needs to stop talking about it. No one gives two shits about Calum’s love life.

“Fine.” Calum drags his chair back and gives the room a slow once-over to build the suspense. I tap on my knees as his

eyes fall on me. A part of me wishes he would let this slide today. “Alice.”

They are already on a first-name basis. Great. I nibble on the rest of my chicken. I should have starved again instead of coming down to this. He is ruining my life. I can't kiss other boys and enjoy it. Things are not the same anymore. And I meant it when I said I want Dani, not him.

“She's older than you, Cal,” I hear myself say to him. An odd feeling blooms in my chest. I want to call him Cal every day. It sounds special, for special people. My stepbrother locks angry eyes with me, and the desire to annoy him grows. “Wouldn't that be a problem, Cal? Huh, Cal? Cal?”

“Not a problem for me,” he answers.

“And age is just a number,” Dani offers. No shocker. She will support her son. “Right, Cal?”

“Right.”

For the rest of dinner, I only give monotone replies. Calum has the good sense not to involve me in his dialogue, but Dad doesn't. He questions me each chance he gets, and I must answer.

When the conversation lulls, I excuse myself from the table and race to my room. I whip out my laptop and type in a long post to Girls Code using my anonymous account. I don't read through the emotional vomit I type, and my chest clenches hard when I hit the send button.

The first comment comes in. I jump to my feet. So fast?

My door opens while I'm skimming through the replies that pour in. Calum stands in the doorway, so tall and formidable and not-mine. I use my body to block his view of the laptop.

He takes one step inside, and I mumble, “I didn't ask you to come in.”

On a mock bow, Calum walks out of my room. My relief is short-lived. A knock sounds from outside. “Can I come in?”

I draw a line on the floor with my foot. If we can maintain this distance, then we will be fine.

“Yeah.” My hot stepbrother takes a step into my room. I tip my chin, and he cocks an eyebrow. “What do you want?”

Pushing away from the doorway, Calum stops a foot from me. My heart jumps to my throat. He has invaded my space, and I can't think properly. Piercing, beautiful blues stare down at me. My confidence wavers. I reach out for something solid to steady me, but my fingers brush the desk.

“You called me Cal.” Given the chance, I will do it again, but in the absence of my father and his mother, my courage fails me. Calum closes the distance by half. “I told you not to call me that.”

My lips open in the quietest of protests. They say the eyes are the portal to the soul, but there is no trace of anger in the baby blues exploring my face. Am I allowed to do it again? In here?

“I'll let it slide this once.” His words drag me down from the clouds, and my heart crashes. We are still stepsiblings. One corner of my lips twitches in a quiet dare. “Did you walk yesterday?”

“What do you even care?” I ask in a whisper.

As much as I want to look away from Calum's arresting gaze, I cannot. The space between us is inexistent. A wedge sits between his brows. He opens and closes his mouth without speaking.

“I'm sorry,” he replies in the same whisper.

My arms wrap around my lower belly, and I bounce on the soles of my feet. Calum is sorry now, but he'll pick Miss Gates over me once the chance arises. “It doesn't matter anymore,” I mutter.

“It does, Cathie.” I shake my head, but he keeps talking. “I didn't know there would be no cabs. I thought you could easily flag one down.” His warm breath fans my nose, and I lose focus. I trace the curve of his lips with my eyes when I really want to do it with my tongue. “I'm sorry.”

The voices in my head fade. I touch him.

At first, it's a curious touch. Soft hands meeting a firm chest. A warning shines in his eyes, but it does the opposite to me. I slip my arms into his shirt. His body is warm and solid, all muscles.

"Cal," I breathe out. Calum's eyes darken. I'm staring into two pools of boiling anger, but that doesn't scare me. Heat unfurls in my stomach. I splay my fingers on his tight abs. "Cal, please."

Calum wrenches my hands off him and secures my wrists at my lower back to prevent another exploration. I press my legs together, tilting forward so my breasts brush his chest. I want him.

"Do. Not. Call. Me. That."

"Cal," I murmur on repeat, like a broken player. Desire blazes in his eyes, but he fights it. "Cal."

Calum claps a hand over my mouth. "Shut up." I touch the tip of my tongue to his palm, and a hard look slips into his eyes. "Stop doing that."

A second or two of silence passes. My head bounces in a nod, and he lowers his hand without letting go of my wrists. My arms protest from being stretched back for too long. "Unhand me."

"Why?" he teases, pulling so hard I fear my arms will pop out of their sockets. "Tell me why I should. You never listen to me, so why should I, Cathie?" I whimper, and he eases his grip. When I don't say what he wants to hear, he adds, "I could easily hurt you, can't you see that?"

Pain flows down my arms. I wet my lips, and his eyes pick up on the move. One sharp tug at my arms and a cry escapes my lips. He can't scare me away, but I say, "I won't call you that again."

"Good." A tear rolls down my cheek. He brushes it off with his thumb and backs away. I rotate my shoulders to reduce the pain, and his eyes soften for the briefest second. He takes another step away from me and clears his throat. "You

got a C in your chemistry test. According to our deal, you are back in the choir. But you'll be on probation for as long as I say so. Are we clear?"

"What if my grades get better?" I would love to take the solo parts. "Will the probation end?"

"Probation ends when I say it ends, sis. If you mess up your probation, you're out for good."

Our eyes clash. All the words I'm unable to say are transferred into the frosty glare I direct at him. He doesn't back down. He can't take the choir away from me. I won't allow him to do that.

"Fuck you," I say calmly.

Calum scoffs. He looks me up from bottom to top. When his gaze returns to my face, the person I see is not my stepbrother. It's the choirmaster.

"No, you won't, Cathie, and you will never use such words with me again. Am I understood?"

I gulp. "Yes, sir."

"Good. See you on Thursday. Goodnight."

Calum walks out of my room, but I don't move from that spot. I stay there, glaring at the door.

CHAPTER 14

Step. Stepsister



DAYS ROLL BY SO FAST. Soon, it's Thursday. I drag myself out of bed, my mind spiralling with second thoughts. What if I quit the choir? Then, we will never have a reason to talk to each other. As appealing as that sounds, my love for music supersedes the desire to ignore Calum.

Amelia calls when I'm eating breakfast. Dani made strawberry pancakes. She can't make it to school today. That means I have to ride with my dad or, even worse, Calum. I'll rather eat sand.

Speaking of the horseshit, Calum joins me at the dining table with a plate of pancakes and a glass of milk. His leg brushes against mine, and I almost jump out of my seat. He's tempting me.

"Good morning. How was your night, sis? Did you sleep well?" *Step. Stepsister.* I dig into the last slice of my pancake and chew loudly. The idiot laughs. "Only pigs eat that way, Cathie."

I'm not a pig. I finish my pancake like a normal person and text Dad to hurry. He replies, asking why I'm texting him in the same house, and I only reiterate the message. *Hurry Dad.*

Calum rounds up his meal and disappears into the kitchen with our empty plates and glasses. Words of gratitude worm up to my throat, but I don't utter them. On his return, he picks up his briefcase and slings the strap over his shoulder.

"Are you ready?"

"I'm waiting for my dad," I answer.

My stepbrother casts a wary glance behind me and offers me a wry smile. "I can drop you off."

"I don't want you to drop me off."

"Your dad might be late."

"I don't want you to drop me off," I reply without looking at him. Calum sinks into the chair, and his knees press into my seat. I need him to leave. "You should get going, or you'll be late."

"What's with the attitude?" He can't mean that. We bonded over the weekend, and he threw all that away for a lady older than him. He rises to his feet. "Come on, Cathie. I'll give you a ride."

"Leave me alone, Calum." My head snaps up to his face. The ceiling light reflects the blue of his eyes and they send an icy thrill down my back. "Don't you have someone else to drop off, bro?"

His lips spread in a slow, devilish smile. He tips his invisible hat and walks to the door. "Practice resumes today. Don't be late, sister."

The door closes behind him, and I let out a quiet scream. He's frustrating. I scream for Dad to come out already. When he finally shows up, all the angry thoughts of my stepbrother are gone.

"Calum says you're on probation," Dad murmurs once we are both settled in his car. I clear my throat, and he starts the car. "I almost forgot. You got a C in your chemistry. Good job, Cathie."

A smile slips to my lips. "Thanks, Dad."

"Better grades next time, yeah?"

I would never know how I managed a C, but maybe it's a sign I can do better. "Sure."

The wind whistles through my hair, and I'm reminded of Calum's fingers in my curls before he claimed my lips. If we win tomorrow, I'll be at Jackson's party. I'll kiss him and forget Calum.

We arrive at school. I dash out of the car before Dad gives me a pep talk. Taylor and Rose are waiting by my locker. When I inform them about my return to the choir, they squash me in a hug. We mention Amelia's absence. She told us she was fine, but it's unusual. We decide we'll make a fuss the next time it happens. After a group hug, we disperse to our various classes.

The hours rush by. Classes blend into one another. I sit still throughout my last subject. At some point, the reluctance to see Calum fades, and the urge to be at the choir stand takes over. I nod a few times at what the teacher says. She is telling us what page of our textbook to study later.

Once she leaves, everyone follows suit. Rose is out there waiting for me. She drags me towards the hall with a sense of urgency. We are not late today, but I manage to keep up with her.

"Have you been practising?" Rose asks. Her red hair is out of its bun, so some strands tickle my cheek. She smoothens it out of her face a few times. I offer her a tiny smile, and she clicks her tongue in disapproval. "The competition is next week, Cathie. You don't want to take the solo?"

I stop, but she yanks me forward. "I want to."

But Calum won't let it happen. I also haven't rehearsed since Sunday. We jog up the stairs, and I nearly stumble when I spot him coming from the other end of the hallway. I saw him before he left the house, but I'm still stunned by the difference. I like both. Home and Director Calum.

Calum stares at us, then at the door. I will never know who reacts first. Me or Rose. We dash for the door and burst into the hall laughing. I'm not getting punished on my first day back. My laughter dies down as I scan the place. Everyone is present. How? Classes just finished.

The door opens shortly, and Calum walks in. We scramble to our positions. He drops his bag on a chair and claps to get our attention. I hold my breath when his gaze falls on me. Time seems to slow as he stares wordlessly. If Rose were beside me, I would have squeezed her hand.

“Good to have you back, Cathie.” I’m not sure if I’m supposed to say anything to that, so I don’t speak. I only smile. “As you all know, we have been preparing for the singing competition.”

A cough sneaks up on me, and I cough into my palm.

“Cathie?”

“I’m all right, sir,” I answer. I feel the heat of some people’s stare but keep my eyes on Calum.

“There have been some changes.”

Murmurs break out in the stand. I can barely make out their words above the pulsing in my ear. I know what he’s about to say, that I can’t take the solo this year. That Regina Ames will.

“They shifted it to next month,” Calum continues. “Which gives us more time to practise.”

My eyes water, and I look up at the ceiling. The familiar fear that comes when February is close dulls the relief. I redirect my thoughts to the choir. There’s still a chance for me to take the solo. Calum says something else, and we all hum in reply, heads bobbing in agreement. He struts to the chair and picks out something from his briefcase. A note he raises for us to see.

“The timetable is out. I’ll have a copy sent out to everyone.” His eyes settle on every one of us as he says this. My heart beats an uneven rhythm at his tone. “Our first opponent is St Anne’s.” We groan in unison. They beat us at the finals last year. “I know. I know,” Calum says, as if reading our minds. “It sucks, but we will have to suck it up and do our best. Can we do that?”

“Yes, sir,” we chorus.

Calum backs away to grab his wand. Back at our front, he points it at me.

“Me?” I ask. What did I do now?

“Yes, you. Swap with Christie.”

A protest almost escapes me. Swapping means standing between Regina and Christie. I'm still on probation, so I obey. Calum nods, satisfied. He distributes the sheets, and I try to memorise the lyrics. It was St Anne's winning song. On his command, we start. His frown vanishes as we sing. For Calum, I think music means as much as it means to me, or maybe more. I watch the wand in his hand as he conducts us. He balls his left hand into a fist, and the singing dies down.

"I want us to try the solo. Anyone want to try?" Different hands shoot up in the soprano aisle. He ignores all of them and points to me. I poke my chest. "Yes, you. Do you want to try?"

One glance at the words I am yet to familiarise myself with, and my chest collapses.

I don't want to fuck it up.

"No," I reply. Calum's eyes widen in surprise, and I almost take back my words. "No, sir."

"Tomorrow then?" Calum suggests. I nod. "Anyone else want to try?"

Regina waves, and he asks her to step out. She winks at me, but I feel nothing at her blatant show of dislike. Last year, she wanted to take the solo, but Mr Prescott chose me instead. It also doesn't help that the guy she has a crush on likes me. One, her crush likes me. Two, I sing better. She teased me after we lost. I didn't care then. I don't care now about her opinions.

My lips pull into a thin line as Regina's voice goes a note higher than her usual range. She has been practising. I fold my arms on my chest, watching Calum watch her. Why is he smiling?

Regina is not *that* good. I'm better. Her singing finally ends, and Calum calls on Christie to try. We are the top three soprano singers. I pay keen attention to her singing, reiterating the lyrics under my breath until I'm confident I can sing it without fumbling. I want to try after her.

The door opens midway into Christie's singing, but she doesn't stop. Mr Prescott gives her a thumbs up, and she

acknowledges it with a curt nod. He taught us never to break character even if the Queen shows up. Stopping beside Calum, they converse in hushed tones for the rest of her song. I don't know what Calum tells him, but he runs a hand through the thin patch of hair on his scalp. My eyes dart to Christie when he looks my way. They must be talking about me.

“Good job, Christie,” Mr Prescott says. She smiles all the way back to her spot. Crossing a hand on his chest, he nods at me. I step down. “Cathie, did you sing? Why not? Do you want to try?”

“Yes, sir.” Calum coughs, and I almost apologise. Mr Prescott will appreciate my singing even if it's bad, but I can't say the same for him. Rose catches my eyes and winks. “The chorus, yes?”

“Yes, Cathie,” Mr Prescott answers the question directed to Calum. “Just for today.”

Turning my back on the men, I start the first line of the chorus. Rose's smile never wavers, so I concentrate on only her. Calum steps into my line of view halfway into my singing, and I fumble through the rest of the song. Mr Prescott's claps break through the silence that descends.

“Excellent, Cathie.” Mr Prescott pats my back, and my lips spread in a bigger smile. Calum wouldn't have complimented me. “Good job. A little more practice and you will be perfect.”

I return to my spot with a smile big enough to wipe Regina off this planet, but it vanishes at my stepbrother's scowl. Mr Prescott leaves the hall, and Calum continues without calling any more persons to the stage. In half an hour, we are done. Murmurs break out as we move in pairs to grab our bags and other things. Rose bumps her hip into mine when we have our bags.

“What?” I ask.

She grins and pulls me into a hug. “You sounded like an angel. I missed hearing you sing.”

Her words wrap around me like a shawl I will use to protect myself from Calum. Regina walks up to Calum. I tap

my best friend's nose, and she slips an arm through my elbow. Regina is still talking to Calum. As we near them, I strain my ears to pick out their words, but they shut up.

“Cathie, stay back,” Calum says without looking away from Regina. I glare at his back. Rose taps me. Questions fill her eyes, but I don't have the answers. I count the seconds. Fifteen seconds later, Calum turns. “Not you, Rose. You can go. I only want Cathie to stay behind.”

Rose offers me an apologetic smile and a long hug. She's my ride home. I drag a chair to the centre of the stage, ignoring the squeaks it makes as it scrapes the floor. My eyes meet Regina's, and her nose wrinkles in disgust. I push the seat closer to her and sit, deliberately knocking my elbow into her hip. Her gaze darts between Calum and me. She expects him to do something, but he doesn't. I blow her a kiss when Calum looks away, and she flashes her middle finger.

In a cheery voice, she says, “I'll be off now, Mr Dissick.” Giggles sputter out of my lips. I get to call him Calum, but she doesn't. She never will. With a sweet fake smile, she says, “Bye, Cathie.”

“Bye, Regina. Don't fall on your way out.”

The air swells with tension when Regina leaves. I rub my sweaty palms over my legs. Calum's shadow falls over me. He watches me without a word, and I squirm in the seat. What did I do?

“What was all that about?”

If he wants an explanation or apology for the fiasco with Regina, he won't get one from me.

“All what about?” I ask in the same voice as Regina. “I have no idea what you're talking about.”

Calum yanks me to my feet. A gasp escapes me, and I shove him backwards. My chest falls and rises. He takes a step forward, but I maintain my ground. Another step, and I take two back.

“I'm willing to tolerate your excesses at home, but I won't condone it here in school,” he says. My dear stepbrother will

indulge Regina, but he won't do the same for me. "It will be in our best interest if you drop the attitude. If you are not interested in being a part of the choir, quit."

I open my mouth to say something, but I don't know what. Calum's remark replays in my head.

"What attitude? Is this about Mr Prescott?" I only get a nose twitch. "I didn't know the song."

"But you knew it as soon as Mr Prescott walked in..." He's right before me. Toe to toe. Blue eyes to blue eyes. My breath hitches. I can see all the emotions in his blues. "Didn't you?"

"Because they already sang it," I say, desperate for him to believe me. "Two people."

"Right," he says in a skeptical tone, and I sigh. I would have tried if he asked after Christie finished. "You need to stop acting so spoiled. Don't expect preferential treatment from me."

It doesn't matter what I say. He doesn't like me and will always believe the worst of me.

"Are we done here?" I ask.

"We are done when I say we are."

"It's past practice hour," I protest. I'm not sure he will take me home, and I'm not ready to beg him for a ride. I push my hands into my jacket pockets. "You shouldn't keep a student this late."

"Then leave. I dare you." My feet are rooted to the ground. I can't leave, and he knows that. I clench and unclench my fists, vibrating in silent anger. He cracks a smile. "I thought as much."

Tears push to the surface, and I close my eyes before Calum notices. I want to claw out his eye and feed it to him. I want to hurt him. He is not allowed to treat me like this because he's older.

"I need you to sing it for me. Right here. Right now." His voice is close, a whisper on my skin.

Because I am scared and worried about the wrong things, I fuck up the lyrics and sing offbeat. His breath warms my nose and lips. I hug myself tighter. Why is he so close?

“Open your eyes.” My eyes snap open to angry blues. “Take it again. Take it slow, or we won’t leave.”

“Please.”

“Again,” Calum mutters through gritted teeth. I think I’m doomed. “Sing with your eyes open.”

My eyes are open when I sing again. I don’t mess up the lyrics. I don’t breathe until the end. When Calum gives me a thumbs up, I release the breath stuck in my chest. “Can I go now?”

“How do you intend to get home?” he replies.

As if he cares. “I’ll get a taxi.”

“A cab? I will take you home.” My lips part in a protest that never leaves. “I am not asking you. I am telling you. I will take you home, Catherine.”

“Okay, sir.”

CHAPTER 15

Did they kiss?



THE LAST BELL for the day rings. Students rush out, and I follow them into the crowded hallway. Amelia calls to remind me of the game and my promise to Jackson. She is cheering today.

Rose joins me on my way to the hall. We enter together. We are late. But Calum doesn't call us on that. He gestures for us to hurry, and we skip to a stop beside the other students gathered around him. Regina stands closer to him. I picture her and Miss Gates fighting over Calum, and a smile turns my lips. Miss Gates will beat the hell out of her, and I would love to watch.

"Because of the game, there will be no practice today." Regina stomps her feet like the twat she is. Rose grins. She's excited to meet her crush, Ryan. We both know she will spend more time telling us about the naughty things she will do to him than actually doing them. But I love her this way. "The school bus is available if anyone wants to join it. Any questions before we leave?"

Regina raises a hand. Rose and I share a look and sneer at the back of her head. Calum passes us a silent warning. "Yes, Regina? What is it?"

"Can we go with you? In your car?"

"No, Regina. But you can join the school bus." I love the way he calls her Regina, like a teacher scolding an ill-mannered student. Relief flows into my chest. I grip Rose's

hand so hard I'm convinced it has lost colour. His eyes locate me, and he smiles. "I'll be going with Miss Gates."

My throat tightens. I place a hand on my chest. Why? We didn't need that last piece of information. Rose pulls me out of the room before I recover from Calum's speech. She's talking about the game. She's certain we will win. I know we will, but I'm no longer excited to watch.

I'm not paying attention to her as she rambles on, but my silence encourages her to continue. We reach her car, and she hits the roof to call my attention. I blink sleepily and muster a smile.

"Taylor went with Amelia," Rose tells me as she rounds the car. I slip into the passenger seat while she fastens her seatbelt. "They are already there. Ryan too. I think we are late. Ready?"

I buckle up. "Yes."

They said if Mum had used her seatbelt, she might have had a chance of surviving the accident. I guess we'll never know if it's true. We drive out at the same time the front door opens. Calum and Miss Gates walk out. I twist my head at an awkward angle to get a better look at them. The last thing I see before Rose rounds the corner is Miss Gates leaning up to touch his lips.

Throughout the ride, I torment myself with questions, wild thoughts, and theories.

Did they kiss? Did it end at only a touch? If I'm right, Miss Gates is twenty-nine. Calum is twenty-two. Our relationship, should that ever happen, is more okay than theirs will ever be.

We reach the venue, and Rose finds a spot behind another car. The community field is crowded. Rose and I meander through the aisles to find a seat. Taylor waves and points at two empty seats beside her.

"What took you two so long?" Taylor screams above the music as we sink into the chairs.

Rose yells back a small, "Choir."

“Have you seen Ryan?”

Rose giggles. I wish I weren't sitting between the two of them, so they didn't have to lean forward to talk.

Taylor nods to the other end of the stadium with a row of boys in white jerseys and numbers written in green. “He's there, Rosie.”

Rose follows her gaze to the field where some of our boys run in a short line, and I seize that chance to look for Calum. What if he changed his mind and took Miss Gates home? Not to our house, but hers. I hear she has a fancy place in one of those nicest parts of town and stays alone.

The place goes quiet as the cheerleaders of the other team enter. Their side of the field cheers. Whistles blow. Hoots ripple through the stadium. They finish their routine, and St George's cheerleaders take over. I push two fingers into my mouth and whistle as Amelia walks in with the squad.

She is graceful in her uniform of white and green long-sleeved crop top and green spread skirt. Her pompoms swing from her hands. While the other girls perform flips, Amelia stands at ease with her hands raised. I've always known her to carry out the jumps. If not the hardest jump, at least a flip. Rose and Taylor don't seem to think it weird. I continue clapping until they finish.

Silence descends on the stadium as the players get into position. The field is a mix of white and blue. Our boys are wearing the white jerseys. Jackson has number one boldly written on the back of his jersey. I sit with my knees pressed together. Rose and Taylor mirror my anxiety.

The referee blows his whistle, and a player in a blue jersey kicks the ball. We are tense, all three of us. My nails dig into my knees, my eyes follow the boys and the ball moving from foot to foot. Tension charges the air as the number on the scoreboard counts down without a goal from either of the teams. My gaze wanders to the entrance of the stairway. Calum isn't here.

Jackson gets hold of the ball and dribbles past his opponent. My friends grab my hands, and my heart thuds against my chest. Someone holding a placard in front of us waves it in the air, and another person screams at them to keep that bloody shite down. Jackson nears the goalpost, and I swear we all suck in our breath when he shoots the ball. The ball rolls in slow motion to the keeper's hands. Brushing his gloved fingers, it bounces to the floor, then slips into the net.

A scream tears through our side of the stadium.

It's a goal. I hug Rose and Taylor. Jackson's teammates maul him with claps on his back and shoulders. The referee blows for them to resume the game, and the stadium grows quiet again.

Calum steps out of the stairway with Miss Gates. I'm the only one who notices him. Rose and Taylor are engrossed in the magic of football. His hands slide into his pockets as he assesses the stadium. I clench my hands and look up at the sky. They are a dull blue compared to his eyes.

The rest of the match passes in a blur. It ends in a win for us. Rose dashes off to find Ryan. Taylor excuses herself in search of Lucien. I try not to turn, but my gaze has a mind of its own. Calum and Miss Gates are four rows ahead of us, and I find myself leaning forward to check if they are holding hands. I see nothing but happy people celebrating our win. I should join them.

People laugh and take pictures as they exit the field. I drag myself to the sidelines, where our players are receiving a pep talk from the coach. He pats Jackson on the back and ends the meeting. I force a smile to my lips when Jackson spots me. He's smiling as he stops before me.

Beads of sweat decorate his forehead, and I wipe them with the hem of my sleeve. "Did you see it?" In his excitement, his words roll into one. I yelp when he squashes me into a sweaty hug. I wiggle out of his arms, and he draws me in for a loose hug. "That goal was for you, Cathie."

My lips twitch, but the smile never forms. I wonder how many girls he has told that. He looks at something behind me,

and my back goes rigid. Taking his hands, I place them on my butt. His hands move lower than I want, to the under of my arse, and I swallow my disgust when Calum's eyes stray to us.

“Did you see that goal, Mr Dissick?” He is such a show-off. Calum doesn't reply before Jackson turns to me. “Party at my house, remember?” I never forgot. He slings an arm around my waist, brushing my side boobs, and I vomit in my brain. I've seen him naked. We've fucked. His touch is not revolting, but it feels so wrong with Calum only a few feet away from us. But that's not what my expression conveys. I stand on my toes and kiss his cheek. “I like that, babe.”

I'm not his babe, but for now, it'll do. The hairs on the back of my neck stand. They always do when he's watching, but I don't look back. There is an extra swing to my hips as we walk away from the conversing teachers. He can have Miss Gates. I'll settle for Jackson. He's not so bad.

As soon as we reach his car, Jackson sits me on the bonnet and captures my lips. It doesn't feel the same as Calum's. I place my hands on his chest and jump down.

“Can we leave?” I ask.

“Why the rush?” He spreads his arm towards the field. The noises have grown faint, but people are still there. I step around to the passenger side, but the door is locked. “My friends are here.”

I cross my arms on my chest. “Do you want to go be with your friends or be out here with me?”

That's an arsehole question. Jackson opens the door, and we get in. I send my friends a text so they know I'm safe, then another one with my location to Dad. Dad knows Jackson's parents from church and donations. Jackson turns on the radio, and I shut it down. I want silence.

If he thinks my behaviour is weird, he keeps that thought to himself. The sound of hip-hop music welcomes us from a distance. We arrive at his house in no time, and he's kissing me again.

The next few minutes is a catalogue of terrible events. My clothes are strewn on the floor. I'm naked under Jackson, who pumps his dick with a condom in the other hand. Usually, I'll sheath his penis with the latex. But I pull my legs to my chest, and my back finds the headboard. I'm not wet. I don't want to have sex with Jackson. Hugging my knees, I sway from left to right.

Strapped, he plants his hands on his waist, watching me with anticipation and apparent lust. We have done this enough times that I should feel something. This is not how it goes. I roll a hand through my hair and sigh so heavily the sound carries into the air. Posters of Chelsea players adorn his wall. Cut-outs of Lampard, his football idol, decorate the lower parts of his mirror.

“Have you ever listened to Alanis Morissette?”

“Bloody hell. Who?” Jackson replies.

There is nothing related to music in this room. Jackson covers the gap and brings my hand to stroke his dick. Another sigh escapes me as I perform the action mechanically. The emptiness in my heart expands. I peer into Jackson's eyes and feel nothing but a deep sense of loneliness.

“Jackson, this is not working.”

CHAPTER 16

Sixth form



“DID I DO SOMETHING WRONG?” Jackson asks for the umpteenth time as he pulls a pair of shorts over his waist. The walls vibrate from the effect of the speakers downstairs. Somewhere along the line, the songs changed, and more people arrived. I hear the voices of drunk teenagers. Backing Jackson, I change into my uniform. I should have brought a spare outfit. “Cathie, talk to me.”

I don’t turn until I’m covered. “No, you didn’t. It’s not you, Jackson, it’s me.” I’m just... I don’t know, experiencing one silly midlife crisis days before my eighteenth birthday? Do teenagers experience that? Jackson curves a finger under my jaw, and I look up. “I’m just tired, Jackson.”

“Some other time, then?” He presses a kiss to my forehead and hugs me. “I’ll drop you off.”

“No, it’s fine. I’ll walk.” Jackson runs a hand over his face and offers me a smile. Feeling out of sorts, I draw a half-circle on his carpet with my foot to distract myself. “Thanks for tonight.”

“Yeah,” he murmurs. “Anytime.”

We hug for the last time, and the next thing I know, I’m racing out of his house, brushing past sweaty bodies to inhale fresh air untainted by Jackson and the drunken teenagers inside. A few minutes outside his front doors, I pat my pockets for something. I’m missing something.

My phone is intact.

But my bag isn’t. I’m missing my school bag.

My chemistry note is inside. Music sheets, too. I text Rose to know if I left it in her car, but she doesn't reply. Walking past cars parked in front of Jackson's house, I hum the lyrics to *Nessun Dorma* and start the journey to the house. I've never had to walk back home from Jackson's place. Thinking about it now, I should have accepted his offer.

The lights lining one side of the street brighten the pavement. I've only taken five steps forward when the headlights of a car blare from the distance. I shield my eyes from the light. My heart pounds as the car approaches me. I take a step back, prepared to race back into Jackson's house.

A breath of relief flows out of my lungs when the red car parks beside me. The lights dim. I can see the driver now. If he were the one in the room with me, I wouldn't have had a reason to stop.

Calum exits the car and charges for me. I jump back without him touching me, and a wide block of awkwardness settles between us. He rubs a hand over his lips. "Where's your boyfriend?"

"He's not my—" I stop myself, and Calum folds his arms. "Inside. Jackson is inside the house."

Calum's head tilts towards Jackson's house, then back at me. From the outside, the duplex looks empty. His parents must have travelled. I lick my lips, unsure how to handle this scrutiny. Our shadows move on the pavement as I take one step back, and he matches it with one stride.

"If he's inside, where are you headed?"

"Home."

Another step forward, and I struggle to breathe easily. "Were you going to walk?"

"I wanted to clear my head," I say.

"And he let you?" His brows crease with disgust and worry. "Do you know what the time is, Cathie?" I shrug. It doesn't matter. This place is safer than his America. "He's a fucking idiot."

“Don’t swear around a student,” I say.

Calum chuckles. I like the sound of it. “Get in.”

I don’t wait to be told twice. He opens the passenger door for me, and my smile breaks free when he rushes to his side. My legs brush something at my feet, and I pull out my school bag.

How does he have it?

“Rose gave it to me,” he explains my unspoken question.

We sit in calm silence, broken only by the gentle rumbling of the car. I draw random shapes on the window, heating it up with my breath. Something lands on my knees. A blanket. I spread it over my lower body to reduce the shivers. I should thank him, but the words stick to my throat.

“About yesterday... I was out of line for touching you. I apologise.”

It’s the same apology he offered in the morning when he dropped me off. I ignore it again.

“Calum? Why did you come?”

“You needed me.”

I tear my eyes away from the window. My stepbrother grips the steering hard enough for his veins to grow visible. My fingers curl in the blanket. What else does he have in the car? Did Miss Gates use it? He restarts the car, letting it rumble until he drives down the familiar street.

“How did you know I needed you?” I whisper. I didn’t even know I needed him until he showed up. When he turns on the radio, I know I won’t be getting any reply. I lower the volume. We can talk about something else. I just want to hear his voice. “How did you find Jackson’s place?”

“I asked Rose.” Calum spares me a look, the first since we entered the car. “And your dad.”

“Thanks for coming.” I tap my fingers against my knee. “Did you take Miss Gates home?”

“Yes.”

“Did you enter her house?”

“Yes.”

“Did you kiss her?”

The car slows down. “No. Not today.”

Not today. But yesterday? Or tomorrow?

His words tighten around my neck, cutting off my air supply. I curl against the window, and a lone tear rolls down my cheek. The sound from the radio goes higher. I don't bother asking him to shut it off. It's his car. The song transitions into the popular Alleluia chorus, and I choke on a sob. I haven't heard it in ages because I've avoided it. It was the last song she watched me sing. I took the solo that year. When it ended, she was the first on her feet in the auditorium.

The car stops. We are on a familiar street, but this is not home.

“Cathie, look at me. Are you okay?”

I manage a nod. The silence lingers. I don't want silence. “Mum loved the song. The last time I heard it was when I sang it to her at a Christmas carol.” He turns off the radio, and I shake my head. My nails cut into my wrists. I shiver, maybe from the cold or the memory. “It's okay, you can play it. It's not like listening to it makes me feel closer to her, anyway. Alleluia. Alleluia.”

Calum grunts, and then I hear a click. He unhooks my seatbelt, and I fasten it back. “Look at me.”

My head stays down. “I'm all right, sir. I'm okay.”

Calum's hand reaches for me, but he hesitates a second or two before his thumb presses to my wet cheek. I can't believe I told him never to touch me again. His other hand releases the seatbelt, and I tilt my body forward for more, but all I get is one big hand cupping my cheek.

“If you're okay, why are you crying?”

“The song?” I whisper. His thumb strokes my cheek, coercing more words out of me. “It brings back all the

memories. I want to listen to it and feel closer to her. But I can't. It's all good, sir."

Calum hits the switch on the roof, and light floods the car. His eyes widen with concern, but he doesn't use his words. The overhead light sparkles in his eyes like a thousand and one stars. Stars I want to explore. So close, yet so far away. He's not mine. He belongs to Miss Gates.

"The song doesn't have to make you sad," he says. "It can actually make you closer to her. It's one way to remind yourself that she loves you. She loves your voice and is very proud of you."

"Don't mind me." I sever our connection by pulling back before I do the unthinkable and kiss him. Fanning myself, I say, "It's my period. All the hormones are fighting and making me cry."

"Do you want ice-cream?"

"Ice-cream?"

"Back home, yeah? The girls liked ice-cream and belly rubs." His statement only makes me sadder. I imagine him giving a bunch of faceless girls a massage and belly rub, and my heart clenches. I wrap my arms around my belly. "Will that work for you? You want ice-cream?"

"And belly rubs," I add, more to try my luck.

Calum's responding smile is sad, like he feels bad about the next words that leave his mouth. "Sorry, just ice-cream. No belly rubs."

"Okay. Just ice-cream."

We drive to the supermarket in silence. Calum doesn't ask me for directions.

"I'll be right back," he says when we reach.

The 24/7 store has a few cars out in front and a signboard with their name hangs at the top. He leaves the engine running and returns almost immediately with a large pint of ice-cream. It will take days to finish this.

“I didn’t know what flavour you wanted, so I got this,” he explains. “It’s a mix.”

Chills race down my spine as my hands connect with the tub. There are five plastic spoons in the bag. I doubt he checked it.

“Do you want to go home?” I whisper.

“No. Do you?”

“I want to stay here a little longer with you.”

Calum’s blues hold mine, and an unnamed emotion flashes through them. I place the ice-cream on the middle console and open it. Steam rises to the air. I offer him one spoon, and he accepts it wordlessly. Our eyes connect again, but I break off the stare first and dig into the ice-cream.

This moment feels oddly special, nothing as soul-fulfilling as our guitar-singing moment but better than the encounters that have followed. On my sixth scoop, he takes his first, and a rare feeling of warmth expands in my chest. The car is quiet except for our little breaths and scoops.

“How do you like it here?” I ask, mouth full of melting ice-cream.

Calum frowns. “It’s a cool town... city. But I have a few questions.”

“You may ask.”

My stepbrother leaves his spoon inside the tub, but I continue digging until I find a second colour. The strawberry flavour tastes better than the vanilla. He smiles when I smack my lips.

“Your dad tried to explain it once, but I didn’t fully get it. The uniforms are different. Why?”

I grin. I enjoy knowing something he doesn’t. “Because we are in sixth form.” His blonde brows wrinkle, and I close the pint. “We finish secondary school at age sixteen, but the government requires us to stay back for higher education or some sort of training until we are eighteen.”

“Sixth form is your final year?” he asks. I nod, and he sighs. “But you are seventeen?”

It’s much more intricate than that, and I explain it to him. Education is compulsory in the UK. You can get arrested if you skip classes. Because we are required to start school at a certain age, almost everyone finishes year 11, their final year, at sixteen. After that, we move to sixth form, where we spend two years offering a range of A-level subjects to prepare us for the course we will study at the university. To differentiate us from other secondary school students, all sixth form students of St George wear a white button-down shirt as opposed to the regular sky blue.

“There are sixth-form colleges,” I add to the lengthy explanation. “But St George has both.”

“It’s different for us. High school, then college. No sixth form,” he says. He drops the ice-cream in the backseat. I think I prefer our system. It equips everyone with the basic degree or training and gives us more time with our friends. “There are no age limits, and you can drop out too.”

“In secondary. I mean, high school?” I ask, and he nods. “Without consequences? No arrests?”

Calum laughs. “No one gives that many fucks. It’s really up to you or your guardian.”

“Interesting. So, if I were in New York and decided to quit school, no one would care?”

“Except your parents and maybe friends,” Calum replies. My mouth closes. Oh. It sounds nice. I would have dropped out or skipped classes if I had been there. Laughing, he starts the car, and I fix my seatbelt. “You looked uncomfortable when Jackson touched you. That’s how I knew.”

But my stepbrother doesn’t know I put Jackson’s hand on my waist to make him jealous.

CHAPTER 17

Important days



THERE ARE two important days in February. The first round of the competition, then her death anniversary. I circle the first day of the month on the calendar hanging from the wall. My eyes land on her death date, and a tiny pang of pain hits me. I underline the date, staring at it until it becomes a watery blur.

A knock sounds from outside my door. I wipe the tear that leaks to my cheek. “Who’s there?”

“Calum.”

We didn’t sing together last week, but I’m up for it if he wants a duet. A few seconds in front of the vanity mirror, and I look better than I did minutes ago. I open the door halfway and lean on the doorpost. I’m not sure where we are at now. He’s with Miss Gates, and I’m still single.

“What’s up?” I ask. Calum is wearing shorts today and a tank top that hugs his torso. There’s another story to his tattoo, but I’m afraid I’ll never get to hear it. I look up to see Calum has been staring at me. “Yesterday’s rehearsal was lovely. I enjoyed it.”

He reaches for something behind him. A notebook. I cock my brow without accepting it.

“It’s my old note,” he says.

“Music note?”

Calum laughs. I never thought he would laugh around me this fast today. We have been civil to each other during

rehearsals and at home, but our last special moment was that night in his car.

“No, my chemistry note from back then. Was looking through my stuff, and I found it. Lucky you. I was pretty badass in chemistry.” He flips the note open, showing me footnotes at the ends of some pages. “This can help you remember.” I collect the note without touching him. He rubs a hand over the base of his neck. We have an awkward moment of staring, and he clears his throat. “I could show you how to create tunes with them.”

“Like music?”

“Yeah.” He shuffles to the side, and I push the door wide open for him to enter. “Something you can sing to help you remember. It has to be in my room, though. We can use the guitar.”

“I would like that.”

Throwing me a mock salute, he starts for his room, and I follow behind, hugging his notebook to my chest. We enter his room. I stop. Blue sticky notes litter his table. I walk towards it and pick one. *Helium*. One of the elements on the periodic table and its properties is written on it.

“This looks like... chemistry?” I say. Scanning the wall above the table, I see more notes. More elements, their characteristics, and sidenotes about bonding written on them. “Is this for me?”

“Yes. For you.” Calum pinches the bridge of his nose and sighs. He looks tired, and I wonder if it has anything to do with what happened yesterday morning. I woke up at 4 am to the sound of him singing and playing the guitar. I could have sworn he was crying. Crossing over to me, he leaves a seat between us to keep the distance. “I kind of spent all of last night doing it, Cathie.”

My heart flutters, but I keep a straight face. “Why?”

“I couldn’t sleep.”

But I meant, why was he helping me?

He is giving me mixed signals. First, he shows up to pick me up, and now, he's trying to help me. Why won't I catch feelings when he does all these lovely little thoughtful things?

"Okay." I point to a note. Under the element is a familiar song title. "What does this mean?"

"So," he starts. He pushes the chair aside to stand beside me. My lower belly clenches at the proximity. I catch the faint scent of his bathing soap, and my neck turns slightly to get more of his smell. Tapping on his laptop until the screen comes alive, he hunches over the table, typing and speaking. "I was thinking we could relate it to something you know. Like a song you love."

"Alanis?"

"That could work," he throws over his shoulder.

Some of his excitement seeps into me. He has that same fire burning in his eyes when he talks to us at choir practice. I can tell music means a lot to him. He drags the seat back and motions for me to sit. I smoothen the front of my skirt, and Calum eyes the movements of my hands.

I won't try anything funny today. Grabbing his guitar, he sits on the edge of the table, his legs a hair's breadth away from mine. He pulls a string, leaving a melody in its wake. I tap a finger against my knee to keep still. I can feel the heat of his body, and my palms itch to caress his leg.

Calum nods to a tune in his head. It's not weird watching him create music without a word. I do it sometimes. I rehearse in my head until I'm sure it's good enough for the world to hear it.

The silence lingers for too long, leaving me with so much time to ogle him. To watch the sway of his hair as his upper body moves against the guitar. "What's the name of your guitar?"

"C," he replies.

The name he told us at the pub.

"I can't play any instruments," I say a second after.

“I can only play the guitar.” He pats the guitar twice to buttress his point. Another second rolls by without us speaking to each other. He taps his laptop, and Alanis starts singing. His voice comes after. Instead of her lyrics, he’s singing the elements table. I giggle. The softness of his voice has me pining for him in ways I shouldn’t. He sounds so good. Then it stops. “Your turn.”

“I can’t play the guitar,” I remind him.

He pauses the YouTube video, and Alanis’ voice fades away. “I know. You’ll sing, I’ll play.”

The only problem is, I don’t know the elements offhand. As if reading my mind, he extracts a sticky note from the wall and gives it to me. It contains a list of all the elements and their symbols on it. He strokes his guitar again, and my heart clenches. His thoughtfulness is newly refreshing.

Head bowed over his guitar, he doesn’t notice me sizing him up. I bite my lip to keep a sigh from slipping out. I want Calum, not chemistry. But a chemistry teaching Calum is also fine.

“Are you ready?” he asks, lifting his head long enough to bless me with a vision of his eyes.

After the first three tries without the guitar, I nod. “Yeah.”

My eyes close as the words leave my lips. It’s so easy to sing the song but as the elements table. My feet steadily bounce. If we keep at this, I might get a B. I have never had a B in A-level chemistry.

Calum stops playing the guitar, but I continue singing. I finish the rest of the elements, daring to sing until the thirtieth instead of the twentieth like they taught us in school. I feel lighter. When my eyes open, he’s smiling at me. My lips pull into a smile of its own. I like his smile, too.

“You’re a beautiful singer,” he says.

The intensity in his eyes floors me. Something shifts. We are no longer student and teacher; we are something more. Something unnamed. His compliment is so confusing. Is he saying I sing beautifully, or I’m a beautiful girl who sings

well? I'll take both. I shouldn't be thinking too hard about a compliment. But everything involving him requires an extra thought. I must consider the consequences of my actions and the double meanings behind every word he says. It can be challenging.

Still confused, I settle for, "Thanks." His lips quirk to reveal his one-sided dimple, and there's so little I can do to keep the desire to touch him at bay. "You're a beautiful singer too, Calum."

"I'm a guy," he says and drops the guitar by the table.

"Men can be called beautiful, too. And you have a beautiful voice."

Calum's left thumb strokes my cheek, moving dangerously close to the corner of my lips. I suck in my breath, careful not to make any sound that might distract him. His thumb underlines my lips, and I release a noisy breath. "Cathie."

"Yes?" I whisper back. He can kiss me. Eyes heavy with desire lock onto mine. He doesn't say a word, but his fingers stop moving. I don't want him to pause, but I don't want to scare him by mentioning it. I fold the sticky notes into equal halves. "Should we practise again tomorrow?"

His hands drop to his sides. His gaze loiters on my lips for ten long seconds. Yes, I counted. He shakes his head, and our connection breaks.

"No, but you can practise on your own," Calum says. My shoulders fall. He rises to his feet, and I follow suit. My heart bleeds a little when he opens the door. I drag myself to it. His hair falls into his eyes when he gives a curt nod, so tempting to touch. "Good singing, by the way."

"Good coaching, by the way," I say. He bends over with laughter. Without meaning to, I reach forward and push his hair out of his forehead. He freezes. I touched him without his permission, but I'm not sorry. He backs another step away from me. My smile breaks. "Thanks for today."

"Yeah."

And the door shuts in my face.

CHAPTER 18

On the spot



SOMEONE IS KNOCKING on my door. I respond by burying my face in my pillow. I know it's Dad, and he will leave after a few minutes. He's the only one who knocks this early on a Sunday morning. He must be heading to the cathedral. I don't understand why he keeps going there when God didn't save his wife. Mum died on the spot, and his God did nothing to save her.

A knot tightens in my belly as I listen to the sound of his car driving away. I pound my fists on the pillow and scream. Dad will go to church and pray to a God that never answers prayers.

There's another knock. I charge for the door and wrench it open. Calum steps back. I gulp.

"Hi," I say.

"I thought I heard a scream. Are you okay?" he asks, and I shrug. It's normal for me to feel this way a few days before her death anniversary. He clears his throat. "Is it the pe... your pe-perio—"

Heat crawls up Calum's cheeks, and he lets the unspoken word hang between us. Menstruation is nothing to be ashamed of. If he really thinks I have been bleeding since last week Friday, then we have to reconsider his sexual education. I nod to relieve some of the awkwardness.

"There's still some ice-cream in the fridge," he says, squeezing my palm. My hand misses his touch as soon as it's

gone, and I rub the palm against my cheek. “You can have some of it.”

“Okay.”

Calum doesn't ask me to follow him. He leads the way, and I fall in step beside him. I sit at the dining table while he goes to get the ice-cream. He drops it in front of me with only one spoon. I'm left alone for another minute. When Calum returns, he's holding a box of chocolate biscuits.

“You're not eating?” I ask. His head moves left, then right, but his lips quirk in a small smile. “Why?”

He shrugs. “I don't feel like it. And ice-cream is not my thing.”

“What's your thing?”

Calum traces the water droplets created on the table and sighs. “Oh, Cathie.”

His finger caresses my nose, and I stiffen. He shows me his fingertips coated with ice-cream and wipes his hand on the table napkin. I wanted the kinky version in my head to play out. The version where he licks his fingers clean, then kisses me so I can taste the ice-cream on his lips.

“Are you going somewhere?” I ask. I take a scoop of the ice-cream and point the white plastic spoon at his hair. It's gelled. His shirt is ironed and his boots polished. “You don't have to tell me.”

Pushing against his chair, he spreads his hands on the table. “Why didn't you join them?”

Join who? Oh. Dad. Dani. Church. “Why didn't *you* join them?” I return.

“Changed my mind last minute,” he says, sweeping his hand over his outfit.

I drag the tip of the spoon across the table. “Why?”

“Didn't feel up for it,” he answers. “You?”

“It's pointless.”

God, if he exists, is evil. If he is such a caring father, why do bad things happen to good people? I push the tub aside and pick up the biscuits. I take one and offer Calum a piece. He accepts it.

“Any plans for the day?” I ask.

Calum shakes his head. He has been too nice to me. Probably because he thinks I’m still on my period.

“Can you drive?” he asks.

“Why?”

“All your friends drive, except you.” I tsk, and he says, “You are seventeen, eligible for a driver’s license. But you don’t have a car, and I don’t think it’s because Pete can’t afford one.”

His words rub me the wrong way. Most of us don’t drive. Taylor also doesn’t have a car. Wells Spring isn’t that big, and I can get wherever I want on foot or with my friend’s help. I set the biscuit on the table and cross my arms under my boobs. Sometimes, we do things simply because we can.

“Is there a problem with that?” I ask.

“No. Just making conversation.”

“Okay. I can’t drive. Not so well anyway.”

Dad tried to teach me so we could alternate the use of his car. On the days I didn’t have a panic attack, I almost drove us off the road. He hasn’t tried again, and I don’t care. I’ll try when I feel ready. When I can get the image out of my head, that memory of her before she was ejected out of the driver’s seat through the windshield, maybe then I might try again.

“Do you want to try?” he inquires.

“Not really.”

“Is poor Cathie scared of driving?” he teases.

I hide my hands under the table and focus on the biscuits. “I’m not scared of anything.”

False.

I'm scared of loving someone so much and having them die on me. Young people shouldn't be allowed to die. They should have spare lives. Mum was still young. She should have lived.

"What are you most scared of?" Calum asks. He flips the table mats, then spends the next seconds fixing them. He repeats it twice. I want him to stop. This feels like therapy. I attended therapy for a month after I turned sixteen. It didn't turn out so horrible. "I'm scared of spiders and ants."

His confession evokes a laugh out of me. I think he's lying or instigating me. "Spiders are cute."

"And crawly. Always appearing in unwanted places." We fall into silence again. He drags the ice-cream to himself and takes a scoop. "I could teach you how to drive." I'd rather we spend time in his room studying chemistry or singing a cover of another one of his favourite songs. I want to know more about him. "We could get to it now, unless you have other things to do."

"Nothing at all," I say.

We head outside. I stop on the stairs, and he forges ahead. A chilly breeze whispers through my hair, and I rub my palms together. My eyes follow him as he jogs to Dani's car. I'm stupid. I'm scared of driving, but here I am because I want to impress him. Maybe if I can drive, Calum will see me less as a kid and more as an adult, like he sees Miss Gates. Perhaps he'll kiss me again.

Calum enters the vehicle and honks. I race down the driveway to meet him, and the first thing I notice is the lack of his seatbelt. My jaw clenches and my arms tremble. He steps out of the car.

"Have you ever driven before? At all?"

"Yeah. A few times with my dad," I reply. "I know the basics."

"Then this should be easy," he says. Once I'm in the passenger seat, he takes charge. I smile at his lecture. When he

points at the accelerator, I giggle with a small shake of my head. “Got it?”

“Yes, sir.” He inserts the key into the ignition. I bite my upper lip. “Please put on your seatbelt.”

“It’s just—”

“Please.” Calum clicks it into place, and I close my palm around mine. It might not protect me in an accident, but it makes me feel safe. I sweep my shaky palms over my legs and whisper, “Thank you.”

“Watch,” he says and puts the car in reverse.

I look behind like Calum is doing, and the car slows after the curve. When he has the car facing the street, he shifts gears to drive and continues down the road. *Driving is not a big deal once you get over the initial fear*, he tells me. I need to have a foot on the accelerator, ready to switch to the brake. I can do it. Calum puts the car in park and walks around to my side to open the door.

“Your turn,” he says, “take us to the house.”

“But I’ve not learnt the reverse.”

Calum clicks his tongue and re-enters the car. After making a U-turn so my journey back to the house is smooth, he rounds to my side to kick me out. My heart gallops. I switch to the driver’s seat and grip the steering wheel. Calum claims my seat and urges me to drive. I don’t move.

Images of her flood my mind. I bite my lip until I taste blood, the same blood that covered her face and made her almost unrecognisable. He taps me. I release the steering and grip it again.

“Your seatbelt,” I say without looking at him. I wait for the click, but I don’t hear it. My head snaps up. My voice is louder. “Seatbelt.”

Calum stretches a hand. There are five houses before ours, and an accident can happen in a second. “Look at the house right there, Cathie.” What he doesn’t understand is life can happen to you in a blink. “I don’t need to put on a seatbelt.”

The images replay in my mind in slow motion. My chest tightens. Like her, I can't breathe, but unlike her, I'm alive. I clench and unclench my fists, unable to see past the steering wheel. I hear him call my name, but it doesn't matter as I unfasten my seatbelt and start walking home.

CHAPTER 19

Her annoying existence



CALUM

THEY FOUND ME. It was only a matter of time, but it happened faster than I expected. I place my ringing phone on the table and finish up the rest of my buttons. It must be Him calling again.

A door opens and shuts quietly, and my heart sighs. Cathie is still ignoring me. She has been since she walked out on me and locked herself in her room yesterday. I want to be okay with her silence because it means less contact with her, but my body craves her in illegal ways. With Cathie, I don't want to only get down and dirty. I want to lie in bed and cuddle, talk about silly little things, laugh, and tease her. I haven't rolled a blunt in two weeks, and it's because of her.

She calms me.

Her voice. Her singing. Her annoying existence.

I hate to love it, and there are so many reasons why. She's my stepsister. My mum's happiness comes first before mine. I can't mess up what she has with Pete. Two, she is my student. It can ruin my temporal career. I didn't think I would like the choir as much as I do, but watching the choristers is as close as I would come to performing in front of an audience again.

A breath leaves my lips. I fucked up. I strut to the wardrobe and pull out my suitcase. Cathie's voice reverberates

in my head, screaming at me to drop it, but I take out the blunt and roll it.

Another wave of hesitation rolls through me. But I need an outlet. I hold the flame away from the end of the blunt. The flame flickers and burns my fingertips. Moaning, I drop the lighter.

Fuck this.

I storm to the bathroom and empty the wrap of marijuana into the toilet. One flush, and the weed swirls in the bowl before disappearing. I ask myself again—*how the fuck did I get here?*

Easy. By ruining the band.

I exit the bathroom after cleaning up. The chemistry cue cards I prepared for Cathie are on the table. I didn't refuse to study with her because I dreaded her company. It's harder to control myself around her, especially when she's singing. I can handle it in public, but in private?

My determination wavers once I'm in front of my stepsister's door. My phone buzzes again in my pocket. I extricate it to peek at the caller. It's not him, it's her. Tessa Mower. She has been trying to reach me since forever. Among the others, she tries the most, but I don't want to answer until I sort out my life or it's half as good as hers. I knock once on Cathie's door. Part of me knows she already left for school, but I want to confirm it. Two more knocks and I give up.

She's gone.

I head downstairs, only to find Cathie having breakfast. My heart stalls. As if sensing my gaze, she tugs her hair out of its scrunchie, letting her pink curls form a curtain around her face.

"Calum, you came at the right time," Pete says. He pats my shoulder and drops the tray on the dining table. There's an empty seat beside Cathie. Her bag drops to the chair when she notices me staring at it. I don't get her sometimes. It was just a seatbelt. We were close to the house, a ride of less than five

minutes. It was not a big deal, and I was only trying to help her. “Join us.”

Mum hugs me with a kiss on my cheek. I settle down in the same row as Cathie, with her bag between us. Her phone beeps. If I had her digit, I might have texted her. I need her number.

Breakfast is quiet. Pete and Mum fill the silence with questions none of us care to answer. Cathie offers only monotone responses while I do my best to deflect. They try too much sometimes. I spread butter on my toast to keep busy, taking a slow bite to stall their next question.

“Okay. What’s going on with you two?” Pete asks. He took too long to notice. But the real question is, *what’s wrong with his daughter?* She has terrible mood swings and a fierce temper. “Cathie?”

“He didn’t use his seatbelt,” she answers.

A sad look creeps into Pete’s eyes. That’s all Cathie says, but he understands her. He lends her a smile, and I notice her arms shake before she hides them under the table. I seek my mother, and she shrugs.

Cathie’s phone beeps. She stands. “Amelia is here, Dad. Thank you for breakfast, Dani.”

Once again, she forgets about my existence and walks out of the house without a backward glance at me. It bothers me. So much that I stand to chase after her. She needs to talk to me.

“Calum?” Pete stops me. I shove the cue cards into my backpack. Cathie looks like him, and at the same time, she doesn’t. But she has his eyes. “Please put on your seatbelt around Cathie.”

This again? I drop my bag on the table. “We were just outside, Pete. It was down the street.”

Pete’s stare matches mine with equal ferocity. I’m standing, but he stares me down. Someone has to explain this puzzle. “Even if it’s right in front of the house, please put on your seatbelt.”

I plant my hands on my waist, mildly glaring at Pete. Mum tries to catch my eyes. She wants me to please back off, but I need him to give me answers if Cathie won't. I think I miss her.

“What’s the deal with seatbelts?”

Pete massages his forehead and sighs. “Cathie’s mum died in a car accident. She wasn’t wearing her seatbelt when it...” His voice cracks and his eyes get a faraway look, like he’s in another world. The same world Cathie might have travelled to when she sat still in the car, oblivious to me calling her name. My mum places a hand over Pete’s. He looks back at me as if seeing me for the first time today. “She won’t get in a car if you’re not using a seatbelt. It makes her feel safe.” My chest tightens. It’s hard to breathe. I didn’t know that. Of course, I want her to feel safe. I care about her. “I always want her to feel safe. So please, always put on your seatbelt.”

“Thanks, Pete. Duly noted.”

I stop at the entrance and retrieve one of the cue cards in the pocket of my school bag. On the back of it, I scribble one line, then another line, and a third one in case the first two don’t work on Cathie. If she doesn’t talk to me... She will. She must. There’s an impromptu rehearsal today.

My phone vibrates in my pocket. Tessa doesn’t give up easily but might have to stop trying for now. I’m not ready to see or talk to anyone from a time in my past when life was still kind to me, and I had money, fame, and friends. I open the front door, and the morning cold greets me.

Cathie is also outside. My heart does a backflip. She looks up when the door opens and walks further down the driveway to create enough distance between us. She’s making it hard for me.

Why did Cathie go to wait outside? Her ride shows up, and a head full of blonde hair pokes out of the window. She enters the car, and I wave Amelia down before she drives off. I feel Cathie’s glare as I walk over to them. If she had powers, she might have put me under the ground.

Amelia flashes me a smile. From her uniform, I know she's in sixth form. Jackson too.

“Good morning, Mr Dissick.”

“Morning, Amelia.” Her elbow juts out of the opened window, and her red lips curl in another smile. I hand over the cue cards. The one with my apology is at the bottom. “For your friend.”

“Sir? But she's right here.” Amelia points at my stubborn stepsister, who has no intention of ever talking to me. Cathie hugs her bag. “If you don't mind, please hand it to her yourself, sir.”

“I don't want it,” Cathie says, resting her jaw on her bag. One look at her, and I know I'm doing the right thing by using Amelia as a mediator. She pokes Amelia in the side. “Let's go. We'll be late.”

They won't. Amelia knows that, too. She collects the cards. I say, “Make sure she doesn't rip it.”

I wait until their car zooms off. Once I get into Mum's car, I turn on the heater. My phone vibrates. This time, it's Him. He's the caller.

CHAPTER 20

Bring it on



I SNATCH the cards from Amelia when we are out of Calum's earshot. What could be on it? Parking, Amelia turns to me. She wants me to open it, but I won't. I want to do it in private.

"What was that all about, Cathie?" Amelia asks. I shove the cards into the backpack at my feet, and she adjusts, pushing one leg over her seat. "I thought you two were now getting along."

"We were." I flex my fingers in front of me. Amelia clears her throat. I sigh again and rest my head on the window. "He was teaching me how to drive, and he refused to put on his seatbelt."

"Oh," is all she says.

"Yeah." Silence wraps us in a chokehold. Tears cling to my lashes. I hate talking about it. It makes me sound like a brat. Still seated, I open my door and inhale feverishly. I feel my bag for Calum's note right as a familiar palm grips my free hand. Amelia squeezes my hand and smiles. It's why she's my favourite. We have these little moments I don't have with Rose and Taylor. Both of us step out of her car. "He mentioned something about a sister website for Girls Code."

Amelia brings out a compact mirror and smacks her red lips. When she turns to me, I give her two thumbs up. Her makeup is flawless, and her face is perfect, not a strand of hair out of place.

"Sister website?" she says. "Another Girls Code?"

“No, a male version. Boys Code?” I explain. Coming around to my side, Amelia loops her arm through my elbow. I don’t want her to say no. If she’s on board, it’ll be easy to convince Rose and Taylor. “I think it’s a good idea. We could do something like that. Boys have feelings, too.”

That sounds like what Calum would have said. She shifts her weight to another foot.

“Fine,” she says.

I drag Amelia towards the entrance, and her steps falter at the foot of the stairs. She stares at the doors for so long that I worry. Her eyes gloss over, and she wipes a tear that falls to her cheek. The door of the school pushes open. A girl waves at us, and I wave back on our behalf. It’s impossible to be invisible or maintain a low profile when your father is the headteacher.

“Are you okay?” I ask Amelia once we are in.

Chatters, murmurs, snickers. I hear them from the students loitering by their lockers, but they fade into the background the further we head down the hallway. Amelia stops at her locker.

“Sure. Why won’t I be?” she replies like she has rehearsed that line so many times. My hands drop to her shoulders, and she matches my gaze with a cool stare. “I’m okay, Cathie. Really.”

Lies and more lies. I don’t know why, but I hug her instead of trying to pry the truth from her.

“You’re okay,” I whisper.

Amelia Greene will be okay because we are best friends, and best friends stick together.

She pulls back from the hug with a smile and touches my face like I’m priceless. “I’m okay.”

This time, I believe her. I walk her to her first class and hug her again before leaving. Once I’m in my class, I bring out the cue cards from Calum. My laugh is instant. The teacher

calls me to order, and I mutter a sheepish apology. I trace a finger over his handwriting. It's neater than mine.

Is he trying to bribe me with cue cards to help me study chemistry better?

If that's the case, it's working. He has my forgiveness. I laugh quietly to avoid attention. There are only a few of us in this class. The teacher walks between the aisles and leans on the desk closest to him. He asks the girl beside me to explain something he just said, and she flushes.

This is usually one of my favourite classes, but I'm distracted. The physics teacher returns to the front of the class and circles a word on the board. I spread the cards on my desk. This is the most thoughtful thing a lad has done for me. Jackson never called to know if I arrived home safely, but I can't find it in me to blame him. We are not dating. I flip the card, and a snort escapes me. My eyes fill with tears again. For someone who's not on her period, I am too emotional. A tear drops to the yellow squared card. My heart is a mess, and it's because of him.

Why did he have to apologise? My thumb sticks to the first line of his apology.

"I'm sorry," I whisper the first line to myself, pretending Calum is beside me and murmuring the words in my ear. I miss him. *"Can I make it up to you with ice-cream? How about doing that duet?"*

The whole of the day is a blur. When it's time for rehearsals, I don't wait for Rose. I race to the hall. Sadly, I'm not the first to arrive. Regina is there, and so is our new choirmaster. The flames of jealousy burn out when I process his stance. Calum paces the stage with a sheet in his hand while Regina sits on the block. She stands when she sees me, and I flash her a wide smile.

Regina can try, but she will never have him. I halt beside her. For the period of this rehearsal, I must tolerate the twat. Calum stops pacing. His lips pull in a smile that fades as fast as it comes when I scowl. I love his way of apologising, but he doesn't need to know how much. Walking back to us, he grins.

Regina reciprocates with a gigantic grin, but I know it was meant for me.

“You showed up,” Calum says.

His eyes stray to Regina, leading her to believe the statement was referring to her. She twirls her hair around her forefinger, body swaying to her own tune. I hope she falls flat on her face.

“Of course, Mr Dissick.” Her voice is low-pitched, a bit hoarse. I roll my eyes, darting my gaze at the tall window as soon as his blue eyes try to find mine. “I would never miss your classes.”

Rose walks in at that moment, and I have never been happier to see her. She giggles all the way to the stand. Other students drag their feet in, and we spend the next few minutes playing catch up. Calum interrupts us to remind us about the competition. The first round is almost upon us. We get into position, but Calum never gives us the signal to sing. I press my hands to my sides.

I’m nervous. I shouldn’t be nervous.

“Yes, Regina?” he says. I tip my head towards her, and she lowers her hand. “We don’t have time.”

“Have you decided on who’s taking the solo?”

Calum’s eyes stay on mine for longer than five seconds. If he picks me, I will forgive him.

“About that, I was thinking we could do something different this time,” he begins. I look behind me, and Rose shrugs. Walking away without a word, he extracts a speaker from his bag. “What does music mean to you? For me, it means everything. It’s a beautiful way to create memories.”

Regina waves her hand, and when he calls on her, she says, “It means the world to me.”

Me too. Music is life.

Calum drops the speaker between his feet. I’m not sure what he plans, but it gets us excited. Mr Prescott is

predictable. Stable. But maybe we need to shake things up this year to win that cup.

“How many of us know this song?” he asks.

The chorus starts, and my heart clenches. I stretch out my hands to grab something, anything.

“Breathe. Let it all out,” Calum adds. He hasn’t moved from his position. Tears cloud my vision as the song continues. It’s the alleluia song. Hands shoot up around me. “Just breathe. Relax.”

“Oh, I’m relaxed,” someone says from behind.

“Alleluia,” another person screams.

Everyone laughs. The fist in my chest withdraws. My throat is still clogged tight, but I breathe more easily now. Calum distributes the sheets to us. It’s the song playing. Is this punishment?

“I want us to create new memories with this song,” Calum starts. Palms open, his gaze lingers on me for longer than necessary. There’s no malice in his eyes. Whatever this is, I don’t know if I like it. “To take the old memories associated with it, if we have any, and merge it with the new. Most of you will not be here this time next year. We must give the final our best shot.”

“The final?” some chorus.

Calum laughs and drops his hands on his waist. “We are going to win, right? It’s the perfect song to deliver our victory. A memory to carry around. *St George choir wins the 2023 inter-secondary school singing competition.*” My heart jumps. I like that thought a lot. “Sounds good, no?”

“Yes,” we scream. I think my voice is the loudest.

“And when the song comes on the radio,” he adds. This time, when our eyes meet, he doesn’t look away. “You smile in fond memory of this victory and the time we shared here as a team.”

The song ends, but adrenaline still pumps through our veins. Calum points at Christie, and she steps out. Regina is

next. When she stops beside him, I expect her to make a funny face or grin or... I don't know. I smile, and she looks away. I may dislike her, but she'll always be a part of my secondary school memory. In some ways, she has helped me. She makes me practise more.

“Cathie, you too. Step out.” I join the girls, and Rose waggles her brows. She must have sensed my worry. Calum snaps his fingers to get our attention. “If you looked through the sheet I gave you earlier, you would see that only one person can take the solo, and it has to be perfect. Epic.”

He tries to say more, but Regina cuts in. “You're going to pick only one of us, right, Mr Dissick?”

“Right, Regina.” Tucking the sheet under his armpit, Calum brushes a finger across his lips. There's no trace of familiarity as he stares at us. “I don't know who yet, but three of you are my best bet. You'll rehearse together for now, but I'll pick whoever is taking the solo on that day.”

That day? That's not how Mr Prescott operates.

A funny feeling tightens my chest. Regina locks eyes with me and smirks.

Calum hands us another sheet, the other choristers sing on his command, and he raises a finger to shush the three of us. When he snaps his finger, we join in. I'm not worried about Christie. She's content. It doesn't matter if she gets it or not. Regina mostly wants the spot because I do.

There's no pressure on us since this is our first rehearsal with the song, but Regina tries to out-sing me. This is a competition I intend to win. The door creaks open, and a head pokes in. Calum leaves us to attend to the student he invites inside. He looks familiar. Probably one of Jackson's friends. They might have stayed back to smoke or do something dumber than that.

The boy hands Calum a note, tells him something, and leaves. Walking back to us, he opens the note, and blood drains from his face. I notice it before he regains his composure. With him, I notice more than I should. The note

shakes, and he slides it into his pocket. There's a moment of silence after our singing ends. He massages his forehead, blind to the students staring at him.

Calum's clapping comes late, about six minutes late. "Good singing," he tells us with a smile so fake I wonder why he bothered. The man who motivated us earlier is gone. "You're dismissed."

Our heads turn to each other. We have about twenty more minutes until the end of the practice. A quiet conversation breaks out among us. Calum doesn't seem to hear the murmurs, or he doesn't care about that. He's gripping the note, staring at it like he's reading his death sentence.

CHAPTER 21

Bad day



WHATEVER CALUM SAW in that note was bad. So bad he skipped dinner last night. I drag myself down for dinner, but he is not at the table. Second night in a row. Dani doesn't mention it, and neither does Dad. We finish dinner in silence. Dani excuses herself and returns with a flask.

"I'll give it to him," I say before she sits.

They both cock their heads towards me. "Are you sure?" Dani asks. "You two haven't been—"

On the best of terms? Well, her son apologised. Plus, he owes me ice-cream and a duet.

"We are okay now," I answer. Dragging the flask to myself, I offer both of them a smile. Dad looks at his wife and frowns. Those two. "But we will be perfect if I take this up to him. Okay?"

"Okay," Dani agrees, but Dad doesn't look convinced. "If he doesn't want it, that's fine."

"Okay."

Dani shoos me when I try to help her clear the table. If I'm going to give him his dinner, I must do it immediately. I stalk to Calum's room, and my confidence dwindles when I'm at his door.

I knock once. No response. A second time. No answer. "It's me, Cathie. I'm coming in," I say and twist the knob. The door is open, but the lights are off. My eyes adjust to the dimness. "Calum?"

Moving to the switch, I flip it, and light floods the room. Calum lifts an arm to his forehead to shield his eyes from the light. I stop by the bed. His hand drops long enough for him to glare at me, and my lips crack in a smile. He looks like shit. Maybe it's an American thing to look like what you are going through. He signals for me to switch off the lights and get out. But of course, I do the opposite. I'm worried for him. He wouldn't let me off if he knew I wasn't okay.

“Are you okay? You can talk to your annoying stepsister.” My voice is gentle, almost pleading. A second or more pass without him speaking. I squat by the bed and raise the flask. “I brought food. It's becoming a habit for us, don't you think? Maybe it can be our thing.” I get nothing out of him. “Dani asked me to give you. She doesn't want you starving to death in our house.”

“Please switch off the lights.”

“If I do that, will you tell me what's wrong?”

Calum's blues glow with mischief. He pushes another pillow under his head. “Maybe. Maybe not.” I shuffle to the door and overhear him say, “You should learn to mind your business.”

Not today, though. If he's in this house, he is also my business. I flip the switch, and darkness descends again. For a minute, I stand by the switch, thinking. My heart wins over my brain. I find myself at the windows, parting the curtain to allow a semblance of light into the room.

The natural light illuminates Calum's face. His lips pucker in a scowl.

“I like the idea of making new memories.” I don't know if I'll ever get to the point of listening to that song without my heart aching, but I do know that if we win, it will no longer be a song that reminds me of pain. “To merge the new and the old. I love it. You make choir interesting.”

“Good for you.”

An unexpected laugh escapes my throat. I'm not leaving until he talks to me. I'm not thinking straight as I hop on his

bed and prop his head on my lap. He starts to protest, but I shush him.

“If you’re not going to tell me what happened, it’s fine. Don’t say anything. It will be okay.”

My fingers comb through his hair, massaging his scalp like Mum would have done to appease me. Sometimes, we don’t want to talk about the problem, but we always appreciate the concern.

I clear my throat and drag my fingers across his scalp. “Mum used to do this after a bad day at school, and I didn’t want to talk about it. She could sing, so she would sing for me.”

“Mum did it too. But without the singing.” I feel his head shift. I assume he’s looking at me, but I don’t care to confirm. His voice drops to a whisper. “Then I grew up. No more head rubs for an adult like me.” He laughs, but it’s so sad I ache for him. “Cathie, I’m sorry about the seatbelt.”

Tonight is about Calum, not me, and he can’t turn it on me. I redirect the conversation back to him. My fingers don’t stop moving, and his body relaxes. The weight of his head on my leg increases with each passing second. Instead of complaining to him, I rest on the headboard.

“Did you have a bad day?” I ask.

“Yesterday,” he says. His unspoken words are louder than the things he says. “After school.”

“Do you want to talk about it?” Calum keeps mute. My fingers stray to his forehead. I stroke his face, running my knuckles across his cheek. “Is it about the note?” He stiffens, and my hands return to his shoulders. I massage them until the tension eases from his body. “What was in it?”

“I fucked up, Cathie.”

Taking his hand, I place it over my wrist, on the tattoo, the evidence of my fuck up. “I fucked up too, Calum. We’ve all fucked up at some point.”

“This one is different.”

“Different, how?”

Silence and more silence. I look out the window, and my shoulders slump. My hands still, and he pushes them back into his hair. I chuckle and resume the massage. The silence eases into something more comfortable and relaxing.

“Was it a good idea to bring up the song?” he whispers.

“That’s not how Mr Prescott operates,” I tell him. I prefer Calum’s way better.

“Are you comfortable with it?”

To some extent, I am. I didn’t break down yesterday. “I can try to be.”

Calum’s phone lights up with a name. Tessa with two purple hearts beside her name. My hand freezes on his scalp. There’s another woman besides Miss Gates? He doesn’t answer his call, and a big ball of jealousy explodes inside my belly. I don’t know this Tessa, but I already dislike her.

“Who’s that?”

“Tessa purple hearts,” I say with mild irritation. Without looking, he reaches for the phone and places it face down. I’m slightly relieved by that, but almost immediately, the relief turns sour. “You don’t want to talk to her?” Calum shakes his head, making a cute sound. “Who is she?”

“An old crush.”

“Old?”

“Crush,” he adds, ignoring the main question. “Dunno why she keeps calling when I never pick up. I tell myself I’ll respond or call later, but days pass, and... nothing. I feel bad but still don’t do it. I’m not a very good friend, and I’ll make an even more horrible partner or boyfriend.”

“I’m not a very good friend sometimes,” I say. He smiles. I retract my hands from his scalp, but he doesn’t complain. If Tessa is an old crush, maybe I have nothing to fear. Pushing through my childish jealousy, I focus on him and his feelings. “Why don’t you ever return or pick up her calls?”

“She wants to check up on me.”

“You make it sound like it’s a bad thing,” I say.

“It’s not.” Calum grows agitated. Maybe it’s my imagination, but he slides his head off my lap to rest it on the pillow. An emptiness builds inside me. “When you fucked up as badly as I did, you don’t want your friends checking up on you. You want to be ignored, cast aside, left alone.”

A knot twists in my heart. I don’t get him. I will be upset with my friends if they don’t check up on me. He has one person who seems to care about him genuinely, and he’s pushing her away.

“Why?”

“As punishment. Penance for your sins.”

“Even if you fuck up, I’ll still care about you,” I say before I can stop myself. My hands tangle in my shorts. I pretend I’m running my fingers over his skin. “I’ll always check up on you, Cal.”

As if my words are causing him pain, he rolls further away from me. I try to bridge the gap, but Calum tucks a pillow between us. A soft sigh escapes me. For every wall I tear down, he builds two more. I swallow the words I should have said to prove my point.

“That’s so easy for you to say, *princess*.” He packs a lot of anger into his words, like I’m the sole reason he doesn’t want to talk to this Tessa girl. His verbal attack continues, hurting me. “You live here in this fancy house, hidden away from the real world. What do you know about life?”

Words rush to the tip of my tongue. Anger crawls under my skin. Because I’m younger doesn’t mean I don’t have my own struggles. Dad can testify to that. Maybe Amelia, too. My arms wrap around my lower belly. I count backwards from ten. By the time I’m done, the anger has faded.

“That’s what friends do, is all I was trying to tell you,” I say in a coaxing voice. I will get nowhere if both of us are upset. “Friends help each other, even if one of them is a fuckup.”

“We are not friends,” he snaps.

“We are not enemies either,” I reply with equal annoyance. “Stop pushing everyone away, Cal.”

The bed dips as he shifts further away. “Time for you to leave, Cathie. Thanks for checking in.”

“I’m sorry. I don’t want to go yet.”

Calum says nothing but flips the bedside lamp on. He is wearing a black singlet that exposes his nipples and tattoos. I flick an apologetic gaze his way, and my teeth sink into my bottom lip.

“Fine. If you want to stay here, we have to talk about something else. Deal or no deal?”

“Deal,” I answer, no idea what we can discuss. I cross my legs, and he mimics me. We sit, facing each other without saying a word. I draw circles on his bedsheet. “So... what to talk about?”

“What’s your issue with seatbelts?” His fingers circle a spot on his knee. My chest tightens as he looks on in anticipation. “Your dad told me already, but I would like to hear it from you.”

I hear the sadness in Calum’s voice, but I don’t want it. I don’t want his sadness or pity. Two of the biggest emotions I’m used to from the people around me. He’s new here. I want him to see me as Cathie the brave, not the poor girl who lost her mum in a car accident.

A squeeze of my palm draws me back to the present. My throat constricts, and I have to clear it twice. “I just think it’s important for us to always use our seatbelts.”

Calum’s eyes narrow. I prefer when his head was on my lap, and I was asking the questions. Now, I feel open. My face is on display for him to read my emotions, and I’m not doing a great job of hiding them. He inches close to me, and my breath falters in my throat. I can smell him.

“Is that the real reason?” he whispers.

Yes. And no.

After Mum's accident, there was a video of her circulating on the school's blog. I don't know why some people's first reaction to emergencies is to pull out their phone to record instead of calling for help. A gormless, dickriding cocksucker called Sam uploaded it to our school website for a few likes and quick reactions. He was expelled when the school authorities found out.

I only saw the video once.

A video of her lying down on the tarred road with her skull cracked open and black hair matted to her forehead. I remember every detail.

The truth is, I never forgot it.

I remember how the cracks on the broken windshield extended like dark lines on a canvas, with a gaping hole in the middle. What I didn't see, my brain made up for it by filling in the blank.

The policemen's statements helped, too. They didn't mean for me to hear it, but I did. I heard more than I was supposed to at age twelve. She was not putting on her seatbelt. So when the car rammed into her from behind, the impact had her flying out through the windshield.

"Yes. The real reason. Many deaths will be avoided if people use their seatbelts. It's not so hard to do, Calum." My emotions are all over the place, too much for me to handle. Hot tears prick my eyelids. I click the invisible seatbelt into place and let out a sadistic cackle. "See? Easy."

Calum's blues find mine. I blink back the tears gathering in them. "Come here," he whispers, patting his legs. I straddle him. Our position is less sensual and more comforting. The pad of his thumb brushes my wet cheeks, and I sniff. I'm a mess. "I promise to always use my seatbelt."

"Thank you." My head lowers, and I bury my face in his shoulder. His fingers run in circles on my lower back, and my body buzzes in response. When I think my tears are under control, I pull my head back to face him. "I have a question for you. When your dad died, did you cry?"

“Like a bitch,” he says with a laugh.

“Me too. Well, it was my mum.” He offers me one of his rare smiles. I shiver on the inside when he tucks a strand of hair behind my ear. “I don’t really like talking about it.”

“Why not?” he asks.

“I don’t want to annoy people with my grief,” I say. Understanding flashes across his face. I palm his cheeks and slide my hand down to his growing scruff. He’s effortlessly handsome. “I... I feel somehow talking about it sometimes because I don’t want to burden anyone with it.”

“Yeah,” Calum says. “Yeah. I get it. The pain never goes away, and you can’t talk about it too much, or everyone will look at you awfully odd. And then they wonder why you’re so quiet.”

That’s exactly how I feel. So when my friends ask if I’m okay, I smile and say yes, but I really miss Mum and would love to get a hug from her or even a scolding if it means extra time with her.

“It’s crazy how people die, and the rest of the world continues living,” I say. I thought they would cancel school after Mum’s death. Their headmistress just died. The little they could do was to declare a one-day public holiday to honour her memory, but all she got was a minute silence. “I think you should call Tessa back. It might be important or an emergency. You’ll never know. It’s better to appreciate her when you still can.”

“Yes,” he says slowly. “You’re right. I should.”

“Thanks.”

A finger curls under my jaw, and my eyes lock onto his blues. I want to look away, but I can’t. I am pulled to him, his beautiful eyes. He drags in a breath. “What are you thanking me for?”

My tongue sweeps over my lips. “I don’t know. For agreeing to call her? For letting me stay?” I reply. Calum erupts in laughter, but it falls short when I roll a corner of my lip between my teeth. His eyes darken, and he slides his arms

around my waist. Our position is no longer comforting. It's sensual. I'm acutely aware of him and our lower bodies pressed together. He is, too. "Calum."

"Cathie," he whispers in return.

One big palm cups my face, and I lean into his touch. I want him to play me like I'm his guitar, master every curve and dip of my body, and gaze upon me with the same tenderness he looks at *C*. His thumb traces my lips. My heart somersaults, pounding harder than I thought possible. It's a miracle he hasn't heard it. Or maybe he's ignoring it to focus on my lips.

The intensity of his gaze lends me the courage to brush my lips against his. I touch my forehead to his. I want my stepbrother to kiss me, but I also want him to want it, maybe more than I do.

"Cal..."

"Cathie..."

His head lowers. His breath brushes my lips in a hot whisper. My lips part so he has access. I make a sound between a moan and a grunt at his hesitation, and he kisses a corner of my lips.

I protest with a hit on his shoulder. "Calum."

Calum chuckles. His lips inch closer. One wrong or right move, and we will kiss. The building hesitation in his eyes spurs me to grab his jaw gently. I peck his lips, then lean in for a proper kiss.

Someone knocks on Calum's door. We break off. My heart races, not only from the adrenaline pumping through me. The knock comes again, stronger. I didn't lock the door. I jump out of his bed. We are not doing anything wrong, but we are both flustered, and it can be misconstrued.

"Cal?" Dani's voice sends my heart into overdrive. I try to steady my breathing. She's not coming in. We are fine. What if she checks up on me? I push down the worries. She never enters my room without an invitation. "Did Cathie bring up your dinner? Do you feel better?"

“Yes.” He clears his throat and tries again. “Yes, she did. Thanks, Mum. I’ll see you tomorrow.”

“Okay.” I wait for the sound of her to leave. “Did Tessa call you? She wants to speak with you.”

Calum flips his pillows while I stand at attention in front of the lamp. “Later, Mum.”

“Make sure you call her tomorrow.”

“I will. Goodnight.”

We listen for her footfalls and exhale when we finally hear it. I stare at him. An unfamiliar emotion sits in his eyes. Shame. Fury. Regret. Regret for almost kissing or not kissing me?

To break the ice, I say, “Your crush is really determined.”

“She is,” he responds. The smile he offers me is genuine. Warmth spreads through my belly. He slips his palm into mine and walks me to his door. Opening it, he peeks outside to make sure the coast is clear. He steps back in with a smile that turns my inside into melting ice cream. I freeze when he plants a kiss on my forehead. “Goodnight, Cathie.” If I didn’t know it, I know it now. We are okay. “Thanks for checking up on me. I appreciate it. I will call Tessa tomorrow.”

Before my courage fails me, I kiss him on his cheek. “Goodnight, Calum.”

CHAPTER 22

Friendships



IT'S ten minutes since rehearsals ended, and Calum is still not here. I should have gone with Rose. Another five minutes pass before he shows up with his briefcase swinging from his arm.

"You took so long," I say.

Calum opens the driver's door of his car before he asks, "What are you still doing here, Cathie?"

"Waiting for you. I don't have a ride home." He scans the parking lot. I flatten my hands on the roof of his car, and he tips his head. "Rose is gone, sir. You have to take your stepsister home."

Confusion transforms into worry. He comes to my side and gently grabs me by my upper arm, so I'm staring up at him. I bite into the inside of my lip as his touch burns through my sleeve.

"Did she leave you here? What type of friends do you surround yourself with?" he asks. Anger coats his voice. He misunderstood me. I shake my head. "Then why are you still here, Cathie?"

"I wanted to go with you."

Calum steps back like I touched him. He runs both hands through his hair and fixates me with a soft glare. Heat spreads through my belly. His concern—his existence is such a turn-on for me.

"Fine," he whispers through clenched teeth.

I step back for him to open the passenger door, but I don't enter immediately. Another moment of intense staring and moisture pools between my legs. He rests one hand on the car roof, and I inspect the long, neat, manicured fingers that will fit inside me. My brain conjures more images of us. Images of us kissing in his room. Images of him pushing my skirt up and dragging my knickers down my arse to sit me on his cock. He clears his throat, and my eyes snap to his face.

What did he say?

“Is he your boyfriend?”

The question brings me back to reality. I take a small step to close the distance. “What? Who?”

Calum coughs. “Jackson.”

Jackson walked me to rehearsal today because he felt guilty for not calling to know if I reached home safely that Friday. Calum saw us. I wasn't sure he saw Jackson kiss me, but I guess I know now. I meant everything I told Jackson. We can never be a couple. We might look good together, but beyond the sex and craziness, does he see me? I know he loves football, but what else? If he didn't have another party coming up this weekend, would he have apologised?

But I push those thoughts aside and dump my bag in the passenger seat. My lips curve in an arrogant grin. “Mr Dissick, I thought we agreed not to talk about each other's relationships?”

“We did? Oh, yeah. We did. You're right.” His gaze descends on my lip tucked between my teeth, and his eyes widen with lust. Why won't he act on it? The attraction is mutual. He leans forward, and I am almost certain he will kiss me, but he draws back. “We really should leave.”

Once inside the car, he turns on the radio. I shut it off, and he grips the steering. I want to tell him the kiss didn't matter. There was no tongue, only a swipe of Jackson's lips across mine.

“Were you watching us, sir?” His jaw clenches. I take that as a yes. My curiosity builds. Did he also hear us? I lean

towards him, the seatbelt cutting into my midriff. “Were you jealous, Cal?”

“Don’t.” The fire burning in the pit of my belly explodes into something more ferocious, and my lips draw into a thin line. I’ll call him Cal. It’s only a matter of time. “Why would I be jealous?”

We ride in silence until the traffic lights. “I spoke to Tessa. She’s right. I think I might return to New York.”

That does it. My brain resets, and thoughts of Jackson evaporate. New York is not in the UK.

“No.” At my scream, he cocks his head in my direction, and my mouth goes dry. New York is in another country. Too far. The light turns green, forcing Calum to resume driving. I filter my mind for a sane thought or reason to keep him back here. “You can’t leave. We need you. All of us, the choir. The competition hasn’t started. How do we make new memories without you?”

“With Mr Prescott,” he answers, parking by the roadside. “He will take over.”

My hands clench. I need him here to help me with my chemistry so we can sing together and fangirl over Alanis. Tears prick my eyes. I sink my teeth into my lip to keep them from falling.

“You cannot leave, Calum.”

“Cathie, I’m not leaving now. Maybe at the end of this semester—term or next.”

Not good enough for me. I want certainties. Calum’s hand briefly touches mine. The tears recede, but my emotions still trickle to the surface. I want to rewind the events of Tuesday night, so when Tessa calls, I’ll end it and send her a long text to keep her suggestions to herself.

“There are better opportunities in New York,” my stepbrother continues. He tries to hold me, but I pull back my arm to hug myself. It’s my fault. I told him to call Tessa. “I would like to sing again, in front of people, and she knows someone who can help. Maria. Her best friend.”

I unfasten and fasten my seatbelt with shaky hands that won't keep still. Singing in front of a crowd will never compare to singing with me. I know this. To share his passion with thousands and thousands of people who will appreciate it is something I also want for him. I hate this.

“Okay,” I murmur.

Calum's hand moves in my line of vision, but he doesn't touch me. I'm not sure if it's because I rejected his touch earlier. I rub my hands against my knees and pretend he's the one doing it.

“But I'm still here, Cathie.”

My lips pucker. “Until when?”

“When do you finish sixth form?”

“July,” I answer.

“Then I'll be here.” I look up, and Calum nods. But I'm not satisfied. I shove my pinky finger to his chest. He laughs but links his pinky with mine. “I promise, Cathie. I'll be here until July.”

It's tempting to ask why he wants to wait until I finish. But I don't want to push him away.

“Okay, Calum.”

We stare at each other. Calum smiles first, and my lips crack in an almost smile. “Happy now?”

“Yes, sir.”

My phone buzzes in my pocket. There are tons of messages from the group chat. Taylor thinks having Boys Code is not a bad idea. Rose will make the logo and get back to us with an update.

But that's the least of my worries. I drop the phone inside my bag as Calum restarts the car.

“Amelia didn't come to school today.”

Today is the fourth time she's absent. Dad said her mum called to inform him on all occasions. Amelia left messages on

the group yesterday and this morning. Rose and Taylor think it's just a sickness, like she said, but I think it's something more. Something she doesn't want to tell us.

"I'm worried," I add. Stroking my skirt, I wait for him to speak. "But she told us she was fine."

That we didn't need to check on her when Rose suggested we stop by her house this weekend. Calum reduces his speed. I don't mind his pace because it gives us more time together.

"Will it be okay to check on her?" I ask.

Cars zoom past us, raising a gentle breeze in their wake that caresses my cheek.

"I don't know how your friendships work here," Calum murmurs in a voice so low I'm surprised I hear him. "But if my friends were in the same state as me and I was constantly absent from school, even if I would never ask, I'd appreciate it if they came to check up on me. At least once."

Resting my head on the window, I almost remind my stepbrother it took mine and his mother's intervention to return Tessa's call. Calum spins the steering and the car speeds into a new lane.

"I would also appreciate it if they waited until I was ready to confide in them. Sometimes, our presence is enough. It's all our friends need, especially when we are going through stuff we aren't willing to talk about at the moment. You don't have to talk or ask her questions, but be there for her."

"What if it's a life-threatening issue, Calum?" That might escalate, and none of us would know about it because we waited until Amelia was ready to talk about it. "Should they also wait?"

Calum parks. "If you think your friend is in trouble, then you shouldn't wait." I don't think Amelia is in trouble. I just think she is sicker than she makes us believe. "Do you want to go see her?"

Certainly, but Rose wanted all three of us to go together since Taylor and I don't have cars.

“It’s a bit far,” I tell him, running my fingers over the pleats of my skirt.

“I’ll drive you.”

My head snaps up. “Will you also wait for me?”

“Sure.” I squint in disbelief. He answered too fast. He stretches his pinky finger. “Promise.”

I lock mine with his and say, “Okay.”

We stop at the mall to get me two pairs of socks. I wear a different piece on each leg. Calum laughs, but Amelia will understand. We resume the drive to her house. A Nicki Minaj classic comes on the radio. At first, it’s silent until I mumble the chorus of *va va voom*, swaying as best as I can. Calum joins in during the second verse. He sings the chorus while I rap along to Nicki.

Our voices fill the car. He fumbles the lyrics of the next verse, and we erupt in laughter, putting an end to the song playing in the background. His laughter dies down, but I’m still laughing, at him, at myself, at the moment we just shared. I don’t know if he felt the connection. Something warm spreads through my chest. I lean against the window and stare at Calum’s side profile.

“You’re not such a bad company,” Calum says.

“I’m not bad at all,” I answer. Looking ahead, I guide him to the next street. “Take a turn here.”

Calum makes a turn into the street with houses lining both sides. I perk up as we approach her house. It’s a blue duplex sitting between two other houses. A window opens on the upper floor, and I imagine Amelia glaring at me, the intruder. Her room is upstairs. Her sister’s room, too.

The car stops, and a bundle of nerves floods my insides. My stepbrother unfastens my seatbelt and opens my door for me without notice. I glare at him. He shrugs. “I’ll wait for you. Go.”

One more glance at Amelia’s house, and I’m unsure I want to go through with it. I’m not doing anything wrong, anyway.

And Calum is right. If Amelia needs me, I should be there even if she doesn't ask. I put a foot outside, then the other. Calum doesn't try to push me, but I'm acutely aware of his eyes watching and waiting to know my next move. I shut the door and step back.

“Don't go anywhere, sir.”

I skip to the door and knock. Ashley, Amelia's elder sister, opens. First red flag. Ashley should be at school in Manchester, only visiting a few times during the weekends and on some holidays.

Pushing the door wide open, Ashley draws me in for a hug. I take another step into the house, but she doesn't shut the door behind me. She bumps her hip into mine and points at Dani's car.

“Who's that?”

“Um...my stepbrother.”

“You can invite him in,” she offers.

“I think he's fine there.” Ashley sizes me up to know if I'm telling the truth. The similarities are so obvious. It's like staring at an older version of Amelia from the future. “I won't be long.”

Calum is comfortable in the car. Besides, I don't want him around Ashley. She is smart, pretty, and currently studying to be a nurse. The right fit for him. She's also bloody single and searching.

“Oi,” she says. “Amelia is upstairs.”

Following her into the house, the noise from the TV stalls my movements. Ashley rushes past me to switch it off. There is a figure asleep on the couch in front of the fireplace. Her mother is also home. Second red flag. Mrs Greene works late hours. She shouldn't be home at this hour.

We continue up the stairs and separate when we reach the top. I knock on Amelia's door and open without an invitation. The room is dark, so I stumble through the darkness to get to the curtains and open them. My chest tightens as I stare at the

man in the car. His eyes are closed, and his head is on the headrest. He must have sensed my stare. He sits up and waves, and I wave back.

Butterflies flutter in my belly. I know I'm in lust with him, but I also like him.

"I told you not to come here," Amelia grumbles behind me. Kicking off my shoes, I join her on the bed and show off my mismatched socks. She grins, creating space for me to lie beside her. We smile at each other, but mine disappears when she pinches my cheek. "You never listen."

Amelia tucks a blonde strand behind her ear, and I brush more of them out of her face. "You didn't tell me. You told the group," I defend. After pulling the other mismatched socks over her feet so we are matching, I press the back of my palm against her forehead. "I was worried. Are you okay?"

"No. Not really." Seeking Amelia's hand under the cover, I give it a small, firm squeeze. Sad emotions swirl in her brown eyes that are tainted red from the crying she must have done. My heart races, and my mind spins from trying to guess the problem. "I don't know if I'll be okay."

She didn't mention the name of her sickness in our group chat. When Taylor asked, she was vague about it. A flu, a cold. I poke her cheek, and she pokes mine. We go at it for a couple of minutes, then she sighs. It's so heavy it stays in the air like a wet blanket, suffocating us—me.

"What's going on?" I ask.

Amelia pokes my cheek again, but I don't reciprocate the move. "They are getting a divorce."

"What?" The Greene family can't break up. Her parents are the combination of awesome and sweet. They were there when Dad wasn't. She blinks back the tears that gather in her eyes. The crushing feeling shifts to my chest. It's like that time when Mum died, and I could do nothing but listen to people say there was nothing that could have been done to save her. "But why?"

"Because of me," she replies in a solemn voice.

I cover her hand reaching to poke my cheek again. She grins. “I don’t understand, Amelia.”

She shifts position, so she is lying on her back and draws the cover over our chests. “Me too. I don’t want to talk about it, Cathie.”

We stare at the ceiling in silence, and I smile at the pink walls. I helped to paint her room. She places her hand in the space between us, and I lace our fingers. Seconds later, her head rests on my shoulder. I think I understand what Calum meant by our presence being enough for our friends. Amelia doesn’t say a word, and I don’t ask questions, but the weight on my chest melts.

“How did you get here?”

“Calum.”

Her eyes close. “I’m glad you came, Cathie.”

CHAPTER 23

Till



CALUM IS asleep when I return. At least, I think he is. Guilt pricks me. A ten-minute stop turned into fifty minutes. I raise my hand to knock on the window, but his eyelids flutter open. He stretches his arms and yawns. Moments later, the window rolls down, and his head pokes out.

“Kinda creepy standing over there to watch someone having his beauty sleep.”

I blush. “I wasn’t watching you, Cal.”

He points at the passenger door, and I bounce to the other side. Silence welcomes us in its familiar embrace. I clench and flex my fingers while working up an apology. We didn’t do much talking. By the time I left, Amelia was fast asleep. My hand wraps around the seatbelt fixed in its place.

Calum speaks first. “Well, that took so long. How did it go? Bad? Horrible? Awful?”

A quick inspection of his face reveals he is teasing. His lips quirk into that cute pout, and my heart skips. I want to kiss him. I place a kiss on his cheek, really close to the corner of his lips.

“Thank you, Calum.”

Probably too shocked by my reaction, Calum stiffens. I tap a finger on my knee, waiting for him to snap out of his trance. When he finally does, he turns on the radio, switching channels until he finds a perfect one. Another Nicki Minaj’s song comes up as we resume the drive, but none of us sings

along to it. I continue to steal glances at him. He either doesn't notice or doesn't care.

"Is your friend okay?" he asks when the car is quiet again. I don't have the right answer. Her parents' divorce is bothering her, but there's something else she's not saying. "Do you want to talk about it?"

"Not really." It's not in my place to talk about it, and there's no story to tell. "Thanks."

A few blocks to our house, he asks, "Do you want to chill for a bit?" I point at my chest. Is he asking me out on a date? Of course, I want to *chill* with him. "I don't feel like going home yet. But if you want to chill..."

My voice comes out painfully neutral to mask my excitement, though I'm freaking out on the inside. "Sure." The car swings to the left, and he makes another turn. "Do you have any ideas?"

"I don't know. Teresa's?" Uncertainty makes him sound nervous. Teresa's is the most popular fast-food restaurant around. He flashes me a grin. I think my cheeks turn the same colour as my hair. "A few teachers suggested I check it out. I guess I will now. You can be my chaperone."

A chaperone's duty is to accompany a younger person to ensure they behave well in public.

"But I'm younger than you," I tell him. He shrugs.

My brain reels back to his words. By a few teachers, did he mean Miss Gates, or has he found another? I can't ask him if they are dating since it's none of my business. But he hasn't brought her home or mentioned her since that dinner. Maybe they broke up? I hope that's the case.

His voice cuts through my thoughts. "How's chemistry going?" I shift slightly so the seatbelt isn't pressing into my chest. "Been practising?"

"Yeah." I cough again and clear my throat. "Yes."

Mostly at night when the entire house is asleep since I can't catch a break in school. Over the days, I've learnt two

things. One, chemistry isn't so bad. Two, nothing is impossible if you have someone like Calum to break it down for you with cue cards. We arrive at Teresa's, and the engine sputters to death. There are two round tables out in front with a big umbrella over each to shield diners. TTTT is scribbled in white letters on a block of painted wood below the roof.

Food posters with recent pizza deals stick to some windows, partly blocking our view of those inside. It is back again, that shy awkwardness that's always around us when we are alone. My palms grow clammy, so much so that sweat drips down to my inner wrists. Calum turns to me.

"Why so many Ts?" he says. "What do the rest stand for?"

"Teresa's To-tally Tasty Treats. I'm not sure what the motivation is, but I love it." We observe the people inside. I don't expect it to be as lively by this time of the week. I open the door, and wind sweeps into the car. Instead of exiting, I place my hand on the console. "Is this a date?"

"Is it?" he teases. My expression must have scared him. He shakes his head and words it slowly. "It's not a date."

Nothing happens after Calum's reply. No pangs of anger or disappointment because I don't care what he says. It's a date to me. I edge closer to him as we walk in. The only thing that stops me from slipping my hand into his is the attention we might garner. If anyone questions us, we can pass it off as two stepsiblings spending time together. That's what stepsiblings do, right?

Calum enters first but keeps the door open for me. The aroma of sweet-smelling doughnuts with rainbow sprinkles tantalises my nostrils. All the servers seem busy as they hurry to attend to the customers.

My mouth waters as we brush past the showcase displaying the pastries—bread, cake, buns, and doughnuts. I want all of it. Calum guides us to a table at the back, far away from prying eyes. I sit, and he drops into the chair beside me. He leans over to pick up the menu on my side of our table, his leg caresses mine, and his body heat seeps into me. I sink my nails into my thighs.

One peek at the menu and Calum's lips turn down in a frown. I don't think he knows what he does to me. He acts like it's normal to be this hot. An image of my father speeds through my mind. All the sinful thoughts disappear, and I sit upright. He drops the menu back to the table.

"Since I'm new here, what do you suggest, sis?"

Sis elicits a groan from me. He's only teasing, but the direction of my thoughts makes it wrong. My thumb traces the pictures of some pastries I think he might fancy. I look up to provide an answer, but he's looking elsewhere, specifically at the waiter walking to another table with a tray piling with chips and fish.

"That looks good," Calum murmurs.

Calum purses his lips, and his dimple appears. He is the only person I know with a one-sided dimple, and it makes him more special to me. I'm reminded of the poking section with Amelia, and a deep need to hug him claws at my chest. I might be overthinking this situation, but I think my stepbrother suggested coming here to cheer me up. Like he did with the ice-cream.

"I've not had fries since I came here," he states.

My head falls forward with laughter. Moments like these remind me of our differences amid our similarities. I clap a hand over my mouth to keep my laughter under control. He said *fries*.

"What? What's funny?" I snort with more laughter and his forehead wrinkles. His confused face is almost as cute. Patting his cheeks, he asks, "Cathie, do I have something on my face?"

"No, but that's so American."

Doubting me, he wipes his face with his sleeve and brings out his phone to confirm what I already told him. There's nothing on his handsome face.

He sets his phone on the table. "What is?"

"Fries," I answer.

“I don’t get it.”

My grin is intact. I almost reach for his cheeks to give them a good pinch before I remember I shouldn’t. I can’t. “We call it chips. Chips, not fries.”

“Fries is right. And they sound better because the potatoes are actually fried.” He makes a fair point, but I must defend my community. I pout, and he pinches my nose. As soon as his fingers touch my nose, something changes. Tension charges the air. We share a sinful glance, then lower our gazes to his hand. He backs off, dragging his chair along. “We should order now.”

A waiter stops by our table. “Wha’ yer gwain ‘ave?”

“Excuse me?” Calum says.

The waiter darts me a helpless look and the hand with his notepad drops. I swipe the menu from Calum. “We will have fish and chips for him. No fish but ice-cream for me.”

“Was that what he said?” Calum asks when the waiter leaves. “The waiter.”

“Oh, yes. *What are you going to have?*”

Our meals arrive, and Calum stares in dismay as I dip the chip into the ice-cream first before eating it.

“It’s not so bad,” I say. It’s my comfort food. When there’s no chip, I eat the ice-cream alone. I dip another chip into the ice-cream and offer it to my stepbrother. He blanches. “Just try it, mate.”

In the end, he accepts it. His face contorts in mild disgust before the taste registers, and he slowly relaxes. I wait for his verdict to no end.

“Well?” I drag out.

“It’s not awful,” he finally says. Liar. It’s awesome. I plaster on a smile that earns me a tiny smirk from him. “On a scale of 1 – 10, I’ll give it a minus five.”

“You’re an idiot, Calum,” I mumble, stuffing my face with more ice-cream chips. “A big idiot.”

Calum chuckles. “A bloody fucking idiot.”

At the end of our meal, the waiter clears our table, and Calum leaves him a 20% tip. I jerk a little when his hand finds mine under the table. My eyes lift to his face in silent questioning.

“If you want to talk about Amelia, I’m here,” he whispers. “I’ll be here whenever you’re up for it.”

This blue-eyed man smiles to back up his words. A thousand and one happy emotions explode in my chest, and I can only nod. I like him. I really like my stepbrother, who doubles as my choir director.

CHAPTER 24

Undefined but better



“Do you want me to set up your account now?” I ask Calum from his door. Dani and Dad went to God-knows-where. Those two are acting like newlyweds when it’s not their first marriage.

“Right now?” Calum jumps off his bed. I enter his room and shut the door. His main question should be: *why not now?* Plus, I’m bored. I can set up his account with my eyes closed. He pulls on a shirt before giving me his phone. “Alright then, Cathie. Have fun.”

Standing in the middle of his room, I’m torn between sitting on the bed or chair by the study table. He decides for me by patting the bed, and I sink into the space beside him.

“I need to see what you’re doing,” he says.

But I tell myself he wants to be close to me. And it’s okay because I also want the same thing.

The distance between us is small. At one point, when I’m suggesting usernames for his TikTok account, he bridges the gap. His breath fans one side of my face, and a load of nerves crashes over me. He points to his screen and then looks at me for a reply, but I’ve forgotten the question.

“It’s so hard finding a unique name,” he says.

“Right?” I add. The awkwardness passes, and I fill in the silence with the backstory of my username. Ceejay. “It is a mix of my first and last name. C for Cathie. J for Jenkins.”

“Cathie is your full name?”

“Nope,” I say with added stress on the p. Calum waits with a cute curiosity that makes me want to tell him about my name or make it sound more interesting than it is. “Catherine with a C.”

“Jenkins doesn’t sound British.”

“American,” I explain. “My dad moved here. Mum’s British, though.”

Stepbrother dearest nods like he understands. From the story I know, Dad was working on a short-term project but extended it because of Mum. They fell in love and got married.

“Cool,” he says. He collects the phone to type a username.

All done, he turns the screen to me. “Caldissick,” I murmur. “Not bad.”

“It’s the same name as my YouTube channel, and it’s free.”

“Nice. You have to create a channel for me.”

“It’s really easy to make one...” he trails off when I hug myself. “Fine. I will.”

We return to work, and my legs swing from the bed in childish glee. I guide him on the trends and perfect hashtags to get the most out of TikTok. I’m in the process of uploading his first video, that cover of Alanis I helped him record, when I remember he didn’t give me a feedback. He hasn’t sung, played the guitar, or uploaded a song in a while. Didn’t his fans like his cover?

“Did they like it?” I ask. “Your YouTube subscribers. Did they like the cover?”

Inching back until he’s resting against the headboard, he crosses his legs. I mimic his position in the middle of the bed. “I think they did.” He flips the bedside lamp on, switches it off, then back on. “Got about two hundred and fifty thousand views.”

The most I’ve ever got on any of my TikTok videos is one hundred and fifty thousand views, only because I hopped on a

popular sound. My jaw drops. I palm my face and grin at this oblivious human.

Calum switches off the lamp. “What?”

“Why are you not freaking out?” I ask.

“It’s not the highest I’ve ever gotten.”

Eyes closed, I fall to the bed in a dramatic faint. Calum taps me, and I sit up.

“You’re a celebrity,” I sing. He shrugs, and I cup my hands around my mouth. “My stepbrother is a celebrity.”

“*Was* not anymore,” he says under his breath. My excitement fickles and burns out. He plucks his phone from my hand before I query him. “Are you done uploading the video? What next?”

“A duet.” Singing makes him happy. I want him to be happy or back to his previous mood. “So?”

“Right now?”

“No better time than now.”

“You’re crazy, Cathie.”

Pushing myself out of the bed, I blow him a kiss and wink. Calum laughs, and the worry lines on his forehead vanish. “Yep. Back in the day, I used to be very crazy. Now, I’m just crazy.”

Calum opens and closes his mouth, and then a new round of laughter befalls him. “No shit, Cathie.”

Not wanting to be away from him for too long, I race to my room to get the ring light. On my return, he is waiting for me on the balcony. At his insistence, he sets it up while I watch. When he’s done, he looks my way to know how well he did, and my insides quiver, not with lust or love, but with something gentle and unknown. Our relationship is changing; undefined but better.

“What are we singing?” Calum asks.

“A song.”

He places the other chair beside mine so the camera captures both of us. His handsome face inches close to mine. I feel every breath he takes, each sound he makes. I see Calum, all of him.

“Can we please sing something without the guitar? I don’t want to play the guitar today.”

I like that he’s seeking my consent. It makes me feel special.

“Why?” I ask.

“I want to hear only your voice.”

Tipping my head back was a bad idea. He leans in. Our lips draw sinfully closer. I could feel his breath earlier, but right now, I see it. I see the white column of air that escapes his mouth. The slight parting of his lips to let out a soft breath. Oh, my. I see every detail about him I missed earlier. The gold flecks in his blues that I’m noticing for the first time. His skin pores. The dilation of his pupils as he contemplates the same unholy thoughts running through my mind.

To kiss my stepbrother or to pull back? My answer is: *To taste the forbidden.*

“I want to kiss you, Cal,” I whisper against his lips.

Any move from either of us and our lips will tangle. But I want it to be mutual. I give him a second to stop me. When he doesn’t, I press my lips to his. He doesn’t respond. He doesn’t part his lips for me to explore. Disappointment and shame rocks my courage. I tear my lips from his. Hot tears of embarrassment gather in my eyes, but they don’t fall. I stare at my feet for a while.

“Sorry,” I say.

The tension is so thick a machete can’t slice through it. Calum clears his throat, and the thing in the air clamps down on my neck. The kiss—I cannot call it that—also affected him, and it makes it a little easier for me to handle staying here another minute longer. Calum exits the balcony, and my relief morphs into a more dangerous emotion. My stepbrother hates my guts.

I let out the breath stuck in my throat when Calum walks back in with his laptop. He doesn't sit beside me. He sits on the floor with his back against the chair. I adjust the stand of the ring light to secure our faces with the height differences. He goes through the playlist in silence, pausing every few seconds to give me a chance to decide what song we will cover. I settle on a familiar sound. He is still quiet as he switches the camera to selfie mode, and our eyes connect via the screen. His fingers hover above the red record button on the bottom. I swallow hard.

"I know it was a mistake, so we won't talk about it," he says. "We will pretend it never happened."

My heart breaks into so many pieces. It stings. I am half-certain that was his plan. To painfully pass his point across to me. I avert my eyes once he hits the record button. But as he sings, the broken pieces of my heart align themselves into a whole, and it no longer feels like a rejection.



Awkward is not enough to describe the days that follow that 'mistake'. Three days pass, and Calum is still leaving for school earlier than he usually does. At home, our conversations are a lull; polite and tentative. During rehearsals, he hardly glances my way, and it's infuriating.

The past few days have been a rinse and repeat for me. Since Amelia is out of her slump, she's back to being my driver. Whatever happened in her room stays between us. After practice, I would hitch a ride with Rose and listen to her repeat the same question: *Is everything okay with Mr Dissick? He didn't say a word to you during rehearsal.* And I would roll my eyes and say yes.

For now, I need to focus on what Mr Andy is saying. I haven't been able to pay attention since he walked in with our tests. Last week, we had a quiz. There was no time to prepare, but I think I might come close to getting a C. Mr Andy waves his hands as he explains stuff about carbon.

The bell rings. Mr Andy stops us from leaving, and we let out a collective groan.

Amelia elbows me to ask, “What’s up?”

Walking down the aisle, Mr Andy distributes the sheets. The faces of students in the front row alternate between joy, annoyance, and aloofness. My palms sweat, and my heart drums. He stops at my desk and offers me a small smile before dropping the paper on my desk. I don’t pick it up.

“Proper job, Cathie.”

Amelia makes a throaty sound. She reaches for the test, but I beat her to it. My heart beats a sharp rhythm in my chest. The grade circled in red has to be the best I’ve ever got.

“What do you see?” Amelia asks. She’s holding up her script with a bold C on it. “I got a C.”

Warmth sweeps through me as I hug my test to my chest. I did it. I’m not stupid. “B.”

“No way.” Amelia snatches the sheet from me. A wave of emotions flashes across her face. Her jaw unhinges. She closes and opens her mouth, then slowly shakes her head. “Not bad at all.”

“Not bad at all,” I say. With the class empty, we sound louder. I’m late for practice, but I have the evidence to prove it was worth it. Amelia’s shoulder brushes mine as we step out. “What?”

“I saw your TikTok video,” she replies. We hasten our steps, taking the stairs two at a time so I can meet up for practice. “I knew he looked familiar.”

Her words unlock the series of events leading to our duet. My lips tingle from the reminder, and embarrassment swoops in. I haven’t opened the app since I uploaded the video.

“Who?”

“Mr Dissick. Your stepbrother,” Amelia says. It’s weird to hear them address him by his last name. But it also makes me feel closer to him since I have the privilege of calling him by his first name and the curse of being ignored for trying to kiss him. “He was in a boy band.”

That part of a band isn't so much of a secret to me. It was one of the first things he mentioned when we met. I nod to show her I'm listening, and we slow down a few steps before the hall.

"He was in that boy band we used to like."

My face wrinkles, and she laughs. The only boy band we liked was the one that grew on us. Her sister was—still is—a fan and awaiting a reconciliation. I don't even remember their name.

"Go," Amelia says. "You'll be late."

I already am. She might as well tell me.

Amelia pushes me forward. My protest dies when she wrenches the door open and shoves me inside. Her footsteps fade as she races off, leaving me to face the embarrassment. I stumble and regain my footing. The singing stops, and all heads turn to me. Rose shrugs. Regina sneers.

I wipe my clammy hands on the back of my skirt and rush out an apology. "Sorry, sir." Calum's brows pinch together. He snaps his fingers, and the choir resumes singing. In a few strides, he's before me. I clench the straps of my bag, wishing I could read him. "I'm so sorry. Sir, please."

"You're late." My heart clenches a little. Right now, I'm his student. I want to be that girl he was talking and laughing with last week. "Is there a reason you shouldn't be punished?" A grin slips to my lips. This is the most he has said to me all week. He frowns, and I nod. "Go ahead."

"Mr Andy held us back to show us our tests." He frowns harder. "We had one last week."

There's a trace of warmth in his blues as they scan my face for something. He sighs. "Are you okay, Cathie?" I nod. He cares about me. Pointing to Regina and Christie, he says, "Join them."

Practise resumes, but I'm stuck on what Amelia told me. Calum notices I'm distracted. When I sing off-key, and Regina sweetly suggests he kicks me out for today, he disregards her wicked suggestion and makes an excuse for me. In forty-five

minutes, it all ends. There's a shuffle as everyone packs up. I stay back with Rose, nodding to everything she says. Once Regina leaves, I walk Rose out of the hall and ask her to leave without me, then I return inside to meet Calum.

Calum looks up when the door shuts behind me. Our gazes hold, but he's the first to turn away. In the absence of others, the air charges with our unspoken words. He grabs his bag, ready to leave without acknowledging me, but I block his way out. His lips twitch, but he says nothing.

"I'm sorry."

He switches his bag to the other shoulder and massages his forehead. "For what, Cathie?"

"You know why. I'm sorry I ruined things. I was carried away."

"Okay."

I bounce on the sole of my shoes. "Does that mean we are fine?" My eyes light up with hope for the future. We have more duets to release. He messes up the mop of curls on his head. "Yeah?"

"Maybe."

Maybe yes, or maybe no? But I don't ask. My leg vibrates. "Can I get a ride? Rose already left."

For the first time today, he cracks a small smile my way. "Really, Cathie? Your friend left you?"

"Well..." I leave the statement hanging, and his smile grows another inch. I almost have my Calum back. He stares for longer than I like, and I raise my pinky finger. "No funny stunts."

"No funny stunts?" he says.

"None."

"How was it?" he asks. I frown, and he laughs. "I mean the chemistry. The tests came in today."

I slide my bag to my front to retrieve the sheet. "I have a brilliant teacher." He accepts the test, his brows wrinkling and

relaxing almost immediately. “The cue cards worked, Mr Dissick.”

Calum returns the test with a smile. “I’m proud of you. You’ve always had it in you.”

When he tells me these sweet and sincere things, it becomes increasingly difficult not to pull a funny stunt. I squeeze my bag in a fierce hug, because if I don’t, I’ll launch myself into his arms.

CHAPTER 25

Royally fucked



CALUM

I'M FUCKED. Royally fucked.

Cathie kissed me, and I wanted to kiss her back. No, I wanted to pin her under me and claim her, so she never kisses that boy again. I would have if she hadn't pulled back so fast. Days have passed, and I haven't stopped hating myself for almost losing control. Though my stepsister didn't lie about the age of consent, I can't ignore other factors. She's young, and it's wrong.

I'm her stepbrother and teacher. I could get into trouble with the law or her father.

Some part of me feels like Cathie is still grieving her mum and seeking affection from the wrong person, yet I have gone to bed with a boner every night since that kiss. She haunts my dreams. In my dreams, she is more demanding. We go beyond kissing, break all the rules, and I wake up in the morning feeling like a piece of shit. That's why I've avoided her and spoken as little as possible.

I change into a top revealing my tattoo, mostly because I know Cathie likes it. Yeah, I'm fucked in the head. These days, I do things because I know or hope she will like it. My stepsister has me in this chokehold, and it's cute to see her waver or second-guess my feelings for her. Unlike me, she wears her heart on her sleeves, and I keep mine tucked away.

Wait, what am I saying?

There are no feelings involved. Cathie is cool, smart, blunt, and kind. But I don't—*will not* have feelings for her. I can't do that to myself when I'm still suffering from the consequences of my last fuck up. Instead of going down like I planned, I return to the bed, lie on my back, and bring my hands over my eyes. It's too early for dinner. I don't want to be down there with only her.

Memories of the note pass through my mind. I should stay away from her if I care. What if Red has someone watching me? I've ignored his calls since I left New York. Since I broke my end of the deal. Since Mum found me in my room with my head on my table as I teetered on the brink of death. To Mum, deleting his number was a good move, but I memorised it already. I know it offhand.

It's been how many months now, and he hasn't let it go?

Panic sits in my guts. Are we safe? Tessa will be here next month for a show in Yorkkrinth City. Her best friend, Maria, was supposed to perform, but she put my name on instead. I guess people want to see the fuck up who started the fight on the stage. Technically, it was Sam, but it was my fault. Once I get paid after the show, I'll work out a payment plan to refund Red. I'm no longer sure how much those drugs were worth because Mum emptied everything into the toilet bowl.

Someone knocks, followed by: "Dinner's ready."

Disappointment churns my insides when Cathie doesn't enter my room. My brain speaks a language different from my heart that's asking to see her. I drag myself to the dining room after a stern lecture to myself. I am the adult. She apologised, and I accepted it. We are cool.

There are eight seats at the table, three on each side and two at the other end of the table. Pete sits at the head of the table, his wife on his right and daughter on the left. That leaves me with plenty of sitting options, one of which Cathie will dislike. I pull the seat beside Mum. She looks up from her hushed conversation with Pete, and Cathie's cheeks flush.

Yeah, she expected me to sit beside her. I thought I would, too. But how can I get over these feelings if I'm close to her?

Pete leads the prayer before meal. From the little I know about him, he's a devout Christian and catholic. Hardworking too. It might be one of the things that attracted Mum to him. I manage to stay the course of ignoring Cathie during dinner. I feel her gaze but don't look. It's hard, but I focus on my plate and the sauce on my tongue. Pete is an okay cook, but dinner today is delicious.

The quiet drags on until her angelic voice breaks it.

"Guess what?" Cathie squeals. Her excitement cuts through the air. I don't want to look, but my eyes meet hers, and she offers me an innocent smile. She's not mad at me for ignoring her. My stomach clenches at that fact. Fuck me, but I think that might have been butterflies. I'm ruined. She turns to her dad, then my mum. "Take a guess, Dani. Dad, it's about my chemistry test."

Pete's face lights up. She raises a finger to stop him from speaking and gazes earnestly at my mum. Mum shakes her head slowly. Cathie laughs. Her laugh is like a welcome symphony.

"Fine." The pride seeping from her voice shoots into me. She joins her hands together and grins before the words leave her lips. My chest puffs with content. I did that. I made this girl happy. The thought grows into something bigger and warmer. I love making Cathie happy. "I got a B."

"B?" Pete asks. I thought he knew. She nods feverishly, and a look passes between us. Pete jumps out of his seat. Cathie bubbles with laughter as she's lifted out of her chair. The edges of his eyes crinkle with joy as he messes up her hair. "I told you it was possible. That's my girl."

My girl.

"Calum helped," Cathie volunteers as she disengages from the hug. I feel Mum's gaze on me before I turn. She places a hand over mine, and I have never felt right about anything as I

do at that moment. She's happy with—for me. She's proud of me. "He made me cue cards to study."

I wave off the praises that come with the information she dumps. It's nothing, but Pete launches into a lecture about gratitude. Cathie rolls her eyes, and I laugh. She's such a character.

Dinner finishes with loud conversation, giggles, and laughter. Cathie offers to handle the dishes. Pete pulls his wife towards their room after a hurried goodbye. It makes me smile. I may never have what they do, but I'm happy for them. Cathie leaves and returns later to clear the rest of the table. My gaze traitorously rolls over her body. I don't notice it until she turns to grab the jug.

Her shirt.

I know that shirt. Her gaze lowers to what I'm staring at. The band of three boys after Mira, the only girl, left us. She left after high school to travel the world with her girlfriend, Imani, and Mending Hearts automatically became a boys' band. I see those boys I used to sing with on her black shirt. Three of us are staring into space. One of us has his guitar slung back on his shoulder. Me. The other has a hand up in the air, a microphone in his grip. Lucas. Another one is beating the drum. Sam. Under the image is the name of the band written in bold white letters.

"How did—"

Cathie races out of the dining room before I complete the question. I shoot to my feet, but she's faster. She shuts the kitchen door in my face. I twist the knob, but it's locked. I try again, and her teasing laughter compels me to stop and knock instead. No response. For unknown reasons, I grin at the door. She locked me outside. She's wearing our old merchandise. We made a lot of that at the peak of our careers. Shirts. Pillows. Sweatshirts. Mugs. Tote bags. We had all of that.

The door opens later. Cathie sidesteps me with a shit-eating grin. Like a robot, I follow behind my stepsister. My mind is blank. We climb up the stairs with only our footsteps for company.

“Cathie?” I call when she’s at the door to her room. “Can I have a word with you?” She crosses her arms and shakes her head. I’m older, but it feels like she has all the power now. “Please.”

I don’t wait for her response or check to see if she’s following, I enter my room and leave the door open.

CHAPTER 26

A kiss



CALUM WANTS ME. A man doesn't look at a lady he doesn't want naked under him the way my stepbrother is staring at me right now. Since I walked into his room, he has been staring. But he doesn't act on his desires, neither do I. After the near-kiss incident, I'll only follow his lead.

His tongue wets his bottom lip, and my resolve weakens. Telling myself to behave is one thing. Doing it is another thing. With Calum in that tank top, it's increasingly harder to keep my hands to myself. My back digs into the door as I scan the room for any form of distraction.

None.

"You wanted to see me," I say at last.

Calum jerks out of his daydream. "Yeah." As he says this, he takes another step closer to me. I fight to stay calm. My heart is doing high jumps. He's too near. So close. "You're off probation."

"That's it?" comes out of me in a squeaky voice. I clear my throat. "If that's all, can I go now?"

If I thought the distance between us was close, I was wrong. The gap vanishes. Calum's hands rest on each side of my head. His eyes stay on my lips for so long, I believe he will kiss me. My tongue brushes my lower lip. Calum follows the movement and lets out an almost silent gasp.

"Cathie," he whispers.

His voice caresses my face like a lover's kiss. I stop thinking. I act.

My hands slip behind his neck, forcing his head down. "I want you too."

Calum wants me, maybe more than I want him. He extracts my hands, pinning them above my head. I say his name as his face contorts with hesitation and desire. I need him to kiss me now.

"You're too young," he answers.

"I'm not. I'll be eighteen in a few days."

Releasing my hands, Calum kisses my shoulder, brushing his lips across the open skin. My toes curl. I try to push him back, but he secures my wrists at my sides. My core drips with need. I'm wet for him, and he hasn't done anything. If he were to sniff the air, he would smell my arousal.

"Cal, please," I whisper. He jerks but keeps me pinned to the door when, in reality, I want to be pinned under him, on the bed, naked, whispering his name like an anthem as he fucks me. I want to be his girl, not Miss Gates or any other teacher. "Four years isn't the end of the world."

Calum pulls back without kissing me. Conflicting emotions race across his face, and I let out my breath slowly. I'm tired of all our almost-kiss moments. It's annoying. It's frustrating. I don't want another evening with a dildo. It can't hold or cuddle me after an orgasm. I want Calum.

He points to my shirt. "How did you get that?" I shrug. He glares. "Maybe you should leave."

I fully agree with him. This thing between us is rubbish. I want him. He wants me. But that's it. He won't act on his emotions except he's trying to push me away. Who wants to be with a man like that? He won't make the move but rejects every move I make while staring at me like he wants to fuck me, like he wants to own me. I don't mind that. What I mind is the inconsistency.

"Maybe I should," I say and look away.

Tears spring to my eyes, and I turn to the door before he glimpses them. I tell myself I won't cry over him or any guy, but a simple rejection from him and my heart is tearing apart. His chest presses into my back, his breath heavy on my neck. My hand trembles so much I miss the knob. His hand closes over mine. My silly heart begs me to spin and take what I want. A kiss.

Why's he doing this?

"I'm sorry," he says.

"Why?"

Calum withdraws his hand sitting atop mine, and I drag it back. We don't switch positions. I feel the vibrations of his chest when he chuckles. I want him to touch me.

"The timing is wrong," he whispers.

"Can I at least hold you?" My throat goes dry at the prolonged silence. I press my forehead to the door and take a deep breath. I won't be able to handle a rejection. "You can hold me too."

Calum locks the door, and the sound of the key turning in the hole solidifies my decision. I desperately need him to touch me, and I'll do anything to have that. I let out a yelp and clap a hand over my mouth as he lifts me off the floor. He lowers me to the bed like I'm a priceless artifact he can't afford to lose. My protest dies down on my lips when he crawls in beside me.

There's a foot of space between us. I reach for Calum first and draw a line across his cheek. A heaviness sits in my chest. This beautiful man is real, but I want more than lying in bed and staring at each other. His eyes close as my fingers explore his face. He smiles when I trail his lower lip and poke at his dimple. Taking his hands, I bring them over my breasts to squeeze.

"Cathie." I inch closer and push myself up on an elbow to have a clear view of him. My lips hover over his. We stare at each other's lips more than we should. He sighs. "You're making this harder."

There's a quiet plea in his voice that I heed. I plant a chaste kiss on his cheek and lie beside him. When we kiss in the future, he must do it without hesitation. We stay there for a while until his arm tentatively wraps around my waist, pulling me flush against his chest. His boner pokes my butt, but I don't react even if my mind assaults me with images of both of us doing the dirty.

"Thank you," Calum whispers into my ear. There are many ways he can thank me, mostly with his tongue, his lips, and the big man poking me. Moments later, his boner relaxes. "I'm sorry."

This time, I'm genuinely curious. "Why?"

"For asking you to leave earlier. I didn't mean it." I look above my shoulder to glimpse his face, and he offers me a tight smile. "I'm making this harder, aren't I?" Maybe. But I like being in his arms. It makes me feel safe. He smoothens my hair out of my face. "You're so pretty, Cathie."

"You're pretty, too," I tell him.

To that, Calum only smiles. His nose nestles into my neck. I swallow a moan when his hand slips into my shirt to palm my belly. A few more inches up, and he will touch my boobs. I'm not wearing a bra. He must have read my mind. His hand lowers until it is out of my shirt. Shame.

He fingers the shirt I found in my wardrobe. Ashley used to be one of their biggest fans until they split up. We were forced to listen to them whenever she was home. I stole the shirt from Amelia the first week she got it. Her big sister could have easily replaced it, so I didn't feel bad.

"How did you know?" he asks.

I attempt to turn and face him, but his arm tightens around my waist. Fine, no eye contact. "I was going through our duet on TikTok. You got so many comments, Cal," I say with a lick of jealousy. He squeezes me, and the envy vanishes as fast as it came. "You're already popular."

Calum's TikTok profile might be new, but our duet has accumulated over half a million views on his account. I

suggested we post it on our profiles and tag each other. On my account, the video has a little above a hundred thousand views and is probably the highest I've got, followed by an influx of followers on my account. It's unfair that he just joined and is already past two thousand followers. It took me weeks to get my first ten followers, but it came so easily to him.

I found the name of his band in the comment section of the video. There were a lot of theories about the breakup. A lot of questions about the duet. If this was a hint at a future reunion with the band. Or a sign he has a new band member. As if he will put my annoying arse in a band.

“Back then? Yes.” An unknown emotion coats his voice. I don't fully understand him. He gets the engagement—views, comments, and followers I crave without doing much, but he's never excited about it. His YouTube channel is wild. Seven hundred and fifty thousand views on one video? I'll melt. I slide my fingers into his. He sighs again. “Right now? No. No one knows me.”

“Not true. Plenty of people know you. They miss hearing you sing. They love hearing you sing.” One such person is me. I love Calum's voice. Anyone who listens to him for the first time is bound to fall in love with him. “They want more, Cal. More duets, more solos with only you.” I twist in his arms, and he lets me. As much as I want to kiss him, I don't. “You are a superstar.”

“You're a superstar too.”

My fingers comb his hair. “I'm not. I'm just Cathie.”

“You're Superstar Cathie.” He brings my hand to his lips and sucks on my forefinger. I whimper for more. I will never know how he hides his attraction because I'm a mess. “They just don't know it yet, I promise.”

I smile because Calum is smiling. He lets go of my finger with a pop. Unwillingly, my eyes lower to his lips. Our eyes meet, and I look away first. I don't want to ruin this night for him.

“You think I’m a superstar?” I spread my hands on his chest. He grabs my wrists and shakes his head to stop me from exploring his perfectly toned body. “Does that mean I’ll sing the solo?”

His lips crack in a smile. “You’re cheating.”

“I know. But will I? I really want to sing it.”

So I can give Regina two giant middle fingers. But mostly because I love it, and I have the best range for it and want us to win this year. When he keeps quiet, I switch to my former position.

His body warmth seeps into mine as his arm snakes around my waist to pull me closer to him. I like it here. He plants kisses on my shoulder, and his touch sears my skin. “Goodnight, Cathie.”

“Goodnight, Cal.”

CHAPTER 27

Do you want to cuddle?



KEEP your foot on the brake, but don't step too hard on it. That's my second lesson for the day. I nod to Calum's next instruction. He is not a bad tutor, but my dirty mind is playing a driving kink.

"Relax, Cathie," Calum says.

I ease my grip on the steering, aware my stiffness is from my thoughts, not driving. We start from our driveway, and I drive to one end of the street at a snail's speed. Calum eggs me on with a grin, not once complaining of my slowness. Dad would have mentioned it at least twice. I park at the other end of the cul-de-sac, and he claps. His expression is a mix of pride, care, and awe.

Something has changed between us. Something words cannot express. I release my seatbelt and sit cross-legged on my chair. Calum leans on the door with his elbow jutting out of the window.

"Do you want to cuddle tonight?" I ask.

"Do you?"

His face says nothing. I don't know if it's a trick question. "I always want to cuddle with you."

My sincerity hovers in the air. The almighty Calum blushes and looks outside the window.

"Yeah."

"Yeah, what?" I tease.

He looks back at me. A hand stretches forward to take mine. “Yeah, I want to cuddle later.”

“With Cathie,” I finish for him.

Up ahead, a car roars. We watch it disappear into the distance, and I’m reminded why we are here. To learn how to drive, not to flirt. My phone pings. I’m reluctant to check it. It beeps again. Calum frowns, and I grab it. There are messages from our group chat. I read the last one.

Boys Code is up.

“I don’t have your number,” I tell Calum.

“You didn’t ask,” he replies.

I hand him my phone to type his number. Once it’s saved as C, I text him the link to Boys Code.

“We are now live.”

“How does it work?” he asks.

We spend the next few minutes on a tutorial. Like its counterpart, Boys Code is a site for boys to share their failed experiences with girls. When the website tutorial is over, the air thickens with words we will never tell each other. I peek at the clouds. The weather isn’t so cold today.

“Do you want to drive us around?” Calum asks.

As opposed to driving us back home? Yes. I shift the gear into drive. There’s no location as I drive down familiar streets and burst into the main road. I realise a few minutes into the drive that I’m headed to TTTT, the cafe we had our first date. Excitement erupts in my chest. We are almost at TTTT when I steal a glance at Calum. He’s staring straight ahead at the place.

Is he also remembering our date?

“Do you want to go in?” I ask.

“Do you?”

I don’t know. We ate already. I shake my head.

“Me too,” Calum replies. I laugh, and his lips form a small smile. When I think he will touch me, he retracts his hand. I am not counting this as a date, but I like his silent company. He nods towards the entrance of TTTT. It’s Saturday, so the place is full. “I think we should get going.”

The drive back is quiet except for the swish of the breeze. We reach home, and a lump sits in my throat. Something shifted along the drive to TTTT. He leaves the car first but waits for me.

“Thanks for the lesson, Cal.”

“You’re a brilliant student.” I’m tempted to ask if that extends to the point of taking the solo, but I choose to stick to the rule of silence. Silence is consent. Our eyes meet and hold. “Thanks.”

“For what?” I ask.

Calum starts for the entrance, leaving me behind. I jog after him, but he puts his long legs to use, creating a rift between us. He opens the front door and enters inside.

What did I do wrong?

I step into the house. “For what? Just tell me.” My voice echoes. I halt at the sight of our parents on the couch and replace my sneer with a smile. Calum uses that chance to disappear up the stairs. “Dani. Dad.”

“How was it?” Dad asks.

“Awesome,” I tell them. Being the little shit I am, I squeeze into the space between them. Dad laughs and ruffles my hair in retaliation. “Are you going to church tomorrow? I can drive you.”

Dad always attends the cathedral. I have stopped trying to understand his faith.

“You hate going to church,” Dad says. His brows arch so high they almost disappear into his hairline. He gives Dani a smile over my head. “She hasn’t gone to church since her mum died.”

Who wants to worship a God who can’t save good people?

Dani nudges me with her shoulder. “Is that true?”

“Yeah. But I want to drive you to church tomorrow. I’m now a good driver, I promise.” *And* it’s the only chance I’ll get to drive them anywhere. I throw my arms around my dad. “Daddy.”

“Fine.”

As soon as he says that, I race upstairs. When it’s dark enough, I head to Calum’s room. I knock once and try the door. It’s open. The lights are off with a figure curled under the cover. I lock the door. For a moment, hesitation flickers through me, and I reconsider the offer. What we are doing is wrong. Spending time with him won’t help me overcome my feelings. Dad will disapprove.

“Cathie?” he calls. He flips the cover and pats a spot on the bed. “Are you coming or what?”

I’m on the bed in seconds. Calum has taken off his shirt. The lower part of his body is hidden under the cover. Is he naked? I hope so. The bedside lamp brightens his face, and my finger traces his eyebrow. I glance at him, shy, as I take off my top. My skirt joins the top on the floor.

Feeling self-conscious, I wrap my arms around my lower belly. Calum props an elbow on the bed, and the cover rolls down an inch. He’s in his boxers. I sweep a hand over my underwear. If I had known we were doing things this way, I would have worn something cute or matching.

“Is this okay?” I ask.

“Yeah. Come here.” I draw closer to him. Skin to skin. Chest to back. He pushes my hair from my neck to place a kiss on my burning skin. There’s something sensually comforting about this moment. I want him to kiss me, but I’m satisfied with this. His fingers dance up and down my arm. My eyes close when he kisses my naked shoulder. “Thank you for being you, Catherine.”

“I didn’t even do anything,” I protest, but my cheeks hurt from smiling too much.

It earns me another kiss below my ear. “You don’t like going to church?” he says. I tug the cover over us, and his hand slips to the front to touch my belly. I nod against the pillow. His fingers sink into my scalp, he starts an erotic scalp massage, and an illicit moan escapes me. I twist in his comforting embrace, leaving only a hair’s breadth between us. He smiles. “Why?”

“I don’t know.” I know. It no longer makes any sense to me. “Do you enjoy going to church?”

“Mostly because of my mum. She’s Catholic.”

“Dad, too,” I say. He halts. I halt. I drag his hand to my scalp for him to resume his massage. A grin lifts a corner of his lips, and goosebumps spread across my back. “Where do dead men go?”

“No idea. Heaven?”

I run my fingers through his hair because I feel like it. His face lights up, and I continue it because he loves it. “I think my mum went to heaven.”

“What was she like?” he whispers.

My hand lowers to his chest. I flick a finger over his erect nipple, and he sighs. Guided by my nerves, I trace the line between his abs. His open admiration of me has my lips curving in a tiny smile. Calum plants a kiss on my forehead, and I tell myself it would have been a proper kiss if I were old enough. So I will wait. I will wait until I’m legal by this American man’s standards.

“Very pretty. Prettier than me. I learnt to sing from her. She sounds like an angel.”

Memories spill over me, unannounced, so abruptly. My eyes gain tears. Calum drags a finger across the shell of my nose. I know he understands. He sees the real me beneath the pink hair.

“She was silly, too. Always so careful. She liked to walk barefoot around the house. Dad hated it, but she did it anyway because it was so nice. He had to get used to it. They would

fight over stupid things like no canned food in the house because she always wanted us to eat healthy.”

Eat healthy. Little to no processed food. Drink healthy. Exercise. Avoid excess use of plastics.

And yet she’s gone, and Dad and I are still here with our unhealthy habits, which are partly fuelled by the payout of her life insurance and inheritance.

“What was your dad like?” I ask.

An emotion clouds his face. “Cool.” I lean in to kiss his dimple. “He wasn’t a talkative father.”

“My mum was talkative,” I add minutes later. She was the opposite of Dad. That was why they were perfect for each other. He filled in all her blanks. “Dad isn’t. I like talkative parents.”

A traitorous image of us as parents infiltrates my mind, and my lips spread in a smile.

Calum touches a finger to my bra. I hold my breath as he explores the design of the material. “This is cute.”

Heat creeps up my neck. “Yeah.” I kiss him again on his cheek. “Will you sing for me, Cal?”

He clears his throat, and the lyrics of Alleluia fall out of his lips, luring me into a peaceful sleep.

CHAPTER 28

Today



IT'S TODAY.

I feel it before I wake up. I feel it as I sluggishly get out of bed and dress up for school.

A chill eats at my bones, spreading through my veins. The windows are closed, but I shake, not from the weather but from a reminder of today's date. I glare at the zombie with tired eyes and pink hair in the mirror. She looks like me. It was a struggle to sleep last night. To act fine. I don't feel like doing anything. I want to curl up in bed and cry, but I can't miss school. Dad will know.

Our class group is active with birthday wishes to me. I ignore all of them, opening the door at the same time Calum steps out of his room. We bump into each other, and he sends me a smile. Unfortunately, we didn't spend the night together. He might have cheered me up against today.

"Hi," is what I say in a voice so cold he takes a step back. He recovers faster than I expected. A finger curls under my jaw, drawing my gaze to his face. He's worried, and I want to cry more than before. I bite my lips to keep it together. I must leave now. "Bye. I'll be late for school."

"Cathie."

Calum calls after me, but I dash downstairs. Our parents are eating. For Dad's sake, I put on a fake smile. Over the years, we have both found different and private ways to cope with today.

“I’m going with you today,” I tell him. To his wife. “Hi, Dani.” Her reply flies over my head as Calum’s footsteps draw closer. I walk over to Dad and pull him up. “Can we go now? Please.”

Dad glances at his bowl of oats and offers Dani a contrite smile. I grab his jacket from the chair and start for the entrance. Right before the door closes, I turn back to see Calum staring at us.

When we are tucked in, Dad asks us, “Are you okay?” I shrug. His hand stills on the seatbelt and conflicting emotions sweep across his face as he contemplates his choice of words. “It’s today.”

He’s not talking about my birthday, and I don’t care. I prefer to celebrate my birthday the next day. On the fifteenth instead of the fourteenth of February. As much as I want Dad to start the car and zoom off, he doesn’t. Today is one of those days he has so many things to say. I wasn’t thinking clearly when I ditched my ride with Calum. I may have ruined what we established.

“Yeah, we can celebrate tomorrow,” I tell him, hoping he drops the other subject.

The other subject forgotten, he says, “I can’t even wish you a—”

“Nope,” I interrupt.

“Cathie.”

“Fine.”

Body stretching to envelop me in a hug, Dad says, “Happy birthday, Cathie.” I am not smiling, and neither am I in tears. It’s progress. Staring at me with fatherly concern, we ignore the tension in the car. If he doesn’t say it, I won’t. I splay my palms on my knees. “What do you want?”

“Nothing.” But I will get something from him tomorrow.

I curl against the window, a sign I am done with this conversation. The car starts, and my eyes shut. Dad is watching me. It annoys me, but there’s nothing I can do.

Maybe I get extra moody on my birthdays, but it will pass. It must pass. Getting to school, we bid each other farewell but remain in the car, feeling a little lost and hurt. Dad holds me longer than he should have, then releases me.

Half of the whole day is a blur. My classes pass in a whirr. Soon, I'm in the dining hall with my best friends. It's a tad awkward because of me. They know about my birthday rule, so they can't offer any wishes today. Amelia nibbles on her sandwich while Rose and Taylor scarf their homemade lunch. Taylor picks up her phone. She giggles at the phone and starts texting.

It's probably a boy. Only a boy makes a girl giggle like that. I sneer at the boys milling at Jackson's table, scanning the cafeteria for *Him*. He's not on lunch duty today. Miss Gates is.

"Who are you texting?" I ask Taylor.

Rose laughs, bringing out her own phone. Taylor blushes. "Lucien asked me out."

Taylor has had a crush on Lucien since forever. It's great news, but today is not for that. I pluck out the lettuce from my uneaten burger. Our table grows quiet, and they stop eating. Everyone stares at me. I shouldn't have stayed on this side of the bench. It's three of them against me.

"What?" I snap. Amelia's glare stops me from saying more. She can be such a mama bear over us, and she's only older than me by a few months. "Tell them to stop staring at me like that."

Taylor coughs into her fist. "We got our first post on Boys Code."

The veil of melancholy lifts, and so do our moods. Taylor slides her phone to Amelia, who gives it to Rose. I'm the last one to see the post. My heart gallops to a stop.

It's him. It must be.

The post is about me, and it goes like this: *First, I'm glad something like this exists. Can anyone tell me what to do when the girl you like starts acting up? No, we didn't have a fight. She's just off and cold.*

He likes me? I hide the smile trying to break free. What if it's not him? We haven't made an official announcement on the GC community, and he's the only one I sent the link to. Passing Taylor her phone, I take out mine to read through the replies to his post. Boys are the worst.

Half the comments are telling him to fuck the moodiness out of her. My thighs tremble. I like that suggestion, but fucking won't work today. Another quarter suggests giving her space. Only a few mention talking or cuddling. My gaze drifts to the display name of the poster. *C*.

C is a dunce. Can he get any more obvious? His guitar's name is *C*. He called himself *C* the first time we met. I never forgot that. The girls are on their phones, except for Amelia. She winks. I blush. Does she also know it's him? I won't ask because I can't tell any of them about us.

The bell rings, and an uproar breaks out in the dining hall as we are leaving. We pay it no mind since it's common. The other half of the day is a painful bore. By the end of my last class, I'm ready to leave this building. I make up a silly excuse to Rose and have Amelia drop me at home.

At my house, Amelia asks, "Are you okay?" *No*. She opens her glove compartment to retrieve an envelope she gives to me. I open it. It's a birthday card. "Eighteen is a huge number, Cathie."

"Thanks." I hug her and race out of the car before my tears embarrass me. Sinking into the bed with the cover pulled to my chin, I tell the ceiling, "You should have been here. With me."

A knock on the door jolts me awake. I rub a hand over my face to clear the rest of the sleep. Light filters in through the curtains. There's a shuffle behind the door, then another knock. If I ignore it, they will leave. A quick succession of knocks follows. I groan into the pillow. *Fuck off*.

"Go away. Don't come in."

The door opens, but Calum doesn't enter. He waves a tub of ice-cream. "I come bearing gifts."

Because it's ice-cream. "Okay." He steps in with some chips and shuts the door with his foot. I bite the inside of my cheek and cast him a tentative glance. "Will you please lock the door?"

Calum drops the ice-cream and chips on the nightstand. I'm tempted to reach across and stuff my face in the ice-cream to avoid conversation. His figure casts a shadow on my bed. Standing by my side with a frown, he almost looks intimidating. I tilt my head to meet his gaze and sigh.

"You missed practice," Calum states. I nod. "Why?"

Sitting up, I fold my legs under me and smoothen the creases on my bed. "Will you please sit?"

"Will you please tell me what's wrong?" he counters.

Not yet. "I want a kiss from you first."

"Cathie."

His emotions are bare for me to see. He wants to kiss me, too, but I'm too young for him. Well, my stepbrother is wrong. I'm not young. I'm eighteen. It was okay before. It will be okay now.

"It's my birthday today, Cal." His hand runs through his scattered hair. I lock my arms around myself. He can't say no. My heart can't handle the rejection. "It can be a birthday gift to me."

"Happy birthday."

I shrug. "I don't really like celebrating it today."

That gets him to sit down and copy my stance. I palm his knees, and he slips his hands inside my shorts. I'm not sure what we are both doing, but my fingers inch further up his thighs. His eyes never leave mine as he explores my skin. Sparks light my body with each touch. A part of my brain shuts off, and I automatically lean forward to get more of him and the birthday kiss.

"Why?" he whispers.

Calum's voice carries into the air and stays there. I don't feel like talking, so my eyes fall to our intertwined hands. He pulls away, and I regret not telling him what he wants to hear. I don't have to worry so much about it. He drops the chips and ice-cream on the paper bag in the little space between our bodies.

Inserting a chip into the tub, Calum says, "Open." My lips part, and he feeds me. I chew slowly. It's hard to do otherwise with him watching me intently. "If you don't want to talk about it now or anytime soon, I understand. We didn't do much singing today, so you missed only a little."

That's great to hear. The competition starts soon, so rehearsals are almost daily. After munching on more than half the chips alone, I shove the only available spoon into the ice-cream and scoop some to offer him.

His blues narrow in a warning. "It's for you alone, Cathie."

"Open," I state. He glares daggers at me but eventually relents. On his second mouthful, I add, "It feels wrong to celebrate my birthday today."

"Huh?"

"Today makes it six years since she died," I begin.

Some days are easier than others, but it's worse on my birthday. It's not a reminder that I'm plus one. It is an awful reminder God took my role model away from me today. My eyes leak, and I angrily wipe the evidence staining my cheeks. I scratch my tattoo out of nervousness.

"It feels wrong to celebrate life on the day she died, so I celebrate it on the fifteenth instead."

Calum is quiet, and I raise tear-filled eyes at him. He packs up our unfinished snack and pats his legs, but I don't move. "Come here, sweetheart."

Butterflies flutter in my belly. It's what he called me that day. I didn't realise I missed hearing it. He lifts me onto his lap, and his thumb brushes the tears on my cheek. My mind blanks as his lips touch mine. It's a repeat of the kiss that happened in our living room the first day I saw him at our

house. Only that I will never consider it a kiss. It's too short. Too chaste. It's a tease.

"Not really, Cathie." He touches my bottom lip, and my tongue darts out to wet his fingertip. I want an actual kiss. The one that makes the world stop. "It's not wrong to celebrate life today."

Too stunned, too in love with his lips parting slowly to let out soft breaths, I mutter, "What?"

"Your birthday," he says. "It depends."

If Calum is tired of my weight, of me straddling him, he shows it with a smile. "On what?"

Calum's arms drop to my waist, and I lower them to my arse. He need not be scared around me.

I want this as much as he does.

"On how you look at it," he replies.

There's only one way to look at it, but I don't say that. Moments like this remind me of our age differences and life experiences. He's staring up at me with a tiny smile that says more than he's letting on, and I feel young, so small. I touch my forehead to his and poke his dimple. He laughs.

"How?" I ask in the same whisper.

"How she lived." I don't get it but don't want to sound foolish by voicing my confusion. I drag a curly strand down his forehead, but it curls back into its original form. He wraps a hand around my wrist. "Was her life well spent? For the few years she was here with you, was it fulfilling?"

More than anything. She always claimed she had all she needed on earth with me and my dad.

"My dad was a dick sometimes," Calum says so casually, like it's normal. "But I doubt that was the case with your mum."

"It was not." I cup Calum's face, earning his full stare. His gaze strips me of my confidence, and a veil of shyness descends over me. My smile falters. I feel like switching

topics to remind him he's not alone, but I also recognise that as me being a coward. It's much easier to talk about someone else's pain. "Mum lived her life to the fullest. Always going after what she wanted."

I hiss out a shaky breath as he palms my back. My nipples harden to pebbles as his lips inch closer to mine, and my brain shuts down. The only serious word I can conjure is *kiss*. I need a kiss. He doesn't kiss me, but his lips brush mine in a promise I look forward to him fulfilling.

"Do you think she would have wanted you to be moping around on your birthday? Looking like a bunny. My cute bunny." I shake my head. She would have expected more. A birthday party would have been on the list. He drags his finger behind my ear. "Don't think of today as a bad day, Cathie. Think of it as a celebration of life. Her life and yours by honouring her memory."

I hide my face in the curve of his shoulder and wrap my arms around him. "You are so wise."

"Not really. I'm just older." His voice falls as he whispers, "And I should know better than this."

"Don't think about it." I palm his cheek and tell him, "It's me and you, here and now."

Something in my words relaxes him. He hugs me tight for a nanosecond. The air sizzles with our thinly veiled desire. I want more of this: his hot, naked skin on mine, even if only briefly.

"Do you want to cuddle?" I hold my breath until he nods. My hands move to the hem of his shirt. I pull it over his head, then take mine off. His nipples are as hard as mine. I let him know that by unhooking my bra, and he drags in a breath. I place his hands on my chest. "Touch me."

A shiver races through me as his hands wander to my belly. He tickles my belly button, and my legs shake. With him, it's different. His touches depend on the occasion. Right now, it's curious, innocent, and comforting. My fingers curl under the waistband of my shorts, but he stops me.

“Is it okay?” I ask, and he nods. “Okay.”

I slide it off, leaving me in only my knickers. Our eyes lock, and our worlds realign. He touches my boobs so softly a cry tears out of my lips. I kneel, my breath shaky as his hands dip between my legs to caress my inner thighs. He looks up at me, blue eyes wide, curious, and mischievous.

“We should cuddle,” he says.

The exploration stops, and he lowers me to the bed. It’s time to cuddle, so I think, but his face continues to hover over mine. My breath sticks in my throat when he tucks a hair back in place.

“Happy birthday, Cathie. You’re a superstar.”

Tears fill my eyes. A birthday wish has never sounded so simple and sincere as his. “Thank—”

Calum claims my lips without warning. My mind blanks. His demanding tongue nudges my mouth open, and as I kiss him back, I understand why kissing has felt different since that night.

It’s because Calum is a man, and I spent nearly half of my life kissing only boys.

CHAPTER 29

One last kiss



KISSING a man differs from kissing a boy. To be more specific, kissing Calum is different. It is a piece of heaven. A breath of fresh air after being underwater in the bathtub for too long. I'm thinking of our kiss as I get out of bed this morning, as I brush my hair in front of the mirror, and as I reply to all the chats from last night. I'm still thinking of it as I hear his door opening.

My door opens before he knocks. I step aside, and he enters. The distance causes the hairs on my skin to rise. I need another kiss. Once our eyes meet, I know he's also thinking about it.

"Can I kiss you?" I ask because I know he won't.

It's evident in his eyes that Calum wants this too, but he replies, "That was a birthday gift."

"This can be a post-birthday gift."

Calum laughs. Hooking an arm around my waist, he drags me closer without kissing me. We should leave, but I want to hold on to this moment a little longer. I mess up his neat hair.

"You're so naughty."

"I liked it when you called me sweetheart," I say to him. What are we? No idea, but I like it and want him to be mine in all ways. "Did you create an account on Boys Code under the name C?"

A wedge appears between his brows. He shakes his head. "No idea what you're talking about."

“So you didn’t create an account yesterday—”

“Do you want your kiss or not?”

I answer by pressing my lips to his. His tongue slips into my mouth, battling with mine until I willingly surrender. I lose track of everything except him and the taste of his lips. My mouth widens for him to explore every corner, and our tongues glide like singers on their first tour.

Switching positions, my back digs into the door, and he pins my hands above my head. He stops for a heartbeat to catch his breath, and his mouth covers mine instantly. I follow his lead, giving a piece of myself into the kiss, pouring my emotions. When we finally come up for air the second time, we are both panting. His hand slides behind my head to cup my neck, and my lips spread in a smile. Right now, he’s my Cal. And when he grins, I feel it deep in my belly.

Our unspoken words comfort us. The quietness draws us into a bubble where this moment is all that matters. Someone pounds on the door. We jump. My eyes find Calum’s worried ones. The things he doesn’t say float to the surface, but I choose to ignore them. If we are careful, we will never get caught. Besides, the door is locked. Dad never enters my room without my consent.

“Cathie.”

I clear my throat. “Good morning, Dad.”

“Morning. Are you ready? I’m leaving.”

Because I went with him yesterday, he assumes I’ll do so today. “It’s fine. I’ll go with Cal.”

“Who?”

Calum pinches me. What? Oh. “Calum. I mean Calum.” My stepbrother attempts to step back, and my hands circle his wrists. It was an honest mistake. “Calum is taking me. Don’t wait up.”

“Alright. You need anything?”

A groan of frustration escapes me, and a quiet Calum frees himself from my grasp.

“No. Bye.”

“Bye.”

Dad’s fading footsteps go on forever. I hug Calum as soon as I’m sure Dad is gone.

“I’m sorry, Cal.” When he doesn’t reciprocate the hug, I put on my best smile. “Don’t be upset.”

His arms loop around my waist. He plants a kiss on my hair, and my lips widen in a smile. All is forgotten. I grab my school bag and lace our fingers, but he stops me from opening the door.

“We can’t keep doing this, Cathie,” he says.

It’s so random, as random as the splicing of my heart. My brows twitch. I thought... I thought he enjoyed kissing me, too. Calum locks both of his hands in his hair. His blues find mine, and my heart fixes itself. He’s so good at breaking and repairing my heart without saying a word. I touch his jaw, and he plants a kiss on the inside of my wrist, then reaches up to caress my ear.

“Why do you keep doing that?” I ask. He shrugs, and I trail my fingertip over his ear. A content sigh rolls out of his lips. His frustration isn’t from doing the wrong thing. It’s from enjoying it. “Cal.”

“Cathie, we can’t.” We can’t do what? Kiss? Talk? Cuddle? Have sex? Because he is wrong. I want to do all of that and more with him. “We cannot.”

My arms drop to his shoulders. “I know,” I finally admit.

“I’m your stepbrother.”

My head falls back against the door. I peer at him from hooded eyes and whisper, “I know.”

“And your choir director.”

For every reason he gives me, I can think of two more to continue this. We belong together.

“I know.”

“I could get in trouble, Cathie.” His tone is more urgent, pleading. Our foreheads almost touch, and he cups my cheek. My heart sighs. I want this forever. “We both could. We almost did.”

“Fine.” Relief flies across his face. He hugs me briefly, but I hold onto him. Looking down to know why I won’t let go, he’s met with puppy eyes and pouted lips. “How about one last kiss?”

Maybe a memory to store for rainy days. He wrings his hand, but I don’t back down. “Cathie.”

“Please.” His resolve weakens, but I don’t smile. I stand on my toes and brush my lips against his. Doubts cloud his eyes, and I place his hand on my chest. My heart beats too fast. “Cal.”

Calum’s remaining hesitation crumbles. He tucks one finger under my jaw and stares into my eyes for so long I’m sure I’ll melt. The kiss is gentle, softer. It feels like a goodbye, and I loathe goodbyes.

I jerk back and break off the kiss. I was wrong. This can’t be our last kiss.

“We will be late,” I murmur.

A hint of curiousness shadows his features. I wrench the door open and march to the stairs before Calum queries me. Dad is gone. Dani is clearing the table when we reach downstairs.

“You’re late. Both of you,” she says. Pointing to the leftover breakfast, she adds, “Hurry up.”

Like two faithful kids, we settle down to eat while Dani updates us on the latest happenings. We keep a straight face during breakfast, but once in the car, we crack up with laughter.

“Your mum,” I say more to myself. She’s such a talkative.

“Yeah?” He winks. “She’s the best.”

The car purrs to life. Calum spares me a glance and smiles.

It encourages me to ask, “Can we still cuddle and talk? I don’t want us to stop.”

“Neither do I.” Flutters. Rapid fluttering in my chest. I want him to want me. “We will cuddle, talk, duet, eat chips and ice-cream.” I smile at his mention of my comfort food. “But no kisses.”

The butterflies in my stomach die a torturously slow death. He didn’t have to add that part.

“Why not?”

Twisting his body to face me, he replies, “It will make things complicated. I don’t want that.”

I want it.

Once the car starts, he places his hand on the console, and I cover it with mine. The car grows silent except for the song playing on the radio. At the traffic light, I inch forward and place a kiss on his cheek. His face lights up with the most beautiful smile. For now, everything is fine.

I carry that positivity to my classes. On my way to the dining hall, someone crashes into me. She lets out a string of apologies, and the only thing I do is smile and join her to pick up her books.

The girls are already at our table when I enter the dining. We have an addition today. Lucien. I stifle a groan when Taylor kisses him, scanning the hall for Jackson. If Lucien is eating here, Jackson should be around the corner, probably waiting for an invitation he won’t be getting.

Jackson waves at me from his table. I wave back. He motions for me to join them, but I point at our table, quickening my pace when he jumps out of his seat. That boy doesn’t get the hint.

“Cathie, wait up.”

The dining falls quiet, and unwanted eyes turn to me. Amelia shoots me a goofy grin. I follow her gaze to the source of her amusement, and my feet crash to a stop. He’s here. Jackson catches up to me.

“Hi,” Jackson says.

“Hi,” I reply.

Jackson walks me to my table, but my gaze strays a few times to the man who walked in. Calum is on lunch duty today. I dump my bag on the bench, squeezing myself between Amelia and the wall. She throws an arm around my shoulders and wiggles her brows. Something is not right.

“Where am I supposed to sit?” Jackson asks with a groan. *At his table or on the floor.* He plucks me off the chair like I weigh nothing, and Amelia slides closer to the wall to make space for us. Setting me down on the floor so we are standing face to face, he says, “I had no choice, Cathie.”

He had plenty.

“I want to give you something,” he whispers.

Why here? I understand why when I see the curious eyes centred on us. Jackson is sending a signal for others to know I’m off-limits. He wants me for himself alone. He’s not as subtle as he thinks, and neither are my best friends. They are pretending to mind their business, but every few seconds, their gazes dart at us. Even Calum is staring at us, his lips drawn tight in a harsh line.

Using his body as a shield from Calum’s eyes, I nod for him to continue. His hand disappears behind him, and he pulls out a small rectangular box. By now, we have everyone’s attention.

Jackson opens my hand and drops it on my palm. My lips twitch in a shaky smile.

“What’s this?”

“Open it,” he says. My heart thuds. I slip a pink strand of hair behind my ear. “Open it, Cathie.”

I open it, and my breath catches. He pulls out the gold bracelet and locks it around my wrist. My eyes fly to his face, and he coughs twice. I can’t get a word past the lump in my throat.

“I know you don’t enjoy celebrating on the fourteenth, so I had to wait until today. Happy birthday, Cathie. You’re one of the best people I know.” Aw, he remembered my birthday. My cheeks pink. Something squeezes my heart, and my eyes water. “Hey, don’t cry. Do you like it?”

Four pairs of eyes watch from my table to know my response. I turn my wrist this way and that way, and light from the wall catches the bracelet, bathing it in an ethereal glow. I like it.

“Yes. It’s pretty.”

Jackson sighs. “Thank God,” he says, and we chuckle. Some of the attention shifts from us. Though he’s blocking my view of Calum, I feel his blues on me. “Happy birthday once again.”

“Thanks.”

“One more thing.” I push a foot forward, unbelievably shy. I’m not used to receiving gifts from boys because I’ve never given enough of myself for them to want more than plain fucks and a good time in bed from me. My best friend gifts me often, but it’s not the same with Jackson. We are—used to be fuck buddies. A pink rose appears in front of me. Jackson tucks it in my hair, and I blush to my roots. This is odd but in a wonderful way. “This one is for Valentine’s Day.”

“I didn’t get you anything,” I reply, looking into his brown eyes shining with genuine care. I was born on Valentine’s Day, but her death also ruined that day for me. “Sorry. I didn’t know.”

Jackson’s thumb caresses my cheek in the gentlest of touches. The day Amelia said he liked me, I didn’t see it. Even now, I don’t see it completely, but the dynamics of our relationship seem to evolve. He wants to be more than a fuck buddy. It makes more sense to date someone my age. There will be no more sneaking around for a kiss, only to get a regretful speech about it later.

But I choose Calum.

“That’s okay.” His voice lowers to a seductive whisper. “You can make it up with a kiss.”

The gifts must have messed with my senses. I brush my lips against his cheek. Someone laughs.

Opening and closing his mouth, Jackson settles for a nod. “See you after school, yeah?” He takes a step back and retraces his step to plant a firm kiss on my cheek. “We need to talk about us.”

Uh-oh.

My eyes meet Calum’s. He’s at the other end of the hall. His gaze wanders to the rose in my hair, and he looks away. I lower myself to my spot beside Amelia, and the table goes silent.

“That was hot and so cute,” Rose says. Her eyes take on a dreamy look. Such a romantic. Taylor agrees with a nod, and Lucien snorts. Amelia is quiet. “I bet he will ask you out after school.”

Me too. “I don’t think so,” I whisper.

“Jackson sure will,” Lucien mutters in his deep voice. Taylor rubs her hand over his scalp, and he pouts for a kiss. He is sporting a buzz cut. His green eyes return to my face. “He told us.”

Great. I’m about to disappoint the poor boy. I steal a chip from Amelia’s plate. The girls start a conversation I’m not interested in. Calum is still avoiding my gaze, so I take out my phone and text him a sad face emoji. He glances up and palms his pocket without retrieving the phone.

Our eyes collide, and I’m the first one to smile. His responding smile is so brief it might as well have been my imagination. Amelia nudges me with a foot. I glare at my best friend for ruining the moment, but she picks up her phone and motions for me to do the same. A text comes in.

A: Have you fucked him?

I look up from my phone, eyes widened in shock, horror, and disgust. She nods at my phone.

Me: What are you talking about?

A: So you have?

Me: Fucked who?

A: Mr Dissick. Or should I say C?

Blimey.

My heart slams against my ribcage. I backtrack. Did I say anything about Calum to her? She taps a finger on the table, waiting for my reply. Taylor laughs at something Lucien says. She has liked him since year eight, and he never took notice of her. What changed? Why now?

Me: No.

Amelia rolls her eyes, and my defences rise. First, my dad. Now, her. Is this a fucked-up sign?

Me: Why would you even say that?

A: I don't know? You stepped out of his car this morning with this big mischievous smile that's on your face for the whole of chemistry class. I know you hate chemistry Catherine. Now you won't stop giving him the fuck me eyes and he won't stop looking at our table. Did you fuck him?

Me: I don't hate chemistry anymore.

A: Did you?

Me: No. C just helps me with chemistry. I don't even like him like that. He's all right.

A: Fine. Be careful. Don't do anything stupid.

I ram my elbow into her side playfully, and she does the same. A smile touches our lips. For the rest of our lunch, I don't glance in my stepbrother's direction. When Jackson saunters to the table and stretches his hand to me, I take it.

My conscience prickles me when a smile lights up his boyishly handsome face, and I grin back. It may be wrong, but I am looking out for me and Calum. If we will continue what we have, then we need a cover. Jackson can be our cover.

Jackson leads me to the door. I look back to see if Calum's watching us, but my eyes meet Regina's instead. She looks away, but not fast enough for me to sense her mood. She liked Jackson in year eleven, but he liked me back then. Always has. I slide my hand into Jackson's, and we exit the hall.

"A quid for your thoughts," Jackson says.

"I really like the bracelet." As expected, he grins. I cringe a bit when his arm hooks around my waist. Only Calum may do that. But for now, I offer him a fake smile. "It's beautiful. Thanks."

"Not as beautiful as you are, Cathie."

We arrive at the front of my class, and Jackson opens the door. "Thanks."

After a kiss on my cheek, he walks away with a bounce in his step. I'm callous for leading him on, but what other choice do I have? I find a seat in the back row and bring out my phone. The notification light blinks. It's Him. My smile is instant. Amelia's words resurface, but I don't let it ruin my mood. I'll be careful.

C: Was he bothering you?

Me: No.

C: Good

Me: Jealous?

C: Why would I be?

Me: I'm going to kiss him.

C: No you won't.

Calum is right. I won't kiss Jackson or any other person because he is the only man I want to kiss. I put my phone out of sight, my gaze following the movement of the teacher who walks in. Classes blend into each other. I'm constantly distracted. Soon, the bell for closing hour goes off.

Jackson is outside my class, waiting. He helps me with my school bag. We stare at each other and laugh at the same time.

From the distance, Taylor and Lucien wave at us. We wave back.

“They look good together,” I say when they disappear down the corner.

“Right?” We fall into step, and he slinks his hand into mine. “Told Lucien she likes him.”

My steps falter. I lift my head. “You did?”

“Yeah. If he didn’t act on it, someone else would have.” He slows even more for me to meet up with him. “You mentioned it twice, and I thought you would be happy seeing them together.”

“Oh.” I don’t remember telling him that, but it’s obvious he has been paying attention to our chats while I barely listen to him. He did it for me. Another stab of guilt hits my chest. “Thanks.”

“It’s all good. Lucien liked her too,” he says. I make a face, and he laughs. Lucien is Jackson’s friend and teammate. He’s not bad, but Taylor is not the type of girl he goes for. But Jackson is right. I’m happy they are together. “I was just as shocked as you are. Big guy blushed when I mentioned it. He didn’t say nothing earlier ’cos why would she want to date someone like him?”

“You’ll be surprised,” I mutter. “She adores him.”

Silence falls over us again, and my heart drums faster in my chest. Knowing what he is about to ask makes me nervous. I misstep, and he steadies me. We stop at the foot of the stairs leading to the hall. He weaves a hand through his hair and sighs. It’s rare to see a nervous Jackson.

“Cathie... I know what you said, but I think we can make this work,” Jackson starts. My heart skips a beat when he grabs my shoulders gently. Every nerve in my body screams for me to stop him before he says those words, but my lips seal tight. “Will you please be my girlfriend?”

CHAPTER 30

Sweetheart



CALUM DOESN'T COME for practice. Mr Prescott is a good choirmaster, but I want Calum. I need him. In his absence, we do things differently today. He merges the three of us—me, Regina, and Christie with the rest of the choir. Most of us sing half-heartedly. By the end of practice, I'm ready to bolt out of here and find him. But I need a ride. With Rose close on my heels, we start for her car. There's a text from him waiting on my phone. He better have a good explanation.

Rose drives out of the parking lot. I unlock my phone and put on the radio to discourage her from striking up a conversation. Calum's text is from an hour ago. He knew he wouldn't be here for practice, so why didn't he say that earlier?

C: Sweetheart you're going home with Rose today.

A smile fights its way to my lips. No, fuck him and his text. He can't bribe me with that.

Me: Why? Where are you?

"Did Jackson ask you out?"

My head jerks up at Rose's question. Seconds later, I slide my phone into my pocket. "No," I mutter. Rose shuts off the radio. If she had turned to me, she might have caught the lie. "Why?"

"I saw you two together." Apparently, Amelia is not the only one rooting for us. For a second, I consider telling her Jackson's role in Taylor's new relationship but decide against

it. It might score him more points in their books. Two, they don't need to know. "He didn't mention it?"

"Nope," I murmur. I unzip and zip my school bag to distract myself. "Maybe he got cold feet."

"Yeah. I'm sure he will ask. Can't wait for Ryan to ask me out," she says, looking away from the road for the first time. "We can go on a couple's date with Taylor and Lucien. Lucien is cute."

"Can't wait," I answer with false enthusiasm.

The wind grazes the hand I shoot out of the car. I let my hair fall down my shoulders in loose, pink waves. I will Rose's car to go faster than it's moving, but fate must have a thing against me. The green light turns red seconds away from us crossing to the other side, and I groan.

Rose cuts me a look. "Got somewhere to be?"

My foot stops drumming on the floor. I comb my hair with my fingers and murmur, "Nope."

After what feels like ages, we reach the house. I scurry to the front door and pull it open. Dani is curled against my dad on the couch, seeing a movie. She attempts to sit up, but Dad places a hand on her shoulder to keep her down. Dani throws me a smile, and I walk over to hug her.

"Is Calum home?" I ask.

"No. Not yet," Dad offers. "How was school?"

He can find out from all those nosy teachers who report me to him. "Great. Hey, Dani." At his prolonged stare at my bracelet, I stretch my hand so he can inspect it. "Jackson gave it to me."

Dani finally sits up, and so do I, but on the floor. I drop my bag at my feet.

"He is not a bad kid," Dad says. I listen for the things he doesn't say. We never discussed boys, but he knows I have a thing with Jackson. Nothing gets past your father if he's the headteacher. "It's nice."

“Yeah. I’ll leave you two to it.”

They resume their movie almost as soon as I leave. I pause on the stairs, and a smile crosses my lips when Dani feeds Dad some popcorn. I think I want what those oldies have. Cuddles, kisses, and popcorn. Calum’s room is locked. I’m so used to seeing him at home that it feels weird. There is a gift box on my bed when I open the door. It can only be one person who did this.

Dad. I pry the box open and erupt in a fit of giggles. Taking out the snow globe with a singer inside, I shake it, and the white flakes scatter around the female singer. It’s exactly the kind of gift Mum would have given me to remind me my dreams are valid. That it’s okay to have a different goal. Dad is the best for remembering and for bringing Calum into my life. Amelia’s words echo louder in my head. I drop the box inside my wardrobe without sifting through the rest of my gifts. Changing out of my clothes, I get into the bed and spread out my arms.

What we are doing is not wrong.

But it feels so wrong.

How will Dad and Dani react? They want us to be happy, but I doubt they want us to find happiness with ourselves. I like that he makes me feel and gets me excited about the little things. That doesn’t feel wrong. As my thoughts battle, my eyes close, and I fall asleep. I wake up to someone tapping me. I know it’s him before I open my eyes because I left the door open for him.

“Cal?” I murmur, sitting up.

In the light, the top of his hair takes on a gold hue, and my fingers itch to run through it.

“Yes. Do you want to come to my room?”

I cross my arms below my boobs. Calum looks disturbed. His shoulders hunch as he slides his fingers into his front pockets. Why isn’t he in bed with me? Why is he standing there?

My neck strains so I can get a better look at his face. “You missed practice. Where were you?”

“I’ll tell you later.”

Kicking my legs over the bed, I plant my feet on the floor. “Then I’m not coming to your room.”

He squats between my legs and places his hands on my knees. Heat travels up to my chest, and his lips tilt in a smirk. “You don’t want to cuddle?”

Of course I want to, but he doesn’t have to know that. Plus, he left me in school without a word.

My lips pucker for a kiss. “Bribe me.” One kiss to my jaw, then another on my other cheek. I shake my head and tap my lips. Calum looks at the door and pulls me up to my feet. “Not fair.”

“In my room,” he whispers against my lips.

Once we are in his room, Calum locks the door. I also locked mine in case our parents show up. He takes my hand and guides me to his study table, and I clap a hand over my mouth. Tears appear in my eyes. I thought Jackson was so thoughtful about his gifts, but Calum is better.

He’s... he’s everything.

Two rainbow candles sit in the middle of the cupcake. Numbers one and eight. Calum lifts the cupcake for me to blow out my candles. My heart swells as I make a wish for us to be together.

“Get it?” he teases. He sets the candles on the table. “One. Eight. Eighteen for your age.”

“I like cupcakes,” I tell him. Mum liked to bake them. When she died, I moved to a new comfort food. I push myself on my tiptoes, lips almost touching his. “I really like my gift, Mr Dissick.”

“That’s not a gift. It’s a cupcake.”

“It’s a gift,” I insist. My eyes close, and I moan in appreciation as I take my first bite of the cupcake. It’s rich,

moist, fluffy, and sugary. Calum accepts the tiny piece I offer him, but instead of eating it, he feeds me. We spend the next few seconds doing that until the cake finishes. A soothing silence falls over us. My arms hang from his waist, and my head falls back. “Is that where you went?”

“No.” My body misses him as soon as he steps back. His hand vanishes into his back pocket, and he pulls out a locket. “I went to get this.” The heart-shaped locket dangles between us. I hesitate for a second before collecting it. It’s cold against my palm. “Would you like to sit?”

Without waiting for my response, Calum steers us to the bed. My lips split in a small smile as my stepbrother hoists me onto his lap. I open the locket, and a ball of warmth unfurls inside my belly. Tears pour out of my eyes, uninhibited. I touch a fingertip to the baby picture on one side of the locket. The second picture is one of me and my mum from such a long time ago it’s grainy.

His lips brush my cheek, tasting my tears as he kisses me chastely. I toy with the pendant.

“How did you get this?”

“The pictures? From your dad.”

“He didn’t ask questions?” I ask. Calum shakes his head. “He trusts you.”

Affection burns bright in his blues. Calum palms the pendant and says, “You were a cute baby.” A cute, freckled, chubby baby. His forehead touches mine, spreading warmth through my veins. I feel all the things he doesn’t say. “I wanted to give you something to remember your mum, so you’ll always have her close to your heart and remember to live life to the fullest, even on your birthdays.” *Heart, please be still.* But it doesn’t listen. My chest tightens. “Do you like it, Cathie?”

“I love it,” I say. And I love him. I think I do. I kiss him again, sharing my heart and unspoken words with him because I have no better way of expressing my gratitude. “Thank you, Cal.”

“No biggie, sweetheart. I don’t want to sleep yet. Do you want to talk? We can chill outside.”

Fireworks explode in my chest. He grins. I grin.

“Will you carry me?” I ask. He stands, and I bury my face in his shoulder. The evening breeze welcomes us to the balcony. He sits, and my legs circle his waist. “When’s your birthday?”

“December 15. Why?” So I will know how long I have to prepare the best gift for him. Calum weaves his fingers into my hair, and my eyelids flutter like a bird’s wings. “How was practice?”

“Not fun,” I say and palm his face. “I missed you, Cal.”

He touches his finger to my ear. “I missed you too, Cathie. Didn’t think it would take so long.”

“It was worth it.” Shifting into a new position so I’m not straddling him but still seated on his leg, I slide an arm around his waist. My head relaxes on his chest. I replay the events from school. “Jackson asked me out.”

Calum stiffens. “Oh. What did you say?”

“That I’ll think about it.”

False. I told Jackson no, and he begged me to think about it. “Why didn’t you say no?” he asks. My head rounds up. Is that what he wants? I can do that. “Sorry. I mean, will you say yes?”

“I don’t know. The girls think I might need a boyfriend. I think I agree with them.”

Calum inhales softly. I hope he hears the desperation and plea in my voice for him to ask me out.

“You shouldn’t. You don’t need a boyfriend,” he tells me. My lips part and close. I don’t need a boyfriend. I need him. “Do you want me to sing for you?” My smile is instant. “Any requests?”

“I Love You Baby, by Surf Mesa. You know it?”

Calum's arm loosens around my waist. "Choose another song, Cathie." I stare blankly at him, and he hugs me. His lips touch my shoulder, and I hide my face behind my palms. "Please."

We end up falling asleep without him singing. When I wake up, I'm alone in my bed. The coldness of the pendant against my chest unlocks memories from last night. It was one of my best nights. I need him to warm these lonely nights, and more than that, I need him to be mine.

What if Calum loves me? I want him to love me, to see me as an adult. Halting in front of the mirror, I open the locket and place it beside the snow globe. Tears shimmer in my eyes, and my knees weaken. A tiny wave of guilt stabs me in the chest when I spot Jackson's bracelet sitting between my makeup kit. I slide the gift into its box with a mental note to return it to him.

In the shower and alone with my thoughts, the guilt intensifies. Logic interferes, and I'm left questioning myself. We need a cover. No. Calum is right. I don't need a boyfriend. We cannot work. I'll tell him there's nothing to think about. I can do that, but we still need a believable cover.

Calum knocks as I exit the bathroom. It must be him because Dad said he would leave earlier for the PTA meeting this morning. Calum is not an academic staff. I doubt he qualifies to attend. The knock intensifies, and I tighten the towel around my chest. Passing in front of the mirror brings my feet to a stop. Our relationship is still in the early stages. The towel might scare him. I ditch it and shrug on my robe. I don't want another "*We can't do this*" lecture.

I want us to do this. I want him to kiss me, cuddle me, fuck me, sing to me, give me presents. I want him to do every single thing boyfriends do with their girlfriends. Does that mean we are dating? I have no idea. But I won't ask. Asking might ruin what we have if he hates labels.

"Good morning," Calum greets when I open the door with a grin. I step aside, and he walks in without another invitation. My lip catches between my teeth as my gaze sweeps over him.

I stare at him, thinking about what's right and wrong. Am I still allowed to kiss him? Without thinking, I push him to the bed. "Cathie, what are you doing?" But he doesn't try to leave. His arms slip around my waist, and our foreheads touch. My breath tangles with his. "Catherine."

"Calum."

He flips positions, so I'm under him. "I want to kiss you."

Yes. Yes. Yes.

He doesn't have to ask. My body melts into his, and he captures my lips in a torturously slow kiss, refusing to hasten the pace and forcing me to slow down to enjoy the moment. I feel every bit of him. The bulge pressing against my belly, his fingers sinking into my hair. I need him. I need his hands on my skin, between my legs. Everywhere.

"Calum," I gasp out to voice my request, but he reclaims my lips. My senses heighten. I'm a live wire under his touch, wiggling in his embrace. I bring his hand to my stomach. "Mr Dissick."

My world turns upside down when Calum steps back. He smoothens his hair out of his face.

"Fuck, Cathie." Yes, I want him to fuck me. I lick my lips, and his thumb caresses my nipple. My robe must have opened, but I don't cover up. "You make me want to do more than kiss you."

"Then do it," I urge him. "I'm eighteen now."

"And you still have school," he finishes for me. We both laugh, and my arms circle his waist so he's flush against me, and we are breathing the same air. "I'm still your choir director." I kiss him before he completes the sentence and ruins the mood. Nothing can ruin us. "Ready to go?"

"Not yet." He frowns, his gaze sweeping over my body. "You can touch me, Cal."

He fists his hands over his eyes. "I shouldn't."

I slide off the bed and stop in front of the wardrobe. My heart clenches, and I hold on to the door for support. Calum

hugs me from behind, his breath fanning my ear. “Sweetheart.”

Peeling his hands off me, I pull out the hanger with my uniform. “I need to change.”

“I’m trying my best, Cathie,” he whispers.

The problem is, his best involves putting barriers between us. I manage to change without baring my body to him. When I turn, Calum is right there, staring at me with the saddest smile. I try to walk past him, but he pulls me back. There’s no distance between us, but I don’t lean into him.

“We will be late,” I say. I’ll put on my jacket and socks when we are ready to leave.

“Classes won’t be starting early today because of the PTA. We... we have a few hours.”

“We?” I whisper. He nods. This is why it’s confusing. “What are the rules?”

“You know them,” he answers.

I hate those rules, but I also want to know what it feels like to cuddle with him during the day.

“Is your mum home?” I ask. He shakes his head. “Do you want to cuddle?”

“Okay.”

Carrying me bridal style to the bed, he plants a kiss behind my ear. I roll onto my side to face him, and he offers me a smile. We can be everything he wants if he would stop holding back.

Wrinkles form on Calum’s shirt as he moves, and I try to smoothen them. He grabs my wrist, flattening my hand on his chest. “I will have to iron this again. But that’s okay. It’s worth it.”

Number one reason you should never fall in love with a musician is because they are good with words. Even if they don’t mean it, they know how to sound like they do. But Calum doesn’t need to act. He means what he says, which is

the problem. He might like what we have but doesn't want it. I curl a strand of his hair around my finger. I want to know more about him.

His knuckles brush my jaw. "What are you thinking? You can't zone out when I'm here."

"Sorry," I say. He prompts me to speak with a subtle nod, but I lean in for a kiss. "I was thinking of you." A note of interest shadows his face, and he rolls onto his back so I can rest my head on his chest. I prop my jaw on his chest as he plays with my hair. "What happened with the band?"

I want his version, not the media version. He opens his mouth, and I feel the rejection coming.

"If I tell you, you can't ask more questions." Oh. That won't work. I'll need to know more. My expression must have revealed that. He laughs. "You are such a curious little thing. So I'll give you the summary. I was in a bad place, and I did something stupid. It ruined our friendship."

"And ruined the band?" Calum looks at the ceiling and nods. I bring his hand to my tattoo, and his eyes lower to my face. "I was in a bad place once, and I cut myself." Mimicking his stance, I stare at the ceiling and pretend to see what he's seeing. "I... I don't really like talking about it."

"I understand," he whispers. The bed sinks with his weight. His shadow falls over me, and I feel his breath on my cheek. I stay composed. "I'm here for you if you ever need someone to talk to."

"I know."

"I won't judge."

"I know." He sees me. He sees the little girl who misses her mum beneath her tough exterior. He sees the stubborn brat who loves singing. The girl who is upset with God. The girl who has trouble with learning sometimes. And he cares about every single part. "I know, Cal. I know."

His mouth inches closer to mine. "You do crazy things to me, Cathie." He kisses a corner of my lips. My head turns, and

he kisses me fully. “Most times, I wish we weren’t stepsiblings.”

“I know.”

Sometimes, I wish the same too. But we would never have met if our parents didn’t get married. He kisses me again, as if to stop my thoughts from straying. I peer into his eyes with a big grin.

“This would have been easier,” he whispers.

My heart skips. “I know.”

“You’re so pretty,” he adds.

“I know.” He falls to the bed with laughter. I straddle him and whisper against his lips, “You are pretty, too, and I like you.” Hooded eyes look up at me. His emotions hide behind a veil of neutrality that shadows his face. I can’t retract my words, so I rephrase. “I like that you see me.”

Calum’s fingers curve under my jaw, and I steal a second kiss from him. He’s breaking his own rules, but I don’t mention that to him. He broke it the moment he walked in and kissed me.

“I like that you let me see you, Catherine. There’s so much to see.”

CHAPTER 31

Keep it



I GROW the balls to talk to Jackson after my last class. His smile widens as I approach him in the parking lot. It's primarily sixth-form students who drive, so there are more moped bikes than cars here. My nerves tangle in a bigger knot, and I nearly run back into the school. I can't do this.

Picturing Calum's face gives me the courage to complete the short distance between us. Once I'm within touching reach, Jackson hugs me tight. I hug him back because it feels right, and it's the least I can do. He steps back with an arm on my shoulder, a wide grin splitting his lips.

"So? Have you thought about it?" he asks.

Looking around to make sure we are alone, I nod. I asked us to meet here so Calum won't see us. I'll have to explain to him later why I was late to choir practice, but it's worth it. Even if my dearest stepbrother doesn't say it or act unbothered, he's jealous. I like that he's jealous. I like to think it's because he loves me, so he can't stand the thought of me being with another guy.

I drop my bag on the bonnet of Jackson's car. He shifts, and our arms brush. No sparks. I take out the jewellery box he gifted me and place it on his palm. His bushy brows shoot up in worry.

Now is the hard part. "The answer is no." An emotion flies across his face. He grabs my hand to return the gift, but I ball my palms into fists. He drops the box on the car when I refuse

to accept it. “Jackson, I don’t think it’s fair to accept gifts from you when I’m not your girlfriend.”

“I gave it to you as a friend,” Jackson counters. I can’t think of a suitable reply, but accepting gifts from him might confuse this. “What am I supposed to do with it? I can’t wear it. Keep it.”

My mouth opens in a protest that never comes. I nod softly. “Fine. But I’m not your girlfriend.”

“Why?” If I tell him I like someone else, he will ask who or try to find the person. I shrug. His eyes narrow. He hoists me to the bonnet and squeezes my knees. Again, no sparks when he touches me. “I’m not taking no for an answer, Cathie. Not without good reasons. What gives?”

But no is a good enough reason. My eyes find the skies. This is hard. The words form in my head. I place both hands on his shoulders to keep him at a distance. Jackson peels my hands off him to lock our fingers together. He’s making this hard for himself because I’ll break his heart.

“We are too young to be in a relationship,” I say. Now I sound like Calum. But I’m a bloody hypocrite because I’m pining for one with my stepbrother. “We might hurt each other.”

I realise now that Calum can do exactly what I’m warning Jackson about. But he won’t break my heart. He’s older and more mature. When did Jackson grow feelings for me? I don’t get it.

Jackson cups my face with one hand. “I’ll take the risk. Just think about it.”

“I already did,” I answer, flustered.

“Think about it again.” We stare at each other for a minute. My shoulders sag, and his free hand palms my other cheek. “I get this feeling that you didn’t even think about it.”

He’s not wrong.

“I really should go now, but I’ll think about it. Oh, thanks,” I add when he drops the box on my palm. His lips pucker in a

kiss. I kiss his cheek and push him back before he protests. “Go. Bye.”

Jackson zooms off, and I peek at my wristwatch. Fuck. There are only ten minutes left for practice. I race inside, but my feet falter as I near the staircase. Calum is at the foot of the stairs.

A foot away from him, I say, “Hello, sir.”

“You are late,” Calum states. His face is closed off. There’s no way he would have seen us from here, right? My eyes zoom in on the tall window at the other end overlooking the parking lot. “Think carefully before you say anything to me.”

“Sorry.”

“You skipped practice for a boy, Catherine. It’s ten days to the competition.”

I shake my head. “No. Of course not.” One stern glance at me and my throat closes. His mask cracks, and his anger lashes at me. I try again. “Yes. I mean, I wanted to tell him something.”

“And it couldn’t wait?”

“Sorry. I won’t do it again, sir.”

After a curt nod, he ascends the stairs without a backward glance. Rose gives me a worried look once I’m in the hall. I mouth a reply to let her know I’m fine, and she nods. Regina rolls her eyes, and I stick out my tongue. I can’t wait for the day she shits her knickers. From their positions, I see we are back to the way things were before Mr Prescott temporarily took over.

“We were practising a few songs before you decided to grace us with your presence,” Calum says.

Regina chuckles. Why is he so hard on me? I offer everyone an apologetic smile. Rose grins.

“It won’t happen again, sir.”

“Since you are here now, you might as well go for it,” Calum adds. I look around. Everyone has a sheet, but I’m not

sure for which song. He turns to me, his hands buried in his pockets. I rub a hand over the back of my neck, and he sighs. When he continues, his voice holds less meanness. "Today, we did something different. We started with the alleluia, down to *nessum dorma*. Regina and Christie already went. But we don't have time, so you can only take the solo for the alleluia right now. Next time, don't be late." Turning back to the stand, he says, "In position."

Someone offers me a sheet. I don't know who. My brain started lagging the second he said I would take the solo now. Calum snaps a finger in my face. He speaks, but I hear nothing.

"It's okay if you don't want to do it," he says to mostly me. I look behind him, and Regina is smirking. This is a test I cannot fail. I nod, and he motions for me to return to the stand. I stop in the middle of other soprano singers, and he shakes his head. "No. One step forward, please."

I move, but it mustn't have satisfied him. He grabs me gently by my arm and pulls me forward. My heart pounds, not because he's close, but because I'm scared. I don't think I'm ready for this.

"Everyone, relax," he says, but it's for my sake. The sheet shakes in my hand. He almost steps forward to hold me but pauses. Regina narrows her eyes. I look away. "Ready when you are."

Calum might be kind enough to wait, but the others won't. I clear my throat and nod. My voice is shaky and raw as I join in the singing. Towards the end, their voices fall off, leaving me alone to chant the alleluia. This is not my best performance, but when I finish, my stepbrother claps twice. He dismisses us after that song, and I walk Rose out of the hall so he thinks I'm gone.

"Why were you late?" Rose asks as we approach her. "I think your brother was worried."

"*Step*," I say. Ants swarm my belly, but I keep a straight face. We head to the driver's side of the car, and I open the

door for her. “Jackson asked me out. I said no. No, I said, I’ll think about it.”

“Why?” she asks. I push her into the car and shut her door. She rolls down the window. “You are not going?”

I nod at the building. “He will take me.”

“Is he single?”

“How am I supposed to know that, Rosie? It’s none of my business.”

“Why are you yelling? Cathie... are you crying?” Rose tries to open the door, but I throw my weight against it. Her lip trembles. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to annoy you. Are you okay?”

It’s the song. This is the first time I’m singing it in public. “Yeah. My period.”

Rose’s hand disappears into her purse, and I wipe the tears drying on my cheeks. She shoves a ten-pound note into my hand, and I laugh. I love my best friends. “For ice-cream and chips.”

It won’t be enough. Bending so she hugs me through the window, I whisper, “Thanks.”

“Don’t be sad again,” Rose says, patting my cheeks. “Talk to you later?”

My head bounces in a nod. As soon as she leaves, I jog to the teachers’ parking lot. Calum is on his way to the lot when he spots me. I smile, but he doesn’t reciprocate it. I cover the gap to the car and enter without an invitation. He doesn’t say anything, neither do I. I don’t know if he’s upset with me, and I’m too emotionally exhausted to ask questions I might not get answers to.

The ride home is silent. Painfully so. I march to my room and slam the door shut. I hear his footsteps as he walks past my room, but the sound of his door opening never comes. Tired of waiting, I open my door, but the corridor is empty. He went in without talking to me. I stop in front of his room without the faintest idea what I’m doing. Minutes later, I

return to my room without knocking on his door. Calum is the adult between us. He should be the bigger person.

But minutes run into hours, and Calum doesn't show up in my room. After an intrusive dinner with our parents wanting to know why we are both so quiet, I crawl into the bed and curl into a ball. Yes, I was late to practice because of a boy, but for good reasons, and I apologised already.

For the second time today, I head to his room. I hesitate before knocking, and the door opens to reveal a shirtless Calum. He stares at my fist, then steps back for me to enter. I do, and he locks the door. His laptop shows the video from last year's singing competition. I'm on his screen.

Calum stops before me and opens his mouth. "Cathie—" I hug him. I don't want us to fight. His arms curl around my waist, and a content sigh leaves my lips. "You shouldn't miss practice for a boy."

"I'm sorry. Your stepsister is young. She will be silly sometimes, Cal." His body vibrates with laughter, but I don't let go. "You're still pissed. Don't be, big stepbrother. Please forgive her."

"I'm not pissed." Taking my hand, Calum leads me to his bed. I'm quick to straddle him, and he sighs again. I kiss him until the worry lines on his forehead disappear. He breaks the kiss and weaves a hand into his hair. "Cathie, you should be kissing guys your age. Guys like Jackson."

"Are you jealous?"

His eyes meet mine. I don't understand what I see, but I don't like it. He shouldn't be worried. I am fine. I'm not the first one to date someone with a four-year age gap. Again, are we dating?

"It's not about being jealous. It's about—"

My heart skips. I kiss him again to silence him. I can't let him end us, this.

"I don't want to kiss guys my age. I want to kiss you, Cal. Only you, Calum."

“You got me fucked up.” Good. He got me fucked up, too. My legs lock around Calum as he stands. He lowers me to the edge of the bed and kneels between my legs. Heat builds in my belly. “You spent so much time with him. I was worried something bad had happened, Cathie.”

“I’m sorry,” I whisper. He hugs my waist, hiding his face in my chest. I sink my fingers into his scalp, knowing he would appreciate the massage. “Why did you do things differently?”

“Practice was dull without you,” he confesses. “I struggle, Cathie.”

“With what?”

“Where to draw the line with you as your director,” he tells me. My mouth parts, and he places a finger over it. “You were late. You deserved to be punished, but then I have to worry if the punishment isn’t too harsh or too soft. I don’t want others to feel neglected or think I’m biased. And I don’t want to push you away, either. It’s an exhausting position for me to be in, Cathie.”

“You weren’t biased.”

“But I don’t want to play favourites.”

“Then don’t. I promise not to put you in that position again.”

He nods. “You were wonderful today.”

“I was nervous.”

“I know, but it made you more vulnerable. Listeners should feel what you feel when you sing.”

Flutters. Gallops. Flips. My heart does all of that. Does that mean I’ll take the solo? I don’t ask. There’s something about not asking when my stepbrother is involved. It’s part of the magic of our relationship. The excitement of the unknown. I spread my fingers on his firm, naked chest.

“Come to bed, Cal. I want to touch you.” My hand dips to his waistband. “I want to feel you.”

“Catherine,” he whispers.

Warmth blooms in my chest, and moisture soaks my already wet knickers. I want Calum, but I want to please him more than I want to be pleased. My back meets the bed as he leans over me. His hands land on either side of my head, and his breath teases my lips. I feel his bulge through his shorts, but it’s not enough for me. My hand sneaks into his boxers, and our gazes connect.

Closing my palm around his dick has his eyes clenching shut. He groans softly. “My Cathie.”

“Come to bed.” I scoot to the middle, and he comes after me. My hand returns inside his boxers to wrap around his length, and my thumb smears his pre-cum over his crown. He sucks in a shaky breath and blinks sleepily at me, showering me with his unspoken feelings. “I want you.”

“Cathie.”

“Not today,” I quickly add.

Our eyes collide, and his forehead touches mine. My hand moves up and down his shaft. Eyelids fluttering, he grunts. It’s a musical sound that encourages me to fondle his balls. His moans grow quieter, more strangled. I know when he’s close, and my movements become sloppy.

“Cal.” Blue eyes meet mine. His thumb strokes my cheek, and my heart nearly explodes with love. He spills into my hand with a groan, and his lips part to take in silent breaths. “Calum, I think I love you.” I shake my head to stop him from countering me. “I love you, Calum Dissick.”

CHAPTER 32

A sin. Incest



CALUM

THE CONS OUTWEIGH THE PROS. My pen hovers over the list I spent most of this morning writing. I can't continue to lead my stepsister on or talk about rules and go right ahead to break them. She deserves better. If I can't give her that, then I need to let her go to Jackson. Sadly, I can't.

She sees me, even if I'm only showing her glimpses. I tear the page out of my notepad and toss it into the trashcan by the door. We can try. The pros make all the cons worth the risk. We don't have to do anything different but continue our current routine. I love our nights together. I love every single moment, the annoying, the good, and the emotional. Cathie is magic, and I need her to flourish. To see the world as her stage and conquer it accordingly. She has earned it.

I flip to another page and let my heart guide me. Words pour out of me. It's the power of her love. Minutes pass, I stop to see what I've written, and a smile touches my lips. It's a song for my stepsister. Someone knocks, and my smile widens. Finally, she is here. I shove the notepad into my bag before going to the door. Cathie can't see it until it's done. *If* I ever get done with it.

Cathie is not at the door. Mum is. I love her, but my smile drops. She flashes me a smile, and I step back for her to enter. Cathie was supposed to be here for rehearsal. I haven't told

her, but she will take the solo. Not only because she has my heart but because she has earned her place.

Mum walks over to my bag opened on the desk. She picks up the notepad before I can stop her. Yes, she can be nosy. But her nosiness saved my life once, so I can't complain. I sit on the bed while she reclines on my chair. A glint creeps into her eyes as she scours my notepad.

"You're writing again," Mum murmurs. I nod. It is the only thing I could not do until today. She grins and stretches a hand for me to take it. Her warmth spills over me. "You met a girl?" Fuck, no. The song is not exactly about a girl but hints at a love interest. "Alice, Miss Gatees?"

"Miss Gates," I correct.

Mum drops the notepad on the table to give me her undivided attention. "Is she the one?"

"It's a random song. There's no one." One look from her is all it takes. I feel like a child again, the kid she has sacrificed so much for. I rub my palms over my shorts. "Yes. I think I like Alice."

What I mean to say is, I like my stepsister, the only person I'm not allowed to like. I love the way she looks at me, how her lips part softly when she whispers my name. How much she craves my hugs, kisses, touches, and attention. She craves it like a person in awe and genuine love, not as a fan, and it feels good to be liked as Calum, just Cal, not the lead singer of a band. I love how often she wants to touch me. To cuddle. To sing with and for me. To be with me.

I'm falling. Maybe I've already fallen.

"You should invite her to the house." The bells in my head trip off. Alice and I are just and will only be friends. I already made it clear to her, especially on Valentine's Day, when she asked me on a date after school. I shake my head. "Come on, Cal."

"I don't think Pete will agree."

Mum bellows a laugh. This conversation is going nowhere. My love life isn't her business.

“You’re joking, right?” Mum laughs harder, and my heart lurches against my chest. I might be grown, but she knows how to put me in my place. “Pete loves you, Cal. He sees you as the son he never had.” For all his trust, I am betraying him. But it feels so right to be with Cathie. She heals me, and I heal her. The age is not as much of a problem as other factors. It won’t matter that I met her first at the pub. “He couldn’t have asked for a better big brother to his daughter.”

Not if he knows the things we do at night. How his daughter wraps her hand around my cock and pumps me into an orgasm. There’s nothing sisterly about that or her effective fingers, and I don’t want to change what we have. I love kissing her. I love hearing her whisper my name. I love her mind. I love singing away her doubts and insecurities, holding her tight in my arms.

She is woman.

Her dips. Her curves. Her body. Her mind.

“Mum,” I croak out.

“What?” she mutters. They are so oblivious. Well, it’s easy to be since their room is downstairs, and they are lost in each other for most of the day. “It’s true, Cal. You have been good to your sister.”

Cathie can and will never be my sister. She’s the first and only woman I want to have under me. To teach me things. To hear her breathe my name as we reach our climax. I unclench my fists. The only reason I haven’t touched her is because I’m shy and scared of ruining her. Sometimes, the guilt strikes, but when she is in my arms, everything is perfect. Yeah, I’m utterly fucked.

“She drove us to church. You don’t know how much that means to Pete. Cathie never drives, Cal.” I crack a small smile. It’s all her. She only needed a push, and I was available. “If you ask him to give you a car, he probably would. That’s how grateful he is to you. So, invite Alice over.”

“I’ll think about it.”

Flicking a finger over my forehead, Mum says, “You better.” She is about to stand when she notices my laptop screen. I should have carried it from the table. Mum lowers herself back to the seat and moves the cursor on my screen. She frowns. “What’s this? Who’s Nikki Stan?”

Cathie. But I’m not sure yet.

“If your dad is happily married to a new woman and you start catching feelings for her daughter. Mind you, both of you bond well and kiss a lot. You have special moments with her and it feels right. What do you do?” Mum reads out the post on Girls Code page. I have been meaning to check out the GC website, but I never got to do it until today. “Jesus, Cal, what kind of devilish website is this?”

I cringe as Mum makes the sign of the cross. It definitely is my superstar. How do I know?

One, she adores Nicki Minaj. Two, the question is too specific. Three, I haven’t defined things and made her comfortable enough to ask me intimate questions.

It’s partly my fault she’s seeking opinions from online strangers. The only thing I did after she confessed her feelings was kiss her. She never mentioned it again, and I never brought it up. But the nights that followed have been more daring. More touches, more feels, and more kisses.

“It belongs to my friends. Just for girls to rant.”

“Hmm,” she says as she scrolls through more posts. “Aside from this one post, it looks okay. It’s a free site? They can make money off it.” I doubt that’s why Cathie and her friends created GC. But trust her to think of available opportunities in any situation. It’s the business lady in her talking. She turns to me, and her lips form a smile when my shoulders lift in a shrug. “What?”

“I don’t think they would want to do that.”

“You can never know.” Mum tilts the laptop. Rows of comments fill my screen. One-line comments, heaps of paragraphs. I am not sure what she’s showing me, but I nod. She laughs and continues, “Look at the engagements. The

comments keep coming. They can make money off it by adding ads.” My brows jerk. She changed after Dad’s death and became more money-oriented. I get it. If she had her own money, she might have left before his death. “It’s not as difficult as you think. They can add a premium version for users who don’t want to watch ads.”

“I don’t know, Mum.”

“Just run the idea by them. They have a suggestions page, right?” Mum asks. I nod so she will stop talking about it. “They can add a donation link. There are so many ways to earn from it.”

“I hear you, Mum.”

“I’m disturbing you,” she says. I lace our fingers. Her disturbances are welcome. I love her. Shifting her attention to my laptop, she pulls away from me. “How old is this Nikki Stan girl?”

I peer above her shoulder. She’s typing a reply to the post. Yeah, I created an account on GC and BC. It’s the only way you can post, reply, or upvote comments. “Mum, what are you doing?”

“Replying. So many kids on here are encouraging her to go after her heart. Wrong, Cal. Wrong. What she needs to do is cut off her stepsister. Kill the feelings while it’s still early.”

My knees weaken. I sit up. “Why?”

“It’s a sin,” she says without looking up from the laptop. Whatever reply she’s typing is quite long, and the only reason I’m not bothered is because I used a random username, something unrelated to the one for BC. The bed dips as I crane my neck to see the screen. “It’s incest.”

Mum is catholic. She believes in God. But in this case, she’s wrong about her definition of sin.

“How?” I ask. “They are not even related.”

“Cal, they might be unrelated, but they became siblings immediately after their parents’ marriage happened,” she tells me, her voice thick with conviction. I know better than to try

to argue with her. When it's about faith, we are not always on the same side and might never be. "It's like you and Cathie. You became siblings as soon as I married Pete. Imagine you kissing or touching her..." Her face scrunches before she finishes her statement, and dread curls around my spine. She shivers and makes the sign of the cross. I wonder now if she didn't divorce Dad because of her faith. Instead, she suffered in silence until his death freed her. "It's a big sin."

"I get it," I tell her.

But I don't. Because my heart is dividing. One half wants to listen to her. The other wants me to wait up for Cathie, kiss and touch her the way she has been touching me every night. I want to love her the way she hasn't been loved, much less by a guy. I want to be her man, her lover.

"I know you do," Mum says. Her confidence triples my guilt. She turns to the laptop and hits send on the lengthy reply she typed. "You're a good son and brother. You will never do that."

Our identical eyes lock, and she smiles. I failed her once by doing drugs. It broke us, but we are fixing our relationship now. I can't break her heart again.

CHAPTER 33

Boundaries



A KNOCK SOUNDS on the door as I'm leaving my bathroom. I check the time. Calum is earlier today.

“Are you ready?” comes the undeniable voice of my stepbrother. I'm not ready, but I sashay to the door in only my white towel and fling it open. Calum gulps. Water rolls down my hair to my chest, disappearing into the towel. His gaze sweeps over me, and my hand drops to the knot of the towel. I want him to see me fully naked, touch me. “Don't. I'll wait for you downstairs.”

Calum pauses briefly at the stairs and shakes his head when he notices me ogling him. I hum Surf Mesa's love song under my breath while getting ready for school. One day, I'll sing it to him. Should I get to writing songs, I'll sing for him on a big stage. All dressed up, I rush downstairs. He's not there. When I join him in the car, he's frowning. His hand curls and uncurls around his seatbelt. I drop my bag on the backseat and pry his hand off the seatbelt.

“Cal?”

He retracts his hands from my grasp. “We need to talk.”

My heart gallops. I don't have an issue with talking, but when he says it in that voice, it worries me. Blimey. He's upset. Am I about to get a lecture? I shouldn't have teased him with the towel.

Calum starts the car but doesn't drive halfway to school before stopping by the roadside. The road is mostly empty except for a few cars that drive past us. He scrubs a hand over

his face and sighs. I'm scared. I think he will break my heart, and I'll never recover. My hands tremble.

"We need to set boundaries, Cathie."

Air whooshes out of my lungs. I offer him a tiny smile. "Boundaries are good," I say.

We can do that. Besides, I know it won't last. We have spent the last three days, except for yesterday, in his bed, kissing, touching, being us. He looks nervous, but I keep my hand to myself.

"One, we can't hold hands."

"Please," I cut him off. I don't know what I'm begging for. "I'm sorry. I won't do it again, Cal."

"You also can't call me that again. My name is Calum. Calum Dissick," he whispers.

A tear drops to my palm, and I ball my hands so Calum doesn't notice. It's my fault. It's because I teased him with the towel earlier. His hands run through his hair, and his eyes lock onto mine.

"What we are doing is not okay, Cathie. I am so sorry for leading you on."

"I'm not sorry, Cal." He flinches, but I can't stop calling him by that name. My feelings don't have a switch. I can't just turn them off because he says so. I unfasten my seatbelt to straddle him, but his eyes cut to me in a silent warning. "You didn't lead me on, Calum. I wanted it, too."

"As the older one, I should have known better."

My heart cracks. I don't understand this man. Is it because I confessed to him that night? As much as I wanted to talk about my feelings, he didn't bring it up, and I let it be. I swipe the back of my hand across my leaking eyes. This is why you shouldn't date or fall in love or give anyone your heart. They can decide at any moment that you are no longer worth their time.

"If you want, I'll continue to drive you to school and bring you back home," he adds. As if I love him for his driving

skills. I have Amelia or Rose for that. “Rehearsals for the competition won’t stop, but no more kisses or hugs.” A thick lump clogs my throat. I slip my palms under my legs. If I stay still long enough, I might wake up from this bad dream. “No more cuddling, Cathie.”

“I want to cuddle,” I whisper. “Calum, please.”

“We can’t. As your teacher and stepbrother, I forbid it.” My hand closes over my mouth. This is not fair. He unfastens his seatbelt and pushes a knee over his chair. Emotions shine in his eyes. Hesitation. That can’t be my imagination. He is reluctant to do this. “I’m doing what’s good for you, Cathie.”

Stabbing his chest with my finger, I say, “You don’t know what’s good for me. If you know what’s good for me, you won’t ask us to stop.”

“Cathie.”

“Please. I promise I won’t do it again. I know I fucked up, and I’m sorry, okay?”

Calum’s eyes close, but I want them open. If he is bold enough to hurt me, he should be bold enough to see what hurting me looks like. I take his hand, but he wrestles it out of my grip. My heart shatters. I don’t want a breakup, even if we never dated. What we have is too pure for words, and he can’t end it. Maybe I’m not saying the right things. I take a deep breath and try again.

“I can be good for you, I swear. Just give me another chance. I will do anything you want. Cal.”

“Stop. You’re making this hard for both of us.”

“Because you don’t care about me.”

Hiding his face behind his palms, he says, “You know that’s far from the truth. That’s not true.”

“It’s true.” I’m clawing at straws now, desperate to have him back. “What about what I want?”

“You don’t know what you want,” he thunders. I sniff, and his eyes soften instantly. “Cathie, you are too young to get it. There’s more to life than sneaking into your stepbrother’s

room in the middle of the night for a cuddle or kiss.” Maybe. But I’m fine with our current arrangement. It’s part of the thrill. It’s part of what makes us what we are. I want to live that life with him. “You will meet other better people you never have to hide to hug and kiss, okay? Boys your age.”

A sob escapes my lips. That’s my final straw. Looking up at Calum with tears in my eyes, my lower lip trembles. He means it. He means every word he tells me. It doesn’t matter what I want. In the end, it all comes down to my age. Calum has spoken his piece, and I must obey.

A car zooms past us, honking as it goes. I fix my seatbelt and wipe the residue tears on my cheeks. He’s not worth it. “We will be late.”

“Cathie, I want—” We both stare at the hand that reaches out to hug me. He lowers it to his knee, and I scoff. Even if I’m having a bad day and a hug will make things better, he won’t hug me. Point duly noted. “I know you won’t understand what I’m doing now, but you will appreciate it in the future. Maybe in the future, you might look back at this day with a smile.”

Right? Because he’s old and wise, it’s only his opinions and feelings that matter. I don’t reply. It doesn’t matter what I say because he’ll chuck it up to me being a kid. As if kids can’t have feelings, too. As if we can’t love wholeheartedly.

I hate him.

I hate everybody who commented on my post.

I feel Calum’s gaze on me but continue to look out the window. He has done what he’s best at. Making me feel, then ruining it. Coward. I wipe the tears trailing down my cheeks. I can’t cry.

My tears are reserved for special people and moments.

“Are we good?” he asks in a low voice.

We can never be good.

Calum starts the car, and in no time, we are en route to St George. He should have stayed back in his country instead of

moving here to make teenage girls fall in love with him so he can break their hearts. American men are the worst. They hurt you once and hurt you some more.

Who needs him when I can have other boys? So stupid of me to think Calum loved me. That he would love every version of me.

As soon as the car stops, I grab my bag and slam the door. That's what happens when you break a teenager's heart. We react. We get angry and prove his point of us being immature. But not to worry, I can also be mature. I will show him I can be a proper adult at this age. I head to my locker, bumping shoulders with students who also seem to be in a haste to get somewhere.

The person I want to see isn't here. I head to the student parking lot, eyes searching for him. Jackson's car is at the lot, but he's missing. I retrace my steps and start for his locker. He should be there.

Jackson approaches me at my locker. I force a smile to my lips, but he offers me a genuine one.

"Hey," he says. "Have you thought about it?"

The noise in the hallway reduces. We look to the source of the silence and see Calum at the door. He adjusts the strap over his shoulder, his eyes narrowing as they zero in on me. I think that's why I push myself on my tiptoes, grab Jackson by his collar, and kiss him. He might not know my favourite songs or artists, but at least he will make me laugh and nurse my heart. But as soon as our lips meet, I know it's a big mistake. Still, I stay there, exchanging spit with him.

Jackson breaks off the kiss. "Is that a yes?"

I toss a look at the entrance. Calum is gone. I hope he witnessed that. "I'm still thinking about it."

Of all the things I expect from Jackson, it's not his fingers sliding under my jaw. Maybe that's why tears gather in my eyes. He stares at me with so much worry, care, and affection I don't deserve. The noises around me fade. Everything is a blur, except for the guy worried about me.

“Did anything happen? Are you all right, Cathie?”

Will I ever be? Something horrible happened. Calum dumped me.

“No. Not really,” I answer sincerely.

Jackson hugs me. It’s unexpected and different from our other hugs. It’s one friend comforting another. I break down. The words I couldn’t tell Calum burn my chest. I tighten my arms around him and cry into his chest. In the back of my head, I register this as a bad idea because Dad will be worried if he finds out, but Calum messed me up. I really, really hate him. I hope someone else breaks his heart. I hope the woman he falls in love with leaves him at his lowest.

A faint smile touches Jackson’s lips when I pull away from his arms. His hand drops to my back.

“Did someone make you sad?” I nod, and he draws me in for a brief hug. “Sorry.”

More tears rush to my eyes. It hurts too much. If I told Calum someone made me sad, we would be on our way to his room or TTTT to get my comfort food. But here we are, and I can’t blame Jackson. He didn’t put the tears in my eyes. Calum did. He didn’t punch a hole in my heart. Calum did.

“Thank you.”

“Don’t be silly,” he says.

Guilt pierces me in different places. I trace the wet spot on his shirt made by my tears. Students stroll past us in their hurry to get to class, but I’m past caring about others or my lateness.

“I ruined your shirt,” I whisper.

Jackson laughs. “You can ruin all my shirts.”

The distant creaking of the door makes me lift my head. Someone starts down the hallway. My heartbreaker stepbrother. Calum takes a look at my tear-stained eyes and Jackson’s arm on my shoulder.

“No loitering in the hallway,” he says and strolls off.

Of course he doesn't care. I'm too young and dumb for him.

"Let's get you to class, shall we?" Jackson says.

My answer is a smile. If Jackson has always been this nice, I do not know. He stops at the door to my first class and plants a kiss on my cheek. See? He pays attention. His finger runs over my ear, and I jump back. That's Calum's thing. I kick out that thought and fix a smile on my lips. I can try to love him. Love grows, and when that happens, I will officially become his girlfriend.

The whole day is a bore, even rehearsals. Rose drops me off at the house, and I spend the rest of the evening curled in my bed. Calum doesn't show up for dinner, but I don't volunteer to take it to his room. The night is long and lonely. I toss and turn, to no avail. It's not until later that I hear the stroke of his guitar and his soft voice as he sings. I should be there, watching him sing.

"*Stone cold...*" he starts, breathing out the rest of the lyrics in a soulful, heartbreaking whisper.

The tears are worse this time. I don't know if this song is for me, but I grab my phone and pull out his contact. I don't want him to be happy for me for kissing Jackson. My heart is not ready. It's in shambles. I hurt. And it's in this state of mind I open the chat box between us, and my fingers move across the screen until they form four full sentences. Sentences I might regret.

I miss you. I love you. The kiss with Jackson was a mistake. He's not it.

CHAPTER 34

She's



CALUM READS my message but never replies. I give him a day of grace and another and another until it's Friday morning. But no reply. We exit our rooms together. It's a struggle not to cry when he turns to me. It hurts more than it did throughout the week. My heart misses him. I haven't kissed Jackson again, but maybe that's what I need to move on from this heartache.

"Hey," Calum says.

His shoes appear inches away from mine. I focus on the phone in my hand and text Amelia. She has been my driver. A hand covers my phone's screen, forcing me to look at him. There's a good distance between us, but it feels like he's pressed against me. I try not to get lost in his blues. Somehow, he'll do so many wrongs, and I'll forget it all once I'm staring into his eyes.

"Do you need a ride? Cathie?" he asks. My lips pull into a thin line, and he nods slowly. "Fine. I get it. But I need to talk to you about something. Or rather, someone I want you to meet later."

Miss Gates? They talked about her at dinner again last night. I don't care about his girlfriend, and I bloody hell don't want to spend another second of my time thinking or talking about her.

"I don't want to talk to you about anything."

"Cathie," my stepbrother lets out in a longing whisper, one hand pulling at his hair. I shake my head. He doesn't get to hurt my feelings and act like we are fine. We are not. We can

never be fine. He ignored my text. “Can I at least give you a ride to school? I don’t want you to be late.”

My phone beeps. One glance at the text glaring on my screen, and I give up. Amelia won’t be able to pick me up today. I text Rose, and she replies almost immediately. She’s in school. Being late sounds better than staying in a car with him. But if I don’t leave with him now, I may walk.

“We don’t have to talk to each other. It’s just a ride.”

It’s more than that. It’s a reminder of all we were and what we could have been. “Okay,” I say.

We descend downstairs, and the first half of the ride is quiet. When we slow at the traffic light like we have done so many times, I stare at his side profile. He clenches the steering so tightly.

“Did you get my text?” I whisper. His jaw clenches, but he says nothing. I bare my heart out to him and get nothing. My hand almost reaches to touch him. “Is it something I did? Tell me.”

So, maybe I’ll stop torturing myself with what-ifs, questions, and thoughts of crimes I’m not sure I committed. It can’t be only the towel incident. Is it the tattoo? He must think I’m a freak.

No one likes freaks. But I need to know. It’s breaking too much, my heart.

“I can’t fix it?” I say when I sense his rejection. “At least let me try. Give me one more chance.”

The light turns green. A car honks behind us, but Calum makes no move to drive forward. He kills the engine and unfastens his seatbelt so he can face me. Hurt flickers through me. I fist my hands on my knees because even now, I still crave his touch. He hurt me, but I still want him.

“You did nothing wrong, Cathie. I can promise you that,” he says. So why did he end us? He’s not giving me anything. Here I am, being a pathetic little bitch, begging him to take me back when I’m not sure what or if I did anything wrong. “It was wrong, and it had to end. That’s it.”

“I don’t want it to end. You called me your sweetheart. This is not how to treat the person you care about. Cal, you see me. No one sees me like you do. Please, don’t,” I say. My stepbrother’s silence splits my heart open. It feels like I’m talking to a robot. Nothing. Just a blank look, waiting for me to finish. “Do you really want to put an end to that? You want to end us?”

“Yes,” he whisper-yells. My biggest mistake was accepting so easily the first time. I didn’t fight for us. “Cathie, you’re making this difficult for both of us. How many times must I explain it?”

Calum’s eyes clench shut, but I’m not having it.

“No, look at me,” I snap. Blues stare back at me. He sees I’m hurting but won’t do anything. Am I that bad? Sometimes, I do silly things, but it’s never to hurt anyone. “You don’t want to hug your Cathie anymore? You don’t want to kiss your superstar? You don’t want to cuddle?” He shakes his head, and hot tears spill from my eyes. I cup his face and brush my lips against his. “Cal, I know you’re lying. You like me too. You want me too. Remember? What changed?”

“I grew up,” he says. He pries my fingers from his face. “You need to do the same.”

Again, it all boils down to my age. I don’t know when I look away from him. My breath fogs the window, and I draw a broken heart on it, a physical representation of mine. I use my jacket to wipe my cheeks dry. I thought people grow in love, not outgrow their lovers. I was wrong.

The rest of the ride is a blur. Once he parks, Jackson opens my door. I hug him tight because Calum is watching, but most importantly, because I need to hug someone who wants me.

“Good day, Mr Dissick,” Jackson says to Calum once he steps out of the car. My stepbrother nods in response, carefully avoiding my gaze. I kiss Jackson on the side of his lips, and he blushes. Walking ahead for some privacy, he puckers his lips. “I want an actual kiss, babe.”

We haven't defined our relationship, but who cares? I peck Jackson and tune him out when he begins a commentary on their last game. He is obsessed with football, as I am with music, and they have another game next week Friday. I smile for the first time when he asks about me.

"What about me?" I ask.

We are at his locker. "I don't know what you like and all. We should get to know each other."

"But we already do that."

One of his teammates brushes past us, patting Jackson on his back. He throws a greeting to his other teammates, then redirects his sad gaze to me. Leaning a shoulder on the locker, he sighs.

"Not really, Cathie. We are not dating. You kiss me, and I call you babe. But what are we doing?"

I force out a laugh to drown the sound of my pounding heart. He wants a label, and that's the problem. I swipe my phone out of my pocket and send an SOS to the girls' group chat.

"We are friends," I say. He stands straighter and grips the straps of his bag. "I need more time."

"How long?" he whispers.

My clammy palms land on his chest. "A week? Maybe the rest of this term?"

This term ends on the first week of April, two weeks before Easter. It's another holiday I hate because we celebrate Mother's Day a week after. Jackson's brown eyes peer down at me with a shade of sadness, and a knot forms in my throat. I don't want to be the reason he's heartbroken.

"Let's see how it goes for the rest of this term, okay? But as friends," I tell him.

His smile doesn't reach his eyes. "Okay. Can I walk you to class? Can I still call you babe?"

No. "Sure, babe."

When he laughs, I feel less like an asshole. It is sad how the heart wants the one who neglects us, then ignores the one who loves us. As we begin the journey to my class, I spot Amelia from a distance. She drags me away from Jackson with a fake smile and apology and we cut into the corner.

We don't stop walking until we are under the stairwell. She peeks at her phone, flashing me the message I sent to the group. "SOS? What's up? Sorry I couldn't come to pick you up today."

"It's fine. Jackson asked me out, and I said I'll think about it. But I don't like him," I confess.

For a minute, she's quiet. Dragging me down to sit beside her on the stairs, she asks, "Did you tell him?"

"No. I don't know how to tell him." And I'm afraid he will want nothing to do with me once he knows. I don't want to be alone anymore. Amelia taps a finger to her lips. She won't judge me. I tuck my head between my knees and draw lines on the floor with a finger. "I like someone else."

"Who?"

"I can't tell you."

The last warning bell goes off. Laughing, Amelia drags me in for a hug. "I think I know who you like," she says into my shoulder. My eyes mist, and I don't know why. I stare at the white walls stained with words, slangs, and illicit sketches. "But you can tell me all about him later."

"All right."

"What about Jackson?" I like him but not as a boyfriend. Amelia pulls away to pat my cheeks. Concern softens her eyes, and she whispers, "Will you eventually tell him? You'll have to."

"No," I reply. Her brows raise, and I exhale. "Yes. But I want to make *him* jealous."

Amelia intertwines our fingers, and we return to familiar ground. The hallway is calm.

“It will come back to bite you in the arse,” she says. Maybe. But for now, I won’t think about it. I’m so late. Dad will scold me if he finds out. She hugs me once more. “See you at lunch, Cathie.”

I nod, but Amelia is already rushing down the other end of the hallway. I enter my class but the teacher is absent. Settling into my seat, I browse through the comments under my last post on Girls Code. Most comments advised me to confess my feelings to my stepsister. I switched up the roles so my best friends wouldn’t link it to me. All the comments except one supported me; the one from a new user. I hated her comment then. I hate it more now, but it holds some truth.

How will your parents feel about it? Will their marriage survive it?

The person finished their long paragraphs with a capital no and a warning to end it before it progressed. Calum must have seen the comment because he started acting out the next day. No, that night. I didn’t sleep in his room on Sunday, and he looked torn when he broke us up. No, I can’t make excuses for him anymore. The door opens, and our teacher walks in. After an apology, lectures begin.

Time flies. Hours later, the closing bell rings. Rose is outside my door when I open it. I am a bit surprised to see her not Jackson. He missed lunch, and my text asking if he’s fine is still unread.

Rose hugs me. “Are you okay now?”

Huh? Oh. She’s referring to the SOS I sent to the group. She wasn’t at the dining today. I explained to Taylor that it wasn’t an actual emergency.

“Yeah. I’m okay. Thanks.”

Titling my head left, then right, she says, “Are you sure?” I nod. She nods. “All right. Let’s go.”

A bounce slips into our steps as we race to the hall. With the competition starting on Monday, everyone is buzzing with excitement, nervousness, and uncertainty. What if we don’t

win? Of course we will. We already have our winning song, and we have been practising harder.

Calum greets us with a nod and merges me, Regina, and Christie. After the first chorus, he stops us. Nothing has been said about the solo, but during this week's practise, he had three of us alternate. We have all shown significant improvements, and I'm afraid to know his choice.

"You have to sing from the heart. It will be a bummer if we don't get to sing all the songs we practised because we didn't even make it through to the next stage. I'll be disappointed," he says. His eyes settle on every one of us. We nod in unison, and he frowns. "Let's do it again."

The door creaks, stopping us from resuming. A lady walks in, and Calum's lips crack in the biggest smile. Calum doesn't wait for the lady to cover the distance. He rushes over to her with as much grace as a teacher can and hugs her. They hug. I mean, *they hug* for ten seconds. My head spins with a thousand reasons my stepbrother would prefer this beautiful woman over me.

She's pretty.

She's sexy.

She's not in high school.

She's not his stepsister.

She reeks of confidence.

The team erupts in murmurs. Regina leans over to Christie and whispers something in her ear. I'm the only quiet one. My eyes glue to the pair speaking in hushed tones and hugging like two lost lovers reconciling. The lady is tall and elegant with her brown hair framing her pretty face.

Ogling her perfect physique, I lower my hand to my belly. I've always thought mine was flat, but hers looks flatter than a surfboard. She is skinny but in a good way, like a model. So what?

Calum walks her to the choir stand. He clears his throat, and the buzz quietens. I follow his hand that disappears behind

her back. She doesn't mind him touching her because she beams.

"This is my friend, Tessa. She'll be joining us today."

Tessa. I know Tessa. His old crush. The one I convinced him to call. I shouldn't have. Tessa flicks her hair back like a model, and I hate to admit how effortlessly sexy she is. Calum grins again. Stepbrother dearest must have forgotten where he is. He keeps stealing glances at Tessa.

Is she really an old crush if he's still smitten by her? Look at him smiling like he won a jackpot.

Annoyance curls in my chest, and I fist my hands. Is he allowed to have guests at the rehearsal? This hall is for students, not to show off his many lovers. He gives the cue for us to resume singing, then walks away to the other end of the hall with Tessa. Their shoulders dig into the wall as they face each other. Occasionally, he darts a look towards us and gives a thumbs up.

Minutes later, Calum is asking us to round up. The ball of annoyance inside me nearly diffuses.

The competition is on Monday.

My hand brushes Regina's, and she sneers. If I wanted a reason to date Jackson, I've found it. Her unhappiness is my joy. The murmurs resume as we grab our bags. Calum says something about being early for tomorrow's practice, and we all nod in reply. Someone drags me by the arm. Rose. She grins as we step outside. I inhale a lungful of Calum-free air and enter her car.

"Why are you happy?" I ask when I'm strapped. Rose shrugs. Instead of starting her car, she pulls out her phone, texts for a while and turns on her camera. "Why are you not driving?"

"Hold on."

"Okay..."

I sit up when Calum and Tessa waltz into the lot. Her movements are so graceful.

“She’s pretty,” Rose says. I must agree. Tessa is not wearing any makeup except red lipstick, but it makes her more attractive. I don’t like her. “And so fucking rich. Amelia doesn’t believe she’s here.” Amelia knows her? Raising her phone to capture the duo, Rose clicks away at the couple. I frown at her. Most of the cars here are gone. We should also leave. “Amelia needs evidence. Besides, I’m also saving them to show Regina, so she will die of jealousy. She is way out of Mr Dissick’s league.”

Regina and Rose offer some classes together. More than any of us, they bump into each other more often. I don’t envy Rose in that aspect, but I’m always up for making Regina miserable.

“Wait, how do you know Tessa?” I ask.

We talked about her, but Calum never showed me a picture. I would have walked right past her without knowing she was his crush. Calum starts his car, and Rose does the same. She pulls up behind them at a slow pace, and a feeling of déjà vu falls over me. The last time Amelia and I tried to stalk him, it didn’t end well.

“Where are you going, Rosie?”

Taking a sharp turn seconds after Calum does, she adds, “Just following to get more pictures.” That’s not creepy at all. She makes a face like she’s about to throw up, and I roll down the window to let in air. “Amelia needs more evidence.” We both know that’s not the real reason, but I’m too much of a chicken to call her out. Plus, she’s my ride home. I’m stuck here with her. “You need to hear Regina talking about him. I’m so over her. Need to shut her up for good.”

“You should.” Resting my elbow on the window, I turn towards her. “What’s the plan?”

“No plan?” she says. She maintains the pace, leaving two cars ahead of us. More cars zoom past us. “I don’t know yet. Take pictures? Send them to Regina with a screenshot of her net worth.”

“Net worth?”

Rose nods. Her nose turns up in mock disgust. “Yep. Tessa is an actress. A part-time model. You should check out her Instagram. You do know there are other celebrities besides Nicki, right?”

Yes. But I have no reason to know Tessa, just like Rose has no idea who Alanis is. Amelia probably knows Tessa because she spends more time than all of us combined on social media.

“How does your stepbrother even know her?”

Friends? Through his former fame? I have no right answer, but it all makes sense. Calum has a type. Mature. Working class. I am none of those things. I’m not his type. His car halts at the intersection before TTTT, I offer a silent prayer to heaven for him to continue straight ahead.

As my luck will have it, he takes the turn to TTTT, and my body sinks. They park on one side of the road and Rose stays on the opposite side, slowing behind a car that gives her a perfect view of them. She takes more pictures as the oblivious couple exit the car. A weight drops to my heart when Calum tucks Tessa’s hair behind her ear, grabbing her hand after. When Tessa looks away, he stares at her for three full seconds and smiles. I think he likes her. They must have had something in the past. That knowledge feels like tiny shards of glass pricking my skin. I hug my school bag to my chest. Rose takes another photo, and I punch her in the knee.

“I got enough pictures and a video.” A grin tugs at her lips as she inspects the pictures on her phone. With the smile of a proud photographer, she tucks it into her purse. “I wish I had Tessa’s autograph, though. Do you think you can ask your stepbrother to help us with that?” I shake my head, and she waves it off. “This will still work. Someone is about to get jealous.”

If only she knows that someone is me, not the cheeky Regina.

“Can we go now?”

“Sure,” she says, already driving out.

“Can you send me the pictures? And video?”

“Sure. But what do you need them for?”

To remind myself I'm off-limits by spending all night looking at the pictures and video. Maybe I can configure my brain to forget about him and the moments we shared. I am not his type.

CHAPTER 35

Painful mess



DINNER IS A PAINFUL MESS. I'm forced to eat at the same table as Calum and Tessa. Dani is in love with Calum's guest. Dad also seems to get carried away by her jokes. She's not even that funny.

Pointing a fork at Calum, Dani asks, "What time does the show start?" She looks at Dad with a small smile, and I trace the shapes on the tablecloth. "I'm not sure we can make it, Pete."

"It's fine. You don't have to be there, Mum." To Dad, Calum adds, "We'll be fine."

"Yep," Tessa adds. She's sitting between Dani and Calum. "We will make you two proud."

I am so tempted to ask what show, but I won't. He made it obvious he didn't care about me, so why should I? Watching the video and scrolling through the pictures Rose sent didn't help. I feel worse than before I saw them, and each time Tessa talks, I want to shove fistfuls of her hair into her mouth. She even sounds like Calum. They have the same accent. She, Dani, and Calum.

The next few seconds roll by with only the sounds of our cutlery connecting with our plates.

"Cathie, do you like coffee?" Tessa asks.

Calum stops eating for a nanosecond. His gaze lifts to my face, and I look away.

"I prefer tea," I answer.

Tessa grins like my answer pleased her, and her pretty face lights up. For the life of me, I can't force myself to reciprocate it. I hate that she's so sweet and difficult to dislike.

"I think I have just the right thing for you," she says. Her hands disappear under the table and appear later with an insulated mug. Dani and Dad look at me. They expect me to speak. She stretches the mug to me, and a tiny grin breaks out on my lips. She's too nice. "This should do."

"Thanks."

Gesturing to the metal body of the mug, she says, "Calum tells me you like music."

There are music notes written all over it. But the sight drills another hole in my shattered heart. Now he's talking to his crush about me. Was it before or after they visited TTTT?

"I do. Singing makes me happy. Thank you, Tessa. I love it." To Calum, I say, "Thanks, bro."

"You're welcome, sis."

I will never be his sister.

Dani cups her cheeks and grins. It must be nice for her to see her kid and stepkid get along. Dad slides his hand under Dani's, and she squeezes it. I'm the only unpaired person at the table.

The rest of dinner is tolerable. Tessa spends most of the evening cracking the family up with anecdotes from their high school. She and Calum go a long way. A funny feeling spreads in the pit of my belly. I should stop trying to compete with her. She has everything I don't. I've lost.

"How's Ben?" Dani asks.

Tessa lights up like a bulb. "He's awesome, Dani. Thank you for asking."

Calum elbows her jokingly in the ribs and they both laugh. Is this how he is? First, it was me, then Miss Gates, then Tessa. I didn't take him for a playboy. Are our feelings a game to him?

As soon as I get the chance to leave, I grab my mug and race to my room to scour the internet for Tessa. Tessa without a last name. My heart flutters as I drop the laptop on the bed. I pull my knees under my chin and wait for the page to load. There's a ton of information on other Tessas, not her. I try again with beautiful Tessa, American model, and actress. The first thing I see is Theresa "Tessa" Grace Mower's net worth. Jesus Christ. She is worth five million dollars.

Regina is not the only one out of Calum's league, I am. But my case is different. Calum and I shared something. Did we? It feels like such a long time ago since we were on the same bed.

Do I really love him? Or, I was so attention starved I fell for the first guy who showed me parts of myself I didn't like to explore? I hate commitments, but I am begging him to want me as more than friends. To love me. I toy with the pendant on my necklace. Opening it, a smile curls my lips. I was such a cute, chubby baby with no worries in this world. Mum was just as pretty.

If Mum was here, what would she say? *Chase your dream.*

Even if the dream was my stepbrother?

Why do I like him? Calum is handsome. But more than that, he gets me. He sees life differently, which is a good thing because I need someone in my corner to remind me how beautiful life can be. Most importantly, he sees all the odd pieces of me. He likes me for me and thinks I'm good.

Footsteps outside the door puts me on edge. I shut my laptop and wipe the tears falling down my cheeks. Maybe I have an unhealthy obsession with my stepbrother. All the things Calum gives me, Jackson can if I let him. As the thought sits in my mind, I know it's far from the truth.

Calum's door opens. I hear her laugh, followed by his chuckles. I lie flat on my belly. Screaming into the pillow doesn't make me feel any better. Tessa makes it hard to hate her, but it doesn't mean I won't try. I spend the next hour trying and failing to fall asleep. I know they are still awake.

They are in the balcony and with my window open, their voices sweep into my room.

Tired of tossing and turning, I stroll to the window and sit on the floor. Tessa should have insisted on sleeping at her hotel. It's quiet for a while, then a familiar sound perforates the air.

His guitar.

Tears spring to my eyes. He's playing his guitar. That's our thing. I'm the reason he started playing his guitar again. He needs to stop. But he doesn't, and it hurts even more when he sings Alanis Morissette. I thought what we shared was special. He's sharing parts of us with Tessa.

Staggering to my feet, I fling the locket on the wall. How can he thank me for being vulnerable with him, then do this? I walk to the bed and spend the remaining minutes of the song session looking at the images from Rose. He's a bloody idiot. A bloody fucking idiot who breaks hearts.

My heart is in pieces, and my eyes hurt from too much crying. Curling myself into a ball, I slip a hand under the pillow and the other drags the comforter over my head. I think my poor heart can't break anymore when Calum starts another song, but the broken pieces shatter when they return to his room, and his bed creaks violently. I shoot out of the bed like a possessed girl. My first instinct is to knock on his door and confirm my suspicions. I'm in front of his door before I can rethink the decision. My fist raps against the door, and my stepbrother wrenches it open.

He's shirtless.

He's sweating.

Calum sweeps a hand through his damp hair, and I'm almost lost for words. "Yes, sis?" He dares to smile, and anger surges through me. I ball my hands into fists. His gaze drops to my hands, and I slowly unclench them. "Hey, are you okay? Do you need help with something?"

"No. Not anymore."

Opening his mouth as if to say more, he stops himself and smiles instead. "Okay. Goodnight."

There's nothing good about this night because he ruined it.

I march to my room and, against my desires, I don't slam the door shut. The rest of the night is a string of unplanned events. But by the time my head hits the pillow, I'm grinning evilly.

CHAPTER 36

Spill it



CALUM

YOU DON'T KNOW how much you miss someone until you see them again. That's how I feel with Tessa. For the life of me, I can't stop grinning at her. She catches me smiling at her again and smacks the back of my head. I almost forgot she used to be a fighter. Ben struck gold with her.

She walks around my room, inspecting stuff and giving them a look of approval or disapproval. Sitting on the edge of the table, she crosses her ankles. "Your stepsister doesn't seem chatty."

To tell her or not to tell her about us.

I walk past her and grab the guitar by the table. Today is the runway show, yet I can't get my head out of my arse because I'm still thinking of Cathie. I've replayed our 'breakup' but can't think of another way I could have done it better. She's wrong to think I don't care. I can't act on my emotions. I'm older and should know better. Maybe someday she will thank me for it.

Maybe in the near future, I'll be able to walk past her and Jackson without a part of me dying. She kissed him. I mean, good for her. But why would she send that text after? I made a promise to myself to stay away from her, and I intend to keep it. Even if it hurts more than pouring salt on an open wound,

I'll keep going. I'll continue to pretend I'm okay with my stepsister moving on.

Tessa snaps her fingers in my face, and I force a grin to my lips. "Geez. What are you thinking?"

"The show?"

Her rental car will be here soon. With only a few hours left to the show, I need to step up. If Cathie wasn't so stubborn, I would have told her about the show. Singing is no fun without her. Even driving to school. My bed feels emptier, my heart is hollower. I miss hearing her giggles. I miss her calling me out on my 'American accent' and pushing me past my limits in the room.

Tessa drags a chair to the middle of the room and points at the bed. "Okay. Sit." Like a robot, I obey, and she plops down to the chair. Eyes on me, she says, "Spill. Don't be an unripe potato."

Only Tessa comes up with the weirdest insults. "What?"

"Start talking."

"My stepsister likes me. We may or may not have kissed a few times." Tessa's eyes bulge, and I struggle to find the right words. I cough into my palms, and she nods for me to continue. We spent last night catching up as old friends reconnecting after nearly four years, but now it feels like she's a professor who will grade my final papers. "It was her birthday. Her birthday gift."

"Birthday kiss," she says with a laugh. I frown, and she sobers up. "Do you like her?" More than I should. Fuck, I spent the first night playing Demi Lovato's *stone cold*, so she wouldn't feel bad for kissing Jackson. It wasn't okay. It still isn't. But I'll be fine. "What happened after the kiss?"

"I... well, she told me she loves me." I rub my knuckles over my knees until they hurt. Talking about it reminds me of how much of an asshole I was to Cathie. She told me she loved me, and I said nothing. "And now she hates me. She thinks I'm going out with one of the teachers."

Silence settles in the room. Tessa spreads out her fingers on her thigh, and a faint smile touches my lips. Ben's promise ring is on her middle finger. An image of Cathie wearing my ring sneaks up on me. But it can't happen. Not like it would be bad, but we are not on talking terms right now, and a ring is a big deal, and I need to just breathe. Mentioning Alice at dinner was to get Mum off my back and also to have Cathie thinking I'm moving on fine like her. It's bullshit.

"You should let her keep thinking that way."

My head rears back. Not her, too. "Why?"

"Your mum, Cal. Your mum." Dragging her chair closer so our legs almost touch, she squeezes my hand. I offer her a tight smile. "Cathie is too young to know if she loves you. It's too early."

I almost remind her of Ben, her high school boyfriend. The man she's living with, the man I know she will spend forever with because her life isn't complete without her Benny. I envy her. The confidence and certainty of their love.

"But you knew with Ben," I blurt out.

Her grin is impish. It's second nature for her to smile at the mention of her soulmate. "Yes. But our case was different. We weren't stepsiblings." The reminder guts me hard. I run both hands through my hair. Talking to her about this isn't helping. One tap on my knee, and I raise my gaze to her brown eyes. "Look at it as a way of testing her love for you. If she moves on from you after seeing you with this teacher, then it means it wasn't really love. Love doesn't wane."

"But it can get tired," I tell her.

Cathie has tried. She has given me a chance to explain myself and redeem us, but I didn't.

Tessa nods. Jumping to her feet, she pats my shoulder. "Yeah. But give it time. You know how your mum can be about this sort of thing." I know that better than anyone. She's rigid on a few matters, and her stance on stepsiblings relationship is one that will never waver. If I didn't meet Cathie, I would have supported that notion, but my heart wants

her. It needs her. “But if you think it’s love and you love her too... I guess you can talk to your mum. But give it time.”

Time. What is time?

I pick up my guitar like I did last night when we were rehearsing at the balcony. Singing Alanis painfully reminded me of Cathie. I started with it to ease myself into the main songs for today.

My singing was unnatural and a bit off. Tessa blamed it on my nerves. I knew better. I didn’t have that blue-eyed girl with the brightest smile cheering me on. So I flopped. I can’t repeat the same mistake again today. I should talk to her.

What did she want last night? Tessa had been showing me how to sing while walking on the runway. She didn’t break a sweat, but I couldn’t say the same for me. I had to take off my shirt.

“She really got you,” Tessa says. My lips twitch. Cathie has. But she doesn’t know it due to how I have been acting. She points to the bed. “Should we practise one more time? We have time.”

“Let’s do it.”

The stage has stairs, but for now, the bed will have to do. I strip the bed of its covers like I did last night and stand on the bare mattress. Instead of singing, I pick up the guitar I dropped.

“Give me that,” Tessa adds, collecting my guitar. Without it, I feel exposed. “You don’t need it, Cal. Just your voice. And remember to smile.”

The bed squeaks under my weight, but I stay composed. My composure is better this morning. Starting a playlist containing the songs I will perform today, Tessa hands me a hairbrush to use as a microphone. She stops by the door of the balcony, poses, then gives me a thumbs-up.

It’s funny at first, but I ease into it. Tessa catwalks into the room and strikes a few poses as I walk the length of the bed. We continue until I finish the third song. Walking and singing isn’t so tough. The hard part is jumping down from the bed

gracefully and climbing back up without acting like that shit hurts or losing my breath. The stage has to have better stairs.

Tessa's smile is contagious. Sweat rolls down my chest, but she's fine. "You're doing great," she comments. She whips her hair over one shoulder and stops at the foot of the bed. "You'll kill it."

"You too. You're a natural."

"It's practice," she tells me. "You will get better."

Walking to the wardrobe, Tessa removes a bag. I insisted she spent the night here. After a long argument and video call with Ben, she relented. I slept on the couch downstairs, but it wasn't much of a night since we both didn't get up to four hours of sleep. She will return to her hotel after the show. I would love to spend more time with her, but the competition starts on Monday.

"We should get ready," she says.

"Yeah." But before then, I have one thing to do. I open the door, and a ball of nerves unfurls in my belly. I'm not doing anything wrong. I'll talk to Cathie, and that's all. "I'll be right back."

Thinking it is one thing, doing it is another. Ten seconds in front of my stepsister's door, and I'm yet to knock. What will I say? No idea. But I don't want to leave without talking to her.

Her door opens. She jumps back, and I offer an apology for scaring her. An eye roll later, and my lips quirk in a smile. My superstar is still upset. She pulls her pink hair back to reveal her bare face. She has always been pretty, but without makeup, she's a different kind of pretty. The type that makes my dick acutely aware of her and the magic her hand can perform. I miss her.

Digging my nails into my palms to collect my thoughts, I try not to stare at her lips. The same lips she used on Jackson. Does she love him? Wait, why am I here? *Think, Calum.* Cathie is not right for me. She is better with her agemate. She steps out and closes the door behind her. The hallway must

have shrunk to contain both of us. I can't seem to get enough air into my lungs.

"Hey," I say. She crosses her arms on her chest, and my brain torments me with images of her naked boobs. She likes my touch. *Not again.* We are done. "I got a small gig today. I get to sing."

"Good for you."

Her cold voice sucks some of the joy out of me. I shove my hands into my front pockets. I came here for something. I'm not sure what, but not this. We need to be cool before I leave. This is my first show since the band broke up. Cathie, of all people, should understand the pressure.

"Won't you wish me luck?" I ask.

"Good luck," slips from her in a flat voice.

I'll take it. And a smile or even a scowl. I smile so she can reciprocate it, but she doesn't. "Do you want to know about the gig? I think it will be shown on TV later. I'm not sure what channel."

"Good for you." Her chin juts out in anger, but my mind chooses to focus on the delicate curve of her neck. I can kiss my way to her lips, maybe replace the feel of Jackson's lips with mine. "I don't care. I don't want to know anything that has to do with you, Calum. We are not friends."

"Is this about Tessa?" Her facade briefly cracks, and she scoffs. "You're jealous. You don't ha—"

"I don't give a fuck about you, Calum Dissick."

Laughter escapes me. Cathie Jenkins is a terrible liar. She gives too many fucks about me. That's why she's hurting. I hurt as much, too, and she's so close I can hug her. I want to hug her.

"All right, Cathie. If you say so. But have fun at practice today." Her lower lip trembles and her sad eyes seek mine. I want to kiss her, too. If not, I might die. "Mr Prescott will take my place."

"Good. Practice is always better without you."

If Cathie hadn't shivered, I might have believed she didn't care. I put one foot forward, and she sucks in a shaky breath. My muscles draw tight as we stare at each other. I want the forbidden.

My hand curves under her jaw. "Cathie, I miss—"

"Cal."

Fuck. My head whips to Tessa. She offers me a big smile, but her eyes shoot lasers at me.

Cathie recovers fast and flashes Tessa a smile. "Hey, Tessa." Taking in Tessa's outfit, she adds, "You look nice."

"Thanks, Cathie."

There's a long second of awkward silence where it's up to me to diffuse it. I clear my throat.

"Tessa, you called me. You want something?"

"Yep." Holding up a necklace, she bares the back of her neck to me. "I need help with this."

My gaze lowers to Cathie's neck. Bare. I stare into her blue eyes, and the coldness in them shakes me to the core. She took it off. Tearing my gaze off my stepsister, I fix Tessa's necklace.

"Thanks, Cal," Tessa says when I'm done. Cathie fakes a smile, but I see through it. What she fails to understand is Tessa and I are only friends. I had a crush on her, but it was so long ago. I'm not that boy anymore. I muster a smile, but Tessa pushes herself up to place a kiss on my cheek. Tugging my wrist, she takes a step forward. "We should get going, or we'll be late."

The voice in my head warns me against looking back, but I ignore it. I shouldn't have. The image of Cathie with tears in her eyes throws me off balance.

CHAPTER 37

Once upon a time



CALUM

“DON’T you think that was unnecessary?” I ask, making reference to how Tessa acted in front of my stepsister. If her plan was to make Cathie jealous, it worked perfectly. “You didn’t have to kiss me.”

The rental car goes over a bump, and I push out a hand to grab the seat in front of me. Noises rise and fall. It’s a busy Saturday with cars and humans on the road in a haste to get out of here.

“I kissed your cheek, Cal,” Tessa replies. She is a great actress who fooled me for a second. A frustrated groan tunnels out of my lips. I am still thinking of Cathie and how heartbroken she seemed. My stepsister is hurting, and I don’t like it. I don’t like to think I’m the cause of her misery. Tessa hands me a compact mirror and smacks her lips at her reflection in it. “And no, it was not unnecessary. The only thing unnecessary was her attitude. She was very rude to you.”

“She’s being a teenager, Tessa.” Cathie didn’t mean any of the things she said. She might act all tough, but on the inside, she is soft, a good girl. It’s all a facade she drops around me alone, and I broke her heart. I run one hand over my face. I hate thinking about her. “Only acting her age.”

Tessa snatches the mirror from me, slaps it close, and shoves it into her purse. Pinning me with a stare only Mum

can pull off, she tells me, “I wasn’t that rude at her age. Neither were you.”

Yeah. I was a good kid until I wasn’t anymore. My head relaxes against the window, the noise of the city unusually calming me. I might be making excuses for Cathie because I understand how she feels. Once upon a time, I used to have a crush on Tessa. I was patient, waiting for the right time. But any shot at a relationship with her died as soon as Ben walked into our class.

“But you were a teen once,” I murmur. We drive past unfamiliar buildings, and a big part of me hopes Cathie gets over her anger and tunes in to watch me. I sent her a text with the channel number. Turning to Tessa, a ghost of a smile flies across my lips. She pouts. “When you thought you wouldn’t end up with Ben, you acted out. It’s what Cathie is doing. And I get it.”

Tessa scowls, but I know she understands. We were eighteen once and acted on emotions more than logic. “Whatever, Calum.” Laughing, I nudge her side with my elbow. “Fine. I get it, too.”

The driver cuts off our chitchat to let us know we are a few minutes away from the venue, and my heart quickens. We are almost there. I steal a glance at Tessa, but she’s the least bothered. Earbuds plugged in, her head bobs to the song playing in her ears. I bet it’s Maria’s new single. Nobody promotes her best friend more than Tessa. The same way she’s trying to do for me.

I swipe my clammy palms over my jeans. I don’t have stage frights, but what if I’ve lost my mojo after being away from music for so long?

To ease the tension building in my joints, I ask, “What if Ben sees you holding hands with me?” Tessa scoffs. When she realises I’m not joking, she laughs. “Okay, what if it was another guy?”

“I’m an actress. A model,” she says in a voice that screams: *dumb question*. “If that really ruffles Ben, we wouldn’t have lasted this long. I was only trying to help you.

You would have kissed her.” Would I? Fucking yeah. I already threw caution to the wind. Cathie, too. She was leaning in for that kiss. We are both so fucked. “What if your parents had walked in? Your mum?”

I’m not sure how Pete would have reacted to a kiss. As a headteacher and my stepfather, he’s cool. Never lost his temper around me. Mum is another story. She will invoke all the angels and saints to help her cast out the demons that have taken over her son. Tessa saved me from that.

“Thanks,” I tell her.

The cab slows at the back of the building. Security lets us in after Tessa flashes her ID. The whole place buzzes with activities. From the backdoor, I can hear the sound engineer testing the mics to be sure everything for the occasion is ready. We won’t start for another hour, and everyone is stiff with tension. We enter through a narrow hallway and burst into a big stage.

Someone giving commands to the crew notices Tessa and waves at us. We are separated after a brief. I’m taken to another dressing room bustling with makeup artists and costume designers. Standing there in the middle of the room, surrounded by chairs, tables, and mirrors, I feel lost.

“Anyone attending to you?” one of the makeup artists asks. He’s rocking the gothic look with the dark eyeshadows and rainbow-coloured Mohawk. I’m not sure I want him touching my hair or face. But I shake my head. He pokes my chest with his brush. “Guess that means I have to.”

Moving behind my chair, he palms my face and stares at my reflection in the mirror. Weird. He applies some gel on his palm and messes up my hair. His lips quirk at the result. Not bad. My curly hair makes me appear younger than I am, and the shit he used made the curls bouncier.

Moments later, I’m looking camera-worthy. The butterflies in my belly go rogue. Doubts cloud my head. What if I fuck this up? I slip out my phone from the new jeans they gave me. Cathie hasn’t replied to my text.

A man peers inside to inform us we have five minutes to the opening, and a chill runs up my arms. I tap my foot against the floor. The Calum in the mirror looks calm and collected, but I'm a mess inside. I need my happy place. Someone knocks. My head jerks towards the door, and Tessa walks in. She's wearing a pink robe. Her hair is styled to perfection in a long ponytail.

Crossing over, she sinks into the chair on my left. "Are you nervous?"

"Very," I reply. The nerves slip into my voice. I shake out my hands like it will help. "Are you?"

"Kinda." We both laugh. No matter how many times you do this, you never fully get over the nerves. It's a familiar feeling. Tessa pats my knee. "Don't be. We'll go out there and kill it."

I have to, so Maria doesn't regret this.

The man from earlier walks in. "All set?" he asks. He speaks into his earpiece. "All right. We are ready."

As we are about to leave the room, Tessa hugs me tightly. "Think about your happy place," she murmurs into my chest. Sadly, my happy place is unhappy with me. "It helps with the nerves."

Images of Cathie float into my mind. All our moments, from the singing sessions to our cuddle nights to the date at Teresa's play in slow motion. Her smile is one of my favourite things about her, so I hold onto that memory of her smiling as I walk backstage and wait to be ushered to the stage.

Through the crack in the curtains, I glimpse the audience. Since this is a runway show, a short flight of circular stairs connects the stage to the aisle. I'll have to avoid all forms of eye contact.

In another second, I am invited in, and the lights dim. Adrenaline courses through me once I step on the stage. Everything goes silent, and the world fades. It's just me, my fucked up self. My confidence crumbles to the floor. I don't get to panic because an image of a smiling Cathie breaks

through the doubts. I take deep breaths. *Think*. I have to think of my happy place. Her.

The beat drops, but no sound escapes my lips. *Sing, Cal*. The first model walks out in black lingerie, and the spotlight redirects to her. That was my cue. Closing my eyes, I picture Cathie's face and let out the intro of the song. The knots lodged in my throat and joints dissolve. I see my stepsister. She's smiling. She's letting me know I can do it. So, I allow the music to take over me.

Lights twirl around me. The spotlight focuses on me a few times and moves to the super-sexy models. I am supercharged. Sweat drips down my arms, forehead, and my brows. It rushes back to me like I was never off the stage. Long-buried emotions resurface. I sing my heart out.

Hours after the show ends, my body still thrums. I remember people backstage congratulating me for the electric performance, but I want her. Cathie. I don't get her. But I get Tessa. She flashes me a big grin from the door, running over to pull me into a firm hug. I stagger from the force.

"You did good. Really good."

Her makeup is gone, and she's back in her robe. Did Cathie watch it? I don't check my phone to avoid disappointment. Tessa rambles about my performance and my singing, but I hardly hear a thing she says. I lower myself to the chair and stare at the mirror with a sad smile. I'm empty.

Singing on that stage momentarily made me feel good. But now, I'm reminded of my happy place. Cathie is not here to celebrate this win with me. Mum sent loads of texts, but she's not Cathie. I excuse myself to clean up and gather my thoughts. I'm the dumbass who asked us to redefine our relationship. This is on me. I shouldn't expect calls or texts after hurting her.

On my return to the dressing room, Tessa is on a call. She motions to me with a crooked finger. "Yeah. Bye," she says into her phone. I offer her a smile when she drops the call. "Guess who?"

“Your mum?”

Without the gel, my hair feels lighter. I weave my hand through it and pretend it's Cathie doing it. We need to talk, but about what? What do I want from her? I can't lead her on if I won't be committed.

“Yeah. She was talking to me about a video.” I drape my arm over the armrest. Something in her expression gives me cause to worry. “An interesting TikTok video that blew up overnight.”

Tessa passes me her phone, and a video shows up. The first thing I notice when it plays is the name of the account. Nikki Stan. My nails dig into my palms. I mask my fear behind a smile.

“Someone created a fanpage and shared some videos of us. I think we both know who, Cal.”

This account reposted the video with the TikTok watermark. I unlock my phone to search for her username, but the results are negative. How? She made a video, then deleted her account? I try not to think about the act, but a flood of emotions rushes through me. Mostly anger and sadness. Maybe I hurt her too much, or Tessa is right about her having an attitude problem.

“I'm sorry,” I say. “What does Ben think of it?”

Tessa laughs. She's not upset, but I feel like shit because it's my fault. “He thinks it's funny and stupid.” I laugh because she does. Giving it another thought, I agree. It's mostly stupid. A teenage girl's idea of revenge. “But he says to tell you to keep your hands to yourself, or he'll chop them off.”

Ben is the last person I want to fight. I don't want to lose our friendship. My head hangs low, and a sigh travels through me. Posting a video of me and Tessa holding hands and hugging so it looks like we are a couple is to what end? To ruin her relationship with Ben? To hurt me?

It makes no sense.

Tessa places a hand on my knee. “She is hurting. Don't be hard on her. She is being a teen.”

No, she is being a spoilt teen who needs to learn a very big lesson.

“Can you send the video to me?” I ask.

CHAPTER 38

Viral



THE VIDEO IS VIRAL. I know that was the plan, but I didn't think it through.

Has Calum seen it? Will he hate me? Be furious?

I pace the empty corridor, my footsteps echoing like a warning. I'm home alone. Dad and Dani went to evening mass because they missed the morning one. They invited me, but I wasn't interested. I haven't stopped thinking about Calum and the video. I thought deleting the account after I uploaded the video would end it, but some foolish people had already created a fanpage. What if he finds out? I make videos on my account, and the one time I'm stupid, that video goes viral.

Why, TikTok?

Wait, what if I try to earn Calum's forgiveness before he finds out? I rush to the kitchen with one intention in mind. My phone lights up with a message from Rose. She wants to know why the video and pictures she sent me are circulating under someone's account. I make up a lie that earns me the rolling eyes emoji. As far as she is concerned, I sent it to someone who posted it.

My phone beeps again with her new reply.

R: Who did you send it to?

Me: My friend.

R: A friend that we don't know about?

Me: Yes.

R: Liar.

Me: Not a liar. Why are u so bothered anyway?

R: I'm not. Just curious. Didn't know they went to the same high school. They look so cute together.

No, that wasn't the purpose of the video. I don't even know the point anymore. It starts with the high school pictures I pulled off Tessa's Instagram, then transitions to the pictures and video I got from Rose. I knew what I was doing was stupid when I saw pictures of Ben, Tessa's long-time boyfriend, but I still posted it. Now, I've woken up sleeping giants. The Cassa gang. Cal plus Tessa. Some fans used to ship them back then, and the video re-ignited their interest.

Fear builds in my stomach as I rummage through the cupboard for ingredients to make that tetrazzini sauce. There's spaghetti, but there's no more chicken. What else do I need to make it good? I also forgot one crucial detail. I'm a terrible cook. When was the last time I cooked?

Footsteps from the living room pull me out of my thoughts. I tiptoe to the door to check.

Calum is here.

Blood rushes to my face. I wait until Calum is gone before I start upstairs. To my dismay, he is in the corridor facing the wall while answering a call. His shoulders vibrate with laughter, and I hurry past him. The call ends as I reach for the knob. Calum turns, and everything slows. His smile falls when he spots me, and my heart drops. I count his steps as he starts in my direction, but he walks past me without a word. Calum knows it's me, and he will never talk to me again.

"Hey," I call out. Calum unlocks his door and waits. I take one step forward. Dani spent lunch talking about the show. I didn't watch it because of practice. Mr Prescott had all of us rehearsing until we almost lost our voices. "How was the show, Calum? You didn't come home last night."

"No, I didn't. Why? Do you want anything?"

"No," I reply.

After a nod, Calum enters his room and shuts the door. I hesitate one second, then knock. He doesn't usher me in, but I open the door. Calum is standing by the balcony door. Light streams in from the door and catches his eyes, making them appear bluer. My stepbrother stares at me from head to toe. The small distance between us vanishes as I cross over to stand before him.

"What do you want, Cathie?"

"Are you upset with me?" I ask.

He walks further into the room, blocking out the light. I take two steps back. "Should I be?"

"Maybe? For being rude yesterday and..."

"And what, Cathie?" Gauging his face for any signs he knows what I did is futile. "And what?"

I can't tell him. I've deleted my account, and I'm not the only one with Nikki as her username.

"Nothing. Nothing, Calum. It's fine."

We stand a foot away from each other.

Staring.

Waiting.

I don't know what to say. Calum looks like he wants to say something but doesn't know how.

"If that's all, can you please leave?" Calum finally says. I can't. His behaviour has changed. For someone who asked for civility, he's unusually cold. He points at the door, but I only step forward and lock my arms tight around his waist. He stiffens. "What are you doing? Catherine."

"I'm so sorry," I whisper into his chest. Tears burn my eyes and spill onto his shirt. He doesn't hug me back, and panic swims through me. He won't forgive me if he finds out. "Cal. I'm sorry."

Prying my hands off him, Calum holds me at a distance. He stares down at the wet spot on his chest, then at me. I rock

on my heels, afraid to hear his next words. “What’s wrong with you?”

I don’t know. Okay. Maybe I do. I’m trying to make it up to him, so if he ever finds out about the video, he won’t be so mad at me.

“I thought about what you said. We can be cool and all that,” I say. Calum’s eyes run over me with suspicions. I stretch my hand to him. “Let’s be friends. That’s what you wanted, right?”

“No. Not anymore.”

“Please.”

Calum sighs. He accepts my handshake, and I take it a step further by hugging him again. His response is the same as earlier, but he’s less stiff. I step back and smile at him. He barely smiles.

If he knows what I did, then he should put me out of my misery.

“Are you sure you’re not mad at me for something I did?” I whisper. His lips thin, and my head bobs. I’m getting nothing out of him. “Alright, bro. How was the show? Wanna talk about it?”

I crack a small smile, and he chuckles. “No, sis.” He points to his wrinkled bed, then at the door. Memories of Friday’s night squeaking pour in. “If that’s all, you can leave. I would like to rest.”

He groans as I drag a chair to the foot of his bed. “I want to stay. Please. I won’t do anything.”

“I don’t think your boyfriend would like that.”

“Did you have sex with Tessa?” I blurt out.

That was the initial motivation behind making that video. But he doesn’t even owe me fidelity.

Frustration rolls off Calum. He pinches the bridge of his nose. “If I answer, will you leave my room?”

“As long as you are honest.”

“No, I didn’t, and I would never do that to—” *To who? Me?* He pauses and exhales. I try to smile, but it doesn’t form. “I don’t know how you got that impression, but Tessa is my friend.”

But I know. I got it from her behaviour around him. He let her kiss him on the cheek. She called him Cal. They went to TTTT together. He sang for her. Plus, all that squeaking on the bed.

Holding my gaze captive, he continues, “And a very good one at that. Someone who will never try to sabotage my relationship with others out of jealousy. Someone who respects boundaries.”

I gulp. “If there’s something you want to say to me, just say it.” His eyes narrow to harsh slits, and I nearly confess. I fist my hands inside my pockets. He’s still gawking at me. “I’m sorry.”

“For what, Cathie?”

“I don’t know.” I know but can’t say it. If he doesn’t already know about the video, then I would have implicated myself. What if he does but wants me to apologise? Remorse fills my eyes, and I silently implore him to forgive me. He’s right. I’m immature. “I don’t know, but I’m sorry.”

“If you don’t know what you are sorry for, how can you be sorry, Catherine?” he asks. I should tell him. What’s the worst that can happen? He will forgive me. We will never kiss again, but we will be friends. He snaps his fingers. “This is your last chance. What are you sorry for?”

CHAPTER 39

Why?



MONDAY SNEAKS upon us like a thief. I'm the first one up in the house. I tiptoe to the door, but the sound from Calum's room stops me. He is playing his guitar. I listen for a few minutes and hum the song. He's strumming the chords to the classic we'll be singing later today. I want to think he's doing it for me since I'm a tight ball of nerves. That we are fine. But I know better.

The hour drags by. 5 am turns to 6 am. Time to prepare.

I read through our group chats. Rose is freaking out. That's what happens when the first team you have to face is the one that knocked you off in the last competition. Taylor and Amelia try to calm her down. It's useless. She will only feel better when we win this round. I know I will.

After a quick bath, I stand in front of the mirror and practise my breathing exercise. Today, we will find out who's taking the first solo. I run a comb through my pink hair. Icy blue eyes stare back at me. My freckles are so faint they are almost invisible. I am taking the solo, right? Right.

It's 6:45 am when I finish getting ready. The competition starts at 9 am. But I can't sit still. I open my door and step into the corridor. Calum exits his room. My eyes trail his sneakers, up to his jeans, then his shirt, finally stopping to rest on his face. He tilts his head in a mock nod.

"Hey," I say. "Are we good?"

"Why wouldn't we be?"

“Cal, we are friends, right? And friends forgive each other all the time, isn’t that right?”

His frown deepens, and he folds his hands at his back. He didn’t correct me on the use of his name, but I can’t bask in that fact. I bounce on my toes. “What are you getting at, Cathie?”

“Nothing.”

“Nothing?” he repeats.

“Nothing,” I say.

There’s a moment of stare-down with his eyes trying to steal a look into my soul. I put my walls back up. Somewhere along the way, the switch flipped, and lines blurred. I’m unsure where we stand or what I feel for my stepbrother. I might have been infatuated by him and called it love. No. The tremors in my heart debunk my claims. It was more than infatuation.

Maybe not love, but more than lust.

I make a U-turn to my room and wait. Propping myself against the headboard, I drag my knees to my chest. If Mum were here, she would be in my room, giving me a pep talk. I pull open my bedside drawer and laugh when I see Mum’s favourite bubble gum. Gums before a competition is our thing. Dad must have put it there. I slide it into my pocket and remove the jewellery from the drawer. Tracing the blurry image in the locket, I smile. I will sing for Mum today.

The doorknob twists, and my head jerks up. 7: 15 am. Dad pokes his head inside. “Ready?” he asks, walking into my room. He sits by my side, and his big arm wraps around my stiff shoulders. We stare straight ahead into space, our hands on our knees. “You will do great, Catherine.”

“Sure, Dad.”

He gives me a full hug. It’s not the same as having Mum around, and I have this feeling Calum would have had a better choice of words than him. But I will take this. Dad helps me to my feet, and I grab my school bag filled with my scores. I won’t go through them again, but I feel safer having them with

me. We descend the stairs, and Dani hugs me. Calum is nowhere in sight.

After more hugs and kisses on my cheeks, Dani follows us to Dad's car. She opens my door and hugs me one last time. I drum my foot on the floor, my mind too rambled to process whatever Dad tells me. He gives up on the conversation, and we stay quiet for the rest of the ride. The wind sends the tips of my hair to my face, and I smooth the edge. It's in a high ponytail today.

Anxiety sits heavily in my belly as Dad drives down the familiar road. A car honks, and I look back to see the dark blue school bus of St Anne's School. We have practised enough, but a giant ball of fear pushes to my throat. I drop my forehead to my knee, and Dad pats my lower back.

"Relax, Cathie."

I keep my head down until the car stops. We are inside a large compound with a brick building. A tall, barbed wire fence encloses us. Different buses occupy various spots, but St George's bus is missing. Students loiter the place in their uniforms. Dad squeezes my hand to reassure me.

My eyes scan the uniforms for our choir. For those who can't make it on their own, they will join the school bus. Dad rounds to my side to open the door. The door to St Anne's bus opens, and their instructor steps out, followed by the students in a neat file. He comes over to greet and shake hands with Dad. I offer him a tentative smile. Dad walks me backstage of the hall.

Moments later, the man and his students enter. Their soloist, a redhead, sneers at me when the choirmaster isn't looking. I kiss my middle finger. Dad hugs me one last time and steps back.

"Are you all right, Catherine? Relax," Dad says. That's easier said than done, but he doesn't understand the pressure we are about to face. He kisses my forehead and pumps his fist in the air. I chuckle. "I'll go check to see what's the delay is. Whatever happens, I'm proud of you."

“Thanks.”

Dad walks away but stops to chat with St Anne’s instructor, and both exit the hall. As soon as the man is gone, I sink into one of the benches lining the wall. The redhead and her friend, a brunette, stalks towards me. Stopping in front of me, they fold their arms on their chest like they have done the move so many times. I’m not intimidated by them, only determined for us to win.

“Daddy’s girl,” the brunette says. They stare at each other and laugh.

“At least I have a dad. What do you have, you bloody idiot?” I say. My smile stretches from ear to ear. “Maybe if your dad loved you a little more, you wouldn’t be over here trying to be a prick.”

“You fucking—”

“Oh God,” I say, cutting off the redhead. I push my fingers into my ear. “You sound like a frog.” Her gasp gets the attention of their teammates. Some stand, but no one comes to their aid. The brunette glares at me without saying a word, but I can’t help adding, “You look like a fucking vagina.”

They turn and walk away, and that’s when St George’s choir walks in. “The real choir is here.”

My voice is loud enough for everyone to hear. Rose looks at our opponents and laughs. If they are trying to rile me up in hopes of me transferring the emotions to the stage, they are wrong.

Rushing to hug me, Rose pulls us down to the bench. “What did they do this time?”

“They exist,” I tell her. She laughs harder, but it dies off sharply. “What is it?”

“He knows, Cathie,” she murmurs.

Someone sits beside me, but I don’t look. It must be someone from our choir.

“Who?”

Rose stares at the open door as if expecting the person to show up. There's no one there. "Mr Dissick. He knows I sent you the video and pictures. He queried me at school. But I told him it was your friend," she says. My face pales. Of course, Calum knows there's no friend. Where is he? She cups my face, and I try to smile. "Are you okay? You look sick. Because of the solo?"

"No, the nerves. I'm fine."

Nodding in disbelief, she leaves to join the other members of the choir. Regina turns and grins at me. I wave to disorient her. Someone walks in and ushers us to the stage through a door. A dark curtain separates us from the audience. St Anne choristers are backstage. We are singing first. Where is Calum? Where is Mr Prescott? They should be here. They walk in through the other door, and Regina beams at Calum. Fear bleeds into my veins when he returns the smile.

Jesus God. Mother Mary. All the saints. Please, no. Never.

Mr Prescott claps, and we form a circle around him. His beady eyes lower to each of our faces, and I squirm because they stay the longest on me. Talk about silent pressure. He clears his throat and gives a talk about doing our best today. All or nothing. We nod in agreement. I tap my foot to the floor, the movement halting when Regina catches my eyes. She smirks, and my heart drops to my stomach. I'm taking the solo, not her. Catherine Jenkins, not Regina Ames.

"Are you ready?"

"Yes, sir," everyone chorus. Regina's voice is the loudest.

Mr Prescott smiles at us, and some of the anxiety floats away. "Mr Dissick has a word or two."

He steps back, and we create a gap for Calum to pass through. Calum plants his hands on his waist, his gaze sweeping over our faces. Christie's hand shoots up before he speaks.

"Sir, who's taking the solo?" she asks.

Everything slows, and the only audible sound is the roar of my heart pounding in my ears. Rose digs her elbow into my

side, certain I'll sing it. Calum's index finger juts out. He waves it in the air until it settles on Regina.

"Regina is taking the solo," he says. The witch grins like a Cheshire cat, stepping forward to stand beside him. Rose's arm sling around my waist in support. She is whispering something I don't want to hear. "Miss Ames showed tremendous progress during practice. Good job, Regina."

My heart stills. Then it shatters.

I'm stunned.

Everyone gets into position, but I don't. I follow Calum outside the stage, and he stops when he notices. If anyone can hear or see us, I don't care. But the place is empty. St Anne's choir must have gone out there to watch our performance. He turns. I drum my fingers against my hip. My nerves are on fire, and my insides quiver with intense fury. I am a time bomb waiting to explode. Calum folds his arms on his chest, cold and unbothered by my reaction. How dare he?

I am bubbling with so much anger that it surprises me when I whisper, "Why?"

Unshed tears burn my eyes, but I don't give them an escape. I'll not appear weak before him.

Calum scoffs. "You are asking me why?" Reaching into his pocket for his phone, he taps on it for a few seconds, then thrusts it in my face. "Did you or did you not make this video to spite me, Cathie?"

It's the TikTok video I made, and it plays on mute. I wipe the tears rolling down my cheeks.

"I'm sorry."

"I'm sorry, too." Brows furrowed in annoyance, Calum shoves the phone into his pocket. "But if you act like a child, Cathie, you will get treated like one. Play stupid games, win stupid prizes."

My chest tightens. I can't do this. I can't go out there and watch Regina sing. I fucked up with that video, but it's not the

same. He can't take what I love from me to prove a point. I get it.

"They are not even comparable. You can't let her sing it. Please," I whisper. Calum frowns. I'm clutching at threads, holding on to a long-gone hope. I would touch him, but we are in public. "You kissed me, Cal. I thought we shared something. That I meant something more to you."

"You thought wrong," Calum deadpans. To him, kissing me was a big mistake. I need to get that into my skull. He doesn't care. He probably never did. "It should never have happened."

The hole in my chest expands. I've made enough excuses for him. He's not pushing me away because a relationship with me is forbidden. He's doing it because he doesn't care. I offer him a smile and wipe the evidence of my tears. Thankfully, I didn't tell anyone I was taking the solo.

"Okay," I say. More tears flood my eyes, but I'll put all these fucking emotions into singing. I'll be vulnerable with it like he taught me. At least he gave me that. I take a step away from this man who has caused me so much pain in the last few days. "Thank you for everything, Mr Dissick."

"Cathie," he starts.

But I raise my hand to stop him. He has said his piece. Now, I'll say mine.

"I will not be bothering you again, sir."

With that, I charge back to the stage.

CHAPTER 40

A big mistake



THERE IS no practise today because Regina led us to victory yesterday. I might as well have stayed at home since I barely paid attention in class. The best part is I don't have to see Calum until practice resumes tomorrow. Avoiding my stepbrother is easier than I thought. Maybe he's also avoiding me. Whatever the case, I do not wish to talk to him again. He can befriend Regina.

I step into the dining and stop. Calum is on lunch duty. We share a glance, but I'm the first to look away. Amelia, Rose, Taylor, and Lucien are at our table. They all turn worried eyes to me, and I send them a smile. The most important thing is we are through to the next stage, right?

Jackson waves from his table. I wave back and continue to mine. Amelia frowns. I've ignored all her calls and texts since yesterday. I'm fine. Jackson jogs over to me, but instead of annoyance, waves of tiredness push into me. I stop in the middle of the cafeteria, and he takes my hands.

"Hey," he says. His brown eyes crease at the corners. He can make me happy. He's my agemate.

Going on tiptoes, I press my lips to his. "I'll be your girlfriend, Jackson."

Jackson blanches. He drops my hands and steps back. His shock draws a small smile to my lips. I might be an awful person for leading him on, but in this moment, I revel in his euphoria.

"You are serious," he says.

I nod. “But we have to take it slow.”

My boyfriend sweeps me off my feet and spins me in the air. He’s grinning as he sets me down. Pushing two fingers into his mouth, Jackson whistles until he grabs everyone’s attention.

“Cathie just agreed to be my girlfriend,” he yells.

The boys in his corner drum their fists on the table. Some hoot. Others whistle. Rose stands to clap, and Taylor grins. Amelia says nothing. Jackson slides his arm around my shoulders and leads me to our table. I wait for him to sit first on the same bench as Taylor and Lucien before sitting on his lap, and Lucien claps his back. The next time my eyes meet Calum’s, I smirk.

Only Amelia seems unhappy about this. Regina too. She glares at me, her gaze softening when it lands on Jackson. She got the solo. I got the man. It’s a fair trade.

Rose passes me her lunch. She’s more excited than I am about this relationship. The rest of the day flies. By the time I’m stepping out of my last class, Jackson is in front waiting for me. The excitement from earlier is gone, only a deep feeling of regret swelling in my belly. I hug him as he leans down for a kiss, hiding my face in his chest. He takes my bag and guides me to his car.

Jackson drives me home. For the next two days, he drives me home and brings me to school, making it unbelievably easier for me to avoid Calum Dissick. A good girlfriend would warn him against waiting so long after school ends, but I don’t. Well, I tried once yesterday, but he didn’t listen. Today, after he drops me off, I race to my room and stay in bed until it’s time for dinner.

Calum steps out of his room, and a sharp pain bursts through me. I don’t understand why it still hurts. I’m too tired to feel anything, so the moment his mouth opens, I rush downstairs.

Dani walks past me with a tray. “I was about to call you. You’re right in time. Dinner is ready.”

I assist her with the tray. We continue to the table, and my gaze falters when Calum joins us.

“You’re here,” she tells her son. Smiling at me, she says, “Cal is bringing a girl home.”

“Mum,” he chides.

“What?” Dani asks. She places empty plates on four table mats. “Where’s the lie, Cal?”

Calum sits first, and I sit on the other side. Stepbrother dearest said he wasn’t dating Miss Gates, but who knows? Holding my gaze, he says, “It’s nothing, Mum. She’s only visiting.”

If that’s supposed to make me feel better, he was better off shutting up. Coming up from behind, Dad hugs his wife and kisses behind her ear. My heart clenches. Calum pales. He remembers.

“Who is coming to visit?” Dad asks, settling down at the head of the table. Dani points to her son, and Dad narrows his eyes. I hope he says no. “Alice?” Calum blushes but doesn’t deny it. I bite the insides of my cheek so I can feel something else, a type of pain I can handle. “It might be awkward, given that I’m her headteacher, but Miss Gates is welcome to visit here, son.”

Calum is *not* his son. I clear my throat. “Jackson is coming over too.”

Everyone’s head jerks in my direction, and a pin-drop silence settles over us. Dad takes a bite of his meal, and Dani places a hand on his shoulder to calm him. I don’t know why he’s acting upset. If Calum is allowed to bring a lass, I’ll bring a lad. Plus, he knows Jackson. He approves.

“We will discuss this later, Catherine,” Dad says.

The food loses its taste, but I swallow and chug down the glass of grape juice. “Sure, *Daddy*.”

A sad smile touches my lips as dinner resumes. It’s not only Calum who sees me as too young to be in any form of a relationship. Dad thinks the same. Maybe Dani also does.

That's why she didn't say anything to support me. In the end, I'm alone. Me, my problems, and my feelings.

We finish dinner, and I rush to my room. When morning comes, I feel worse. There's a hole in my heart, an emptiness I can't explain. I drag myself to the bathroom for my morning routine. Instead of my white button-down shirt, I put on Jackson's jersey and wear my jacket over it.

Today is the game, and I'm on girlfriend's duties. The number, one, is written on the back of Jackson's jersey. Jackson called me his number one when he gave it to me. The memory leaves a bitter taste in my mouth. I smoothen the front of the jersey and smile at my reflection in the mirror. My pink hair contrasts with my outfit. I look like someone emptied a rainbow on me.

Calum's door opens. I've become more attuned to the sound since we broke up. I wait a few seconds before exiting my room, and when I do, he's at my door. His blues drop to the school logo on my jersey. He looks up, and we stare at each other for a split second and look away.

What do you do when you are alone with the boy who broke your heart?

“Calum—”

“Cathie—”

We stop at the same time and chorus, “You first.”

Calum laughs. I grin. It feels like we are back in the past, and I'm still his Cathie, who he thinks is too intense but worth his time and attention. I step forward, and he doesn't back down. My heart, rather than my brain, guides my movements, and I reach for him. I missed touching him.

Warmth flares through my body as my arms circle his wrists. The hole in my heart shrinks. I push closer to him, clinging to this moment because I know it won't last. I have a boyfriend.

But I still envelope him in a hug and say, “I miss you, Calum.”

At night, I have trouble sleeping because I'm not wrapped in his arms. I might have got too dependent on him, but it's his fault. His lips part, but he doesn't say the word. We are over.

Letting go, I lock my arms around myself. "You wanted to tell me something."

"Yeah," Calum says. A second or two passes. He shakes his head slowly, like he's trying to remember what he has to tell me. "I just wanted to let you know I didn't ask Regina to take the solo to punish you. It might have seemed like that, and well, I wanted you to think it was."

"Because that's what it was," I tell him. A punishment. Wickedness.

"She was always supposed to take that solo, Cathie."

My arms drop. I think my heart does as well. Anger surges, but it's quenched by raw hurt.

"We kissed," I say softly, poking my chest. "We made out. And it was hers all along?"

Those were not bribes to get the soloist position, but he knew how much I wanted the spot and could have told me to save myself the heartache and anticipation. I would have mentally prepared for it. I would have still loved him.

"That kiss was never supposed to happen, Cathie."

His voice is weak, the same as his argument. I'm not letting him get away with a silly excuse.

"Lies," I retort. Anger pushes me forward. I'm all up in his face, my eyes blazing with the hurt I've hidden for so long. If it happened once, I might have believed his lies, but each night, he welcomed me into his arms. There was only truth when his lips met mine. "It was supposed to happen. We kissed because we wanted to kiss. You loved it when I touched you. You wanted it, Cal."

Fury darkens his gaze. Grabbing my hands behind me, he pins me against the wall. Our chests rise and fall, his angry eyes focus on mine. "For God's sake, stop calling me Cal," he spits out.

“I will call you whatever I want, *Cal*,” I answer through clenched teeth.

He backs away and releases a heavy sigh. “Only the birthday kiss was supposed to happen.”

“But it didn’t stop at that, did it? Or is that what you tell yourself to ease the guilt?” I whisper. Anger bristles under the surface. I push him, but he doesn’t budge. I need an outlet to expel this rage, or I’ll explode. “All those nights in your bed, did it mean anything? What changed, Cal?”

“Everything. It was a mistake. A big mistake.”

The fight rushes out of my body, and my thoughts stand still. I drag air into my lungs. I must be hearing things because Calum didn’t just call what we shared a mistake. He won’t dare.

“What mistake, Cal?”

He stares at his feet, his fingers rap against his leg, but I hear him loud and clear. “Kissing you.”

Oh.

Wow.

Tears crowd my eyes. Calum watches me, saying nothing as I struggle to catch my breath. It’s my fault. I broke my own rule for him. No commitments, but in less than two months, I fell.

My feet move before my brain reboots. I take many steps away from Calum until I’m in front of the house. Dad’s car is gone. The weather is cold, as cold as the voice Calum used to break my heart. It was clear when he picked Regina over me and ignored my texts. Now, it’s crystal.

Where’s Jackson?

The door opens behind me, and my mood takes a dangerous turn. I smell Calum before he steps in front of me, but I don’t bother him with a glance. He has done enough. I can handle myself.

“Cathie,” he breathes out in a voice that rouses emotions within me. I hate that I can be upset with him and still want to listen to his voice. Part of me wants to know if he’s sorry, but I can’t give in to my emotions anymore. They led me here. “Back there, what I meant to say was—”

“Save it,” I cut him off. I take out my phone to call Jackson. “I don’t want to hear it.”

I’m a terrible girlfriend. I have Jackson, a good boyfriend, but minutes ago, I was begging another guy to have me. Maybe this is karma for all those boys whose hearts I broke in the past.

Calum stands a stair below me. “Do you need a ride?”

“I don’t need anything from you.”

“Where’s Jackson?”

“None of your business,” I answer.

His concern got me in my feelings in the first place. I unlock my phone and pale instantly.

No, no, no. But there it is on my phone. Two messages from Jackson. His car broke down. He can’t come. The second message says he’s already on his way to school.

“In that case,” starts the male voice a few feet from me. “I’ll wait until he comes to get you.”

The tears are unexpected but instant. My eyes sting from trying to keep them back in, but they roll down my cheeks. It’s Calum’s fault. He caused it.

“I hate you,” I whisper, but the wind carries my voice. Covering the gap, I ignore the way he squirms as I pack every angry emotion into my next words. “I really, really hate you, Calum.”

I shove my phone into my pocket. Now what? My lips quiver. I swipe at my cheeks to wipe off the evidence of my stupidity. Boys are so stupid. Jackson had one job: to have a good car.

Why didn’t he check his car last night?

“He’s not coming,” he says. It’s not a question. If it was, I wouldn’t have replied. My eyes shoot daggers at him. If looks could kill, he would be dead. A moment of hesitation passes, where he contemplates his next move, and I wonder why I’m still standing here. “Come on, Catherine.”

“No.”

“I’ll give you a ride today. You can hate me later.”

I don’t know how he does it, but he manages to break the remaining pieces of my heart. I take a deep breath to stop the tears, but they demand a release. A sound escapes me, and my shoulders shake. Calum looks torn. It’s a good thing he keeps his hands to himself, or I would have gone rogue.

“I hope someone breaks your heart,” I tell him.

Every trace of compassion on his face vanishes. His lips quirk. “Someone already did.” Walking a few feet backwards, he stops. His eyes soften for the briefest second. “Now, are you coming?”

CHAPTER 41

Walk of shame



THE WALK of shame to Calum's car is the longest walk of my life. I get in the front seat, fasten my seatbelt, and we spend the next second glaring at each other because he hasn't buckled up.

Clenching the steering so hard his knuckles are white, he says, "You make things so hard for everyone." Of course I do. It's always my fault. "Practice is at four, Cathie. Please, be on time."

I tug on the hem of Jackson's jersey, but he doesn't get the hint. "There's a game today."

My eyes fall to Calum's chest. No seatbelt. This is plain wickedness. My mouth opens, but I can't find the words to reprimand him. Neither do I have the strength or will to walk to school.

"By 4 pm. I'm aware," he says. A click goes off as he fixes his seatbelt. The cord locked around my throat opens, and I inhale a much-needed breath. "But the game doesn't affect practice."

"Jackson is playing."

"As he should, Cathie." His palm closes around the wheel. I miss driving and singing lessons with him. He glides out of the driveway and parks down the end of the street. In the silence, I grow antsy, and my arms shake. "Jackson is on the team, not you, Cathie. Do not miss practice today."

A wave of emotions rushes over me. I bite my lips to keep from lashing out at him.

“I have to be there to support him. Practice can’t happen during a game.”

It’s a general unspoken rule.

The entire school has to be on the field to cheer the boys up. This is Jackson’s first request since I became his girlfriend. I must do it. At least he doesn’t consider what we have a mistake.

A mistake.

The word burns my tongue like hot coals. When I told Calum I loved him, he kissed me so hard I knew he loved me back. He didn’t need to say it because his actions did. But alas, he fooled me.

Calum doesn’t look at me as he speeds down the road, but his next words are directed at me. “If you are not in the hall by 4:10, you’re out of the choir. You’re a chorister, not a soccer player.”

An insult hangs on the tip of my lips, but I choose silence. The entire ride is quiet. As soon as Calum finds a parking spot, I race to the entrance like I can’t get out of his sight fast enough. Maybe I can’t. Breezing through the hallway, I gulp tight when I spot Jackson by my locker. I misjudged him. He’s not with me for sex. He liked me but only gave as much as I did until now.

Jackson closes the gap. I’ve never been as scared of anything as I am of hurting him. He deserves better than me. Sliding an arm around my waist, he lifts me for a kiss. “Hey, sorry I couldn’t make it today.” I run a hand through his messy brown hair. He tried his best. If I also try my best, I might grow feelings for him. He lowers me to the floor. “So? How’d you get here?”

The noisy footsteps from behind stop me from providing a reply. We turn to the lousy fellow, and I lock my arm around Jackson’s waist. Calum halts in front of us, his annoyance so clear.

“Mr Dissick,” Jackson says.

Will Jackson still respect Calum if he finds out about the things he did with his girlfriend?

“Jackson,” Calum replies, ignoring me. Royal prick. A fake smile touches his lips as he waves a finger between both of us. He might fool Jackson, but not me. “Shouldn’t you two be in class?”

“None of your—”

Jackson yanks my arm to shut me up. His eyes narrow in a quiet warning, and I step back to let him answer. “Sorry, sir. We were on our way.”

Calum’s brows raise. He’s waiting for me to speak. “Yes, sir. We were just on our way to class,” I say. For the fun of it, I brush my lips across Jackson’s. “We will be late, babe. Let’s go, babe.”

Jackson smiles and allows me to drag him down the hallway. A few doors to my class, he stops.

“You good?” he asks. I nod, and he traces the letters on the front of his jersey. “You’ll be at the game, right?”

“I promise.” One more kiss on Jackson’s cheek, and I sashay to my class, only stopping at the door to wave at him. He’s cute, not Calum’s kind of cute, but he’s memorable. “I’ll see you later.”

Jackson blows me a kiss. I smile and enter Mr Babs’ class. Classes end fast today. The dining routine is the same with Jackson and Lucien at our table. By 4 o’clock, I’m in Dad’s office to file a complaint. My stepbrother can’t keep me away from my boyfriend’s game. He’s a jealous man.

“Dad, Calum won’t let me go for the game,” I start. Dad picks up a pen from the penholder and scribbles on a note. “Dad, did you hear me? He says I have to be at practice today. Like now.”

“I did.” He drops the pen between the notes and folds his hands on the table. My finger trails the edge of his table, and I pick at the wood. “What will you have me do? The fella is doing his job.”

“Dad.” I fist my hands on the table, and the only sign to indicate he is listening to me is an arched brow. My annoyance fizzles out. “We can’t have practice on a game day. It’s the rule.”

His brow shoots impossibly higher. “No one said it was the rule.” But it is an unspoken rule we have always followed. Besides, I am his daughter. Why is he picking Calum’s side? I grab my bag from the floor. I might as well say goodbye to the choir since I’m late. “But you’re right.”

“Of course I am.”

Dad laughs. He grabs the calendar on his table and strikes out a day. “Practice is holding today because the second round is next week. We have a chance at winning this year. Are you ready?”

“I’ve been practising,” I reply. But it doesn’t matter since I’ll be singing with the others. Regina might as well sing the alleluia verse. I prop both elbows on Dad’s desk. If we do well, the wall shelf behind him will hold our award. Dad clears his throat. “One day won’t make a difference.”

“Where would you rather be?” Finally, the most important question. I point at Jackson’s jersey. The girls teased me about it during lunch. “I don’t think you’re ready for a relationship, Cathie.”

“Why? Because I’m too young and dumb, and everything that has happened is a mistake?”

Dad scoffs. I close my eyes and let the anger flow out through a deep breath. Dad is not Calum. He cares about me and would never use my age against me. Everything he does is for my good.

On another intake of breath, I say, “Sorry.” Dad nods slowly, but his eyes hold questions he will never ask because I won’t answer. We never prod. We always let things be as long as they look good on the surface. I don’t know if I like that silent rule as much anymore. “But you said he’s a good kid. Calum has a girlfriend.”

“He’s older than you, and I know what I said. Teenage relationships are tougher.”

There’s no way he doesn’t know I’m in a relationship with Jackson after the dining stunt. The only thing tough about it is pretending to care for my boyfriend as much as he cares about me.

The wall clock behind Dad chimes. 4:15 pm. “But I won’t be allowed in the choir.” Staring at my feet, I add, “Calum said he will kick me out of the team if I’m late today. I’m already late.”

“I’ll write you a note.”

Great. A note for Calum. What about Jackson? He deserves one. I promised him I’d be there. I collect the note from Dad and bounce up the stairs to face the nightmare called my stepbrother. From the hallway, I hear the voices from the hall. I push the door open and cover the distance.

Calum tries to speak, but I stretch the note to him. He ignores it. “It’s from the Headteacher.”

He doesn’t accept it. There’s no separation today. He points to a spot, making me a bloody spectator with a front-row view of everyone’s side profiles. I missed Jackson’s game for this.

Rose smiles, but I can’t see past my fury. My back hits the wall. I shove my hands into my pockets and rock on my heels. Regina smiles through her chorus. I’m so upset I want to cry.

As if it’s not enough I’m unable to partake in the singing, the door opens, and Miss Gates walks in. The others don’t notice her because of their singing, but I do. She’s on full make-up today. She flashes me a smile as her curvy frame edges closer to Calum, and I try not to roll my eyes.

“Cal?” she calls out softly as the chorus slows to an end. She places a hand on his shoulder, but he doesn’t shrug it off nor give the cue for the choristers to resume singing. “All done now?”

“Almost.”

Liar. We have thirty minutes until the end of practice.

Calum claps to get everyone's attention. "I hear there's a game today," he starts. Oh, I see. This is another outdoor date for him and Miss Gates. "What do we say about closing earlier today?"

Cheers break out from the group before he says more. Fucking stupid people. He's ending the practice so he can chill with Miss Gates. Why can't they see that? This is double standards.

"I'll take that as a yes," Calum continues.

Regina grins. "It's a yes, Mr Dissick."

Stepping down from the choir block, her eyes roam the choir stand as if daring anyone to say otherwise. I would have said something if my opinion counted for shit. Rose scowls but nods.

"Enjoy the game," Calum tells everyone. "And no screaming."

Rose bounces off to me, dragging me towards her car as she rambles on about how cute I look in Jackson's jersey and how she cannot wait to wear Ryan's number. She needs to stop talking.

"Amelia isn't picking up. Taylor too. Maybe the game hasn't started," Rose says. Right. Because they are waiting for the queens to arrive. She uses one hand to steer the wheel and the other to operate her Samsung. I snatch the phone from her, and she glares at me. "You need to chill out, Cathie."

Until we die in an accident because of her carelessness.

I don't speak but clutch the seatbelt. Rose exhales and starts the car, maintaining a reasonable speed throughout the entire ride. We arrive at the jam-packed stadium, and my nerves worsen.

It's a draw.

The air crackles with tension, anxiety, and nervousness. I follow behind Rose until we find the perfect spot to sit. People from our school watch with bated breaths as the ball moves

from one player's leg to another. Jackson will be crushed if the game ends in a draw or they lose. I shoot to my feet when Jackson gets a hold of the ball. Rose grabs my hand so tight it loses feeling.

Nearly everyone is on their feet, breaths held in nervous anticipation. Our love for the game connects us. The countdown on the scoreboard begins, following the same rhythm as my heart.

One. Thump.

Two. Thump.

Three. Thump.

Jackson halts a few metres from the goalkeeper, and I hear murmurs around me. Now is not the right time to dribble or show off his skills. It's the time to score. Give us victory. He fakes a pass to another teammate and shoots the ball into the goalkeeper's hands, missing it by a few inches.

The final whistle blows and our side of the field erupts in a thunderous cheer. He did it.

We won.

Rose jumps on me. Her voice is hoarse from too much shouting. I'm not sure when I pull away from her, but I'm off to the field to join the others. Jackson is already searching for me before I reach him. My confidence wavers when our eyes meet, and a tiny wave of guilt rolls through me.

Breaking out of his friends' group, he opens his arm, and I rush to hug him, sweat and all. His jersey sticks to his chest, highlighting the hard planes of his body. I try not to think of Calum, but an image of him pops into my mind, and Jackson doesn't look incredibly sexy anymore.

"Babe," he says, his voice a little loud because of the noise and music. I kiss him because I feel guilty for thinking about another guy when I'm with him, but he only deepens it. "You came."

Sweat plasters his hair to his forehead, and I swipe at it. His hair is as soft as Calum's. *No Calum, only Jackson.* I slip

my hand into his. “I told you I’ll be here, and practice finished early.”

“Good.”

Jackson tugs me further away from the group. I frown at him, attempting to slow his steps, but he doesn’t stop. “Babe, don’t you want to celebrate with the guys?” I ask. If I’m right, this game took us to the finals. I nod behind me. Most of his friends have taken off their shirts and are bouncing with their jerseys swinging above their heads. “They look like they are having fun.”

“Maybe. But I want to spend time with you.”

Oh. Jackson is too sweet, and I’m evil. I squeeze his hand, and he lifts me. My legs lock around his waist, and I hide my face in the crook of his shoulder. Calum carried me like this once.

Tears rush to my eyes. What am I doing with Jackson? One of us will get hurt in the end, and I think it’s him. *Or me.* I don’t know anymore. Maybe Dad is right. I’m not ready for a relationship.

“Hey,” Jackson mutters softly. He places me on the bonnet of his car and cups my face. “You’re crying.” I am? I swipe at my wet cheeks. Damn my emotions. Damn Calum. “Are you all right?”

I nod. “Yeah. Sorry.”

The intense look in his eyes makes my skin crawl with guilt, and I kiss him again. I am lifted off the bonnet and placed onto something softer. The backseat of his car. Without breaking the kiss, his hand sneaks into my shirt, and my first thought is to remind him he needs to bathe first. But his lips are on mine. I try hard to enjoy the kiss, but his touch is different and foreign.

Jackson moans against my lips, dragging the hem of my skirt over my thighs. Boyfriends and girlfriends make out often. He can touch me, but my heart keeps going: *He’s not Calum, don’t do it. Stop it.* God, he will hate me if he ever reads my thoughts. I untangle myself from him, hating my

pathetic, miserable self for longing for someone who thinks kissing me is a huge mistake.

He sighs, and I place a kiss on his lips to appease him. “Are you sure you’re okay?”

“Yeah.” Now that he isn’t mauling me with his lips, I feel suffocated. Has the backseat always been this cramped? I place a hand on his chest. “I don’t think we should have sex yet, Jackson.”

“Why not?” His brows furrow, and he rubs a finger over my nose. “We’ve fucked before.”

Shifting into another position so he’s seated and I’m straddling him, he puckers his lips. “We weren’t dating then. Now we are.” He nods, and I whisper, “We agreed to take things slow.”

A smile breaks out on his face, and he kisses my cheek. “Wanna go to Teresa’s?”

“No,” I blurt out. Jackson quirks a brow. TTTT is another thing he has ruined for me. If we go there, I will only be able to think about him and our moments. “I hate TTTT. Food is horrible.”

“Oh,” Jackson answers. He shakes his head as if in shock, and I pull on his lower lip. He smiles like he understands. I didn’t expect him to. “I like Teresa’s, but we can go somewhere else.”

I hug him. “Yeah. Anywhere but Teresa’s.”

CHAPTER 42

Leave me alone



WE ARE through to the next stage. And the next two rounds after. The final is today, and I'm more than nervous. I'm freaking out. Someone knocks, and Dad pokes his head into my room. He has barely entered when I throw myself at him. Laughing, he pulls back and pats my cheek.

"Don't be nervous," he says. I nod shakily and exhale. "We have come this far."

We head downstairs together, and my feet crash to a stop. We have a guest.

Dani beams. Jackson waves, and I wave back. He runs around the couch and pulls me in for a hug. I look at Dad for an explanation as Jackson tugs me towards the couch. The last time we talked about boys, he said I wasn't ready. I agree. That's why I have been avoiding Jackson.

On our way to the dining, Dad tells me, "It was Dani's idea. A woman's instinct, I guess."

Why does everything have to be about Dani?

I flash him a grim smile. Jackson joins us at the table for breakfast, and Calum's heavy footsteps stall on the last staircase. He plasters a fake grin on his lips and continues to the table. Since Jackson is on my left, Calum sits on my right. My heart flutters. I'm blessed between men.

We settle down for breakfast. Calum barely says a word throughout the meal. Jackson and Dani get along well. I tune out most of their chat, and everyone blames it on my anxiety for today.

Walking to Jackson's car, I ask, "Who invited you?"

"Your dad," he says. He opens my door but places a hand on the roof to keep me from entering. "Is something wrong?" His voice is defensive. I get ready to defend myself, but his brown eyes crease with worry. "You didn't look so happy to see me. What did I do? You've been distant."

"Of course I'm happy to see you, babe. It's just unexpected," I say. I slip into the passenger seat and close the door. When he's tucked in, I offer him a genuine smile. "Thanks for stopping by."

"Sure thing."

Jackson throws me a small smile and starts the car. Soon, we are out of there. Anxiety tangles my limbs. I crack my knuckles and stretch my arms to feel better, but I only feel worse. I feel like shit. We reach the venue, and the school bus isn't here yet, so I wait inside the car for them.

The silence stretches, and Jackson takes my hand. I'm done pretending, but I don't know how to break up with him. Over the last three weeks, I've tried, but the words never left my lips. I've grown to like him in a way that makes it harder for me to break his heart. But I don't love him.

"I know singing is nothing like football," he says. "But nerves will only fuck up your play."

"Yeah," I say, smiling. "Do you know Regina likes you?"

Well, she used to. But I don't know if she still does. If all the times I caught her staring at us and glaring at me is any indication, that crush hasn't waned.

He cocks his head, sizing me up. "Yeah?"

"Yeah. She really does."

Jackson snorts. "Why are you telling me this?"

"I don't know."

"Well, I *like* you, Cathie," he replies. "Do you like me back?"

Not in the same way he does. But enough to want him to be happy with someone who deserves him. I free my wrist from his hold and rest my head against the window. “Sure. Why not?”

St George’s school bus drives to a stop. I curve my hands over the window. I haven’t seen Rose. Jackson mumbles something about a low battery and a call, so I pass my phone to him and open the door. Rose steps out of the bus and looks around. When she sees me, she shakes her head.

I cover the gap and bump my hip into hers. She grins. “Have you seen Mr Dissick?”

No. For all our rehearsals, we have been alternating the solo between Regina, Christie, and me, but I have no expectations. My nerves are born from the fear of us losing after coming this far. We start for the hall, our hands swinging. Regina bursts out of the backdoor, her eyes flaring.

“Mr Dissick is looking for you, Cathie,” she barks.

Rose and I share a worried glance. Regina walks away before we can ask more questions, and we rush backstage. The air is thick with a mix of emotions. Some choristers sit, others stand in pairs. Calum steps out of a door, and I tighten my grip on Rose’s hand as we cross over to him.

“Not you, Rose.” Nodding to me, he says, “I only need Cathie.”

He only needs me.

Rose grins. I refuse to let her infect me with her enthusiasm. Calum opens the door wider, and I follow behind. There’s a man in a grey suit inside, who stands when I enter. The room is bare except for a highchair, a table, and a rectangular mirror lining the wall. I don’t look at myself.

The man smiles. Calum stretches his hand towards him. “Antonio, this is Cathie, our soloist.” My ears buzz. No way. He’s a liar. This is another prank. “Cathie, this is Antonio. He’s conducting.”

“You are not?” I squeak out. Antonio and Calum laugh. I push my hand to Antonio. “Hi.”

“Hi, Cathie,” Antonio replies, accepting my hand for a shake. “I’ll be seeing you soon.”

Antonio offers both of us a nod and leaves. We stare at each other for the next few seconds. I am taking the solo. Tears brim to my eyes. Emotions war inside me. I. Am. Taking. The. Solo.

“Thank you,” I say and head for the door.

“Cathie, wait.”

My feet decide for me. I stop. His hand lowers to my shoulder. I try to shrug it off, but he holds onto me until I turn and pry his hand off me. A small smile lifts his lips. “I owe you an apology.”

“I don’t want your apology,” I tell him.

“Look, what I said about kissing you—”

“It was a mistake. I get it.”

Calum groans. “Tempers were high that morning, and I said some things I should never have said to you. But we were not supposed to kiss, Cathie, not even that once on your birthday.”

“Yes, a mistake. I understand, sir.”

“You don’t understand,” Calum whispers. He inches closer. I want to remind him anyone can enter, but his thumb brushes my cheek, and my thought evaporates. I drag in a shaky breath and gulp. His eyes light up with something fierce, and my entire body melts under his gaze. “It wouldn’t have been fair for you to take both solos when Regina had also earned her spot there.”

“Is this the apology? You could have told me.”

“I didn’t know at that time. Can’t you see it?” he whisper-yells. I see nothing. I only care about singing that solo and getting our trophy. “I don’t want to be that teacher who denies a student a deserving position because of my feelings. If I was never entangled with you, that decision would have been easy to make. You wouldn’t have been hurt. That’s why this is wrong, Cathie.”

“Okay.”

He fists his hair. “Why don’t you want to understand?” I stay quiet. He sighs. “Are you ready?”

“Yes,” I breathe out. “Move back.”

Calum takes three steps back. “Better?” I nod. My heart slows its aggressive pounding. I take another deep breath and wince when my teary eyes find my reflection in the mirror. “Are you nervous? When I get nervous, I think about my happy place. Do you want to know my happy place?”

“No. Leave me alone.”

His jaw ticks. “Why are you even upset? You have a boyfriend. How am I supposed to believe you love me when you were locking lips with another guy the first chance you got?” My eyes widen. Before I can speak, he says, “I’m not holding it against you. On the contrary, I’m happy for you. I’m happy you found someone else who can appreciate you in ways I could not, Cathie.”

“I’m glad too,” I tell him.

He nods. His eyes glass. “Yeah. It’s settled then.” I tilt my cheek as if to say I agree with him, but I don’t. Nothing is settled. “And now, uh, please go out there and make St George proud.”

I walk out of the office and bump into a firm body. An arm locks around my shoulders, drawing me into them. The familiar scent invades my nostrils. Jackson. “Is everything okay?” he asks.

My head bobs. I look up and fake a smile, but a few tears still drop to my cheeks. “Yeah.”

A door opens behind me. Jackson’s gaze drifts off to the person behind me. The way my body reacts to his presence confirms who it is. Calum Dissick. I snap my fingers in Jackson’s face to break their stare-off. Calum walks away, leaving both of us to handle the mess he created.

“Are you sure you’re okay, Cathie?”

“I’m okay. Everything is. Mr Dissick was teaching me how to invoke emotions into my song.”

“By making you cry?”

I take Jackson’s hand knowing my touch might calm him. “No, he didn’t make me cry.” Yes, he did. He always makes me cry. “These are tears of joy, babe. I just found out I’m taking the solo.”

Sliding his hand into mine, Jackson guides me towards the team. I look up to see Calum staring at our connected hands. He doesn’t want me. I’m allowed to want someone else who does. The noise from the hall grows louder. I hear the announcer giving a breakdown of today’s activity.

We are singing later. I spot Regina alone on a bench and drag us in her direction. Jackson darts me a look of panic but slides a fake smile to his lips when we stop in front of her. I must do it.

“Regina,” I say a little too happily.

The irritation burning in her eyes dims once she sees I’m not alone. She smiles and waves at my boyfriend. “Hey, Jackson.”

Right. I’m the one who brought him here.

I slide my hand out of Jackson’s grip, and he waves shyly at her. She blushes. “Hey, Reggie.” I take the first step back. Regina notices but ignores me. “Today is a big day. Are you prepared?”

“Yeah.” She clears her throat, and I back off to look for Rose.

The backstage is chaotic. It’s a mix of nervous and excited energy. I’m both. Mr Prescott walks in and calls our attention. Rose scurries to my side, and Regina joins the circle. She stares at me for so long without doing anything silly. It’s creepy and unlike her. What did Jackson tell her?

“Can you hear it?” Mr Prescott says. We quieten, and the singing grows audible. Our opponents have begun. He motions for us to come close, and we surround him even more. “They

are good, but we can be better,” he whispers. Laughter builds in my chest. Calum must have infected him with his morale. “Sing like your lives depend on it. We are not going home without that cup.”

“Yes, sir,” we scream like a bunch of footballers and burst out laughing almost immediately.

Calum doesn’t give us a speech today. We break out of the circle when the other school joins us and backstage. My heart thumps under my rib cage as we file out to occupy the stage. Since we are singing last, they didn’t close the curtains. The hall is filled to the brim with parents, students, and teachers from different schools. I don’t look into the crowd but above their heads.

The announcer walks on stage to introduce us, giving a brief recap of how close we came to winning last year. Antonio steps onto the wooden block. He’s not using a wand, so I have to pay attention to his hand. We have always discussed conductors during rehearsals, but I never thought that information would come to use so soon. I maintain the same row as Christie and Regina, fighting the urge to request a quick timeout. I want to be here, but I’m also nervous.

The instrumentalists go first, putting us in the mood. Antonio waves his hand, and we go off in harmony. Here and now, there’s no Cathie, Christie, Regina, or Rose. It’s one body. One voice. One soul. On Antonio’s subtle nod, I step forward for my part without missing a beat. The others don’t stop singing as I begin the solo.

“Alleluia. Alleluia...” flows out of my lips, with the choir singing behind me to back me up.

My voice carries to heaven, and I hope Mum is watching. That she sees and is proud of her baby. I hit a high note, probably the highest one in my life. The choir stops for a few seconds, and my voice continues. They pick up again towards the end, and we end the song together.

A thunderous applause accompanies the silence. Everything blurs, and the sound seems to come from afar. For a moment, I see Mum in the front row. She’s on her feet,

clapping with tears in her blues. My eyes are also wet with tears, but my lips stretch in a big grin. I feel it in my core.

Our victory.

CHAPTER 43

Go away



I STAND. I sit. The next time I try to stand, Rose drags me down to the bench. I bounce my foot against the floor. We are all backstage, waiting for the results. They are calmer than I am. I've let my hair out of its braids and run my fingers through so many times I'm afraid it will fall off from the roots. My eyes dart to the wall separating us from the stage. What's taking so long?

Regina drops onto the bench. I prop my elbows on my knees and sandwich my head between my forearms. If she wants to boo me, here's her chance. We might have had a shot if she took the solo.

"Relax. Your agitation won't change a thing," she says. I look up, and she smiles. "Relax."

This is why I love music. It gives us this. Comfort. A moment where our rivalry doesn't matter. Maybe it never should have because, in the end, we want the same thing. St George's victory. This is our last year together. Calum is right again. We have created memories with the song.

We hear them call our names, and we troop to the stage. The opposing schools stick to one side. We stick to the other. I'm still too nervous to look at the audience. Rose is beside me, half as nervous as I am. The announcer walks to the stage with a white envelope. My heart slows.

"And the winner for the 2023 annual singing competition is..." He pauses to open the envelope and bring out a card. I

freeze. Smiling at it, he continues, “The winner is... St George’s School.”

A scream tears out of my lips.

We won. We did it.

Students of St George flood the stage. Jackson twirls me in the air, his lips forming words I can’t fathom. A grin stretches my lips. The announcer coughs into the microphone, and we separate. Other students return to their seats while we stay back to receive our awards. I grin at Dad and Dani, who are seated in the front row. Dani gives me a thumbs up, and Dad nods.

It’s a galore of praise and compliments from teachers, students, and parents after we receive our medals. I don’t get a moment to myself until Jackson drops me at home. I bound up the stairs and pause in front of the room that used to be mine. Plucking out the medal hidden under my shirt, I kiss it and whisper, “This one is for you, Mum.” She was there with me at every step.

“She would have been proud of you. Very,” comes from behind me. I jump. Calum rocks forward on his heels, his fingers half-buried in his pockets. He smiles. “Sorry. Didn’t mean to scare you.”

I refuse to smile, only nod and retrace my step back to my room. He wasn’t among those who congratulated us at school. He starts towards me, and I race into my room and shut the door.

“Cathie,” Calum calls. Locking the door behind me, I slide to the floor and hug my knees to my chest. The pounding on the door comes after. Heavy, fast, and urgent. “Catherine. I’m sorry.”

Sorry is not good enough. “Go away.”

“I have ice-cream and chips. I called it chips.”

“Go. Away,” I tell the door. He made the rules, and I’ll stick to them. “Or give it to Miss Gates.”

A moment later, he says, “I’ll leave it in front of your door.”

Minutes pass until I hear Calum’s door opening and closing. I wait another few minutes before opening my door. TTTT’s branded nylon sits where Calum said it would. There’s a small pint of vanilla ice-cream and a wrapped plate of chips beside it. I fell for this once. I won’t fall for it again. Grabbing the white nylon, I dump it in front of his door. He can shove it far up his arse.



My fingers drum on my knees in an aggravated rhythm. I steal a look at Dad, and he shrugs.

“Now’s the best time for us,” Dad murmurs. Dani stands behind the couch and leans down to wrap her arms around his shoulders. Her son flips the remote in his grip. He knew about this trip. I lean on the armrest and shake my head. “Cathie. We will be back before you know it.”

They are leaving me in this house with Calum for two weeks. School vacated yesterday, and they are travelling today. It won’t work. Looking at Dad’s expectant face, I can’t find the words to refuse. It’s their honeymoon, kind of. They never had one after their spontaneous wedding. Dad told me they would travel, but he never mentioned when. I can’t take this from them.

“Okay,” I say. Dad draws his head back to inspect my face, and I nod. I’ll move in with Amelia until they return. Dani is the first to react. She engulfs me in a bear hug. “Have fun, okay?”

“Sure,” she answers.

Dad goes inside to grab his things while I help Dani carry her bags outside. Later, Dad joins us with a duffel bag hanging over his shoulder. I almost drop Dani’s bag when Calum stops beside me. We work in silence, loading the boot with our parent’s bags. He avoids eye contact, but it’s impossible to ignore his presence like I have been doing since we won the

competition. His arm brushes mine as I'm about to step back, and I almost fall. His brow quirks, but he says nothing.

Keys jingle in Dad's hand. He smiles softly at me, but I don't miss the longing in his eyes. He can't wait to be out of here with his wife. He leans on the car, his arm stretched over the roof.

"You should join us to the airport," Dad says, his gaze alternating between me and Calum. Dani nods. Her blonde hair has grown to her shoulders, and she keeps whisking the curly strands behind her ear. "We will rent a car there so you can practise with this one. What do you say?"

"Okay."

"I'm coming with you," adds Calum.

"Sure, son," Dad says.

I look at my stepbrother for the first time, but he's already shuffling to the other side of the car. He enters after our parents, and I'm the only one left standing outside. I tap a finger against my hip. This is not about Cathie or Calum. It is about our parents. I can survive him for two weeks.

Dad pokes his head out of the window to ask, "You coming?"

"Yeah." I open the door and slide into the backseat.

The tension is thick enough to suffocate people. Our parents are lost in their bubble, expecting us to do what stepsiblings do. But I don't say a word to Calum, and neither does he. We arrive at the airport. It's not as crowded as it would be during the long holidays. Like two dutiful kids, we spend the next few minutes helping with their luggage. That familiar awkwardness settles over us once they leave. We stand on either side of Dad's car, none of us attempting to break the ice.

Calum's voice is rough. "Are you driving?"

Mine is raspy from lack of frequent usage. I lift the keys Dad handed to me. "Yes. Get in."

The seatbelt is the first thing he uses once we are in the car. A wave of annoyance rolls through me. Being in a confined space with Calum does me in. My palms sweat, and I miss the keyhole.

“Relax, Cathie. You have done this before.”

He’s always the first one to talk about relaxing, yet he frustrates me more than anyone else. I try again. The car rumbles to life, and I switch on the radio before he gets out another word. Calum reduces the volume. I send him a deadly glare, and he throws his hands up in surrender.

Halfway into the trip, he says, “We need to talk.”

Silence.

“We can’t ignore each other for two weeks.”

Watch me.

“Cathie.”

Calum finally takes the hint and shuts his big hole. The drive is mostly silent except when he gives unsolicited directions. He must be in love with the sound of his voice or desperate to hear mine. I drive into our street, slowing in front of our house. There’s a familiar car parked there.

Jackson’s.

I park far behind, so Jackson has space to drive out. Calum exits and slams the door shut. I pay him no mind, my attention on Jackson as he steps out of his car. Calum stops. They discuss for a while, but Jackson’s eyes move past Calum a few times to search for me. I might be in trouble.

“Hi,” I say, walking over to the duo.

Jackson excuses himself from their conversation to hug me. I hold him an extra second to spite Calum. He grins, taking both of my hands. “Hey, babe. Called you so many times. What’s up?”

My phone is in silent mode. I’ve been avoiding him. He wants to talk about the stunt I pulled last week with Regina. Calum scoffs behind us. When I look, he’s glaring at his

phone. I fluff Jackson's hair and grin at my stepbrother. His facade briefly cracks, and that's enough for me.

Jackson and I start for the front door. "Have you been here long? How long?"

"Long enough, I guess," he answers.

We enter inside, and Jackson drags me down to his lap. "We need to talk," he whispers. Shit.

Calum heads straight for the remote and dives into the couch he sat on when our parents were around. He doesn't speak to us but flips through channels lazily like he cares about them. Is he really going to sit here and watch TV while my boyfriend is present?

I look up at Jackson. "Let's talk in my room."

"No boys in the room," Calum states. Jackson clears his throat. I slide off his lap to glare at my stepbrother, and he glares back. My mouth opens, and he cuts me off by saying, "No boys."

My eyes narrow. "You're not my father."

"But he left instructions for us to follow."

Dad didn't mention boys. He didn't have instructions. Jackson's gaze darts between both of us. He stands, and I follow him outside. We are in his car when he asks, "What was that, Cathie?"

"How would I know?"

Jackson takes my hand and runs circles over my palm. "Is Mr Dissick harassing you?"

"What? No." Multiple scenarios run through my head. Do I give him that impression of Calum? I need to fix it. I lean forward for him to lift me onto his lap. "Hey, why would you say that?"

Jackson's fingers rake through my hair. I need to return it to its original colour. Black.

"That day," Jackson says. "He made you cry, Cathie."

“We were rehearsing. I told you,” I say and cup his face. He sighs. “It’s fine, really.”

“If you say so.”

“Yeah, what’s up?”

“What’s going on with us? Be honest with me, please,” Jackson says. His head falls back, and he releases my hands to sink his fingers into his messy hair. If we were standing, I bet he would be pacing. “And that stunt you pulled with Regina? What the bloody fuck was that about, Cathie?”

“I told you she likes you.”

Jackson clenches his hands over his lips. “Really? My girlfriend is trying to set me up with a new girl while we’re still together.” I cringe a little. It does sound weird. But doesn’t he see the signs? We barely kiss. We’ve not had sex. Our sexual chemistry has dropped to zero. He opens his door, and a light breeze rushes in. “Babe, if I need to get a new girl, I can get her myself.”

“It’s not like that.”

“Then it’s like what, Cathie?” I have no reasonable reply to him, so I get off his lap to sit in the passenger’s seat. My heart feels too heavy in my chest. “I don’t need your help to get girls.”

Guilt churns my insides. I need to let him go. I need to do the right thing for once.

“Jackson—”

The front door opens to reveal Calum. He relaxes when he spots both of us in Jackson’s car. After a curt nod, he returns inside, and my phone pings a moment later with a text from him.

C: Going out?

Jackson clears his throat. I put my phone away without replying. A heavy sigh escapes me as I take his hands between mine. Since Calum and I will never be together, I don’t need a cover.

“I think we should break up, Jackson.”

CHAPTER 44

Strictly Forbidden



CALUM

BY 5 AM, I'm wide awake, waiting for Cathie to show up after last night's fiasco. She left the house without telling me, and the only reason I didn't storm the streets in search of her was because Pete reassured me she was fine. I weave a hand into my hair and yank it from the root. Talk about frustrating, and she will be the first one on my list. She doesn't want to talk to me, yet she goes about acting offended, inviting boys to the house, and spending hours in his car.

I drop into the chair beside the study table and read through our messages from last night.

Me: It's getting late. Where are you?

Superstar: What do you care

Me: Your dad left you in my custody Catherine. I should know where you are at all times.

Superstar: Dad knows where I am

Me: Be safe.

Superstar: I'm in Amelia's house.

Me: Okay. Take care of yourself.

There's a ten-minute gap between my penultimate text and the one with her location. Should I have called again? Part of it is my fault. I am doing it wrong, but I have no clue how to do

it right. I could get in trouble. A relationship between student and teacher is strictly forbidden. Jail term for me. I already spent months in rehab. I don't want another time in forced solitude.

Resting my elbows on the table, I lace my fingers over my forehead. I can't give her what she wants. I can't be to her what Ben is to Tessa, the definition of true love. But I can't handle her silence. How does she expect us to live in the same house and give each other silent treatment?

My alarm rings at 6 am. I do some press-ups in my room before heading downstairs to prepare breakfast. The house is emptier without her in it, so I don't spend too long at the dining table.

Mum sends pictures of them at the beach. A sad smile curves my lips. I'd like to have what they have with someone I don't need to hide from the world. Walking to my guitar, I strum a chord. It feels wrong. Everything feels wrong. Cathie should have told me before leaving. I fling the balcony door open and drop into a chair. She's not the only one walking into new territories.

Sitting here makes my head pound, and my heart aches from the memories that assault me. I want one thing, and my heart wants another. I tap on the TikTok icon on my phone's screen. Since getting active on my social media, I have disabled the notifications to avoid distractions.

That video and other Cassa fanpages of us are gone. Tessa's PR team handled it. If that video didn't convince me Cathie was vindictive, the fact she dropped the ice-cream in front of my door and has refused to speak to me confirms it. That should be an extra reason to stay away, but I'm only attracted to her. She's hurting because of me. I scroll through my page, stopping at our duet. Two million views. My followers have also climbed up. I switch to Cathie's account.

Cathie's last post is the duet we performed here. I hit play and set the phone on the empty seat. Her melodic voice slices through the quietness. Handel would have been proud of her for that Alleluia chorus. School hasn't received their clip of

the competition, or I would have watched it on repeat. I close my eyes and grunt when the singing ends. It's too short. I need more of her.

My next stop is YouTube. Cathie has only one video there. This one is three minutes long. It's a cover. Acapella version of Kodakline's *All I Want*. We have similar tastes in music, minus her obsession with Nicki. I head to the room to grab my guitar. Returning to the balcony, I sink into the chair and hit the play button. Her face appears on my phone's screen. She starts softly, and the music flows through me. I play the guitar; the air shifts as I mumble along to the lyrics of the song as they pour out of her lips. But is having her at my door what I really want?

My eyes seek the entrance to my room, expecting my stubborn stepsister to enter or walk right in. That doesn't happen, and I shake off the thoughts. I need to stop. Cathie is young, and she has her whole life ahead of her. I can't keep tagging her along when I don't know what I want.

The YouTube cover is not enough. I scour Cathie's Instagram and listen to her other covers. I'm fucked up. But I don't stop. I can't stop. Her voice is a drug, and I crave it. When there's nothing more to listen to, I check my emails. There's one from an unfamiliar record producer.

He watched my performance and would like to have a chitchat.

I place a hand on my chest. But nothing happens. No excitement. No flutters. I almost go into panic mode trying to picture myself on a stage as just Calum. No band. No Mending Hearts.

Sam will hate me. Lucas too. How dare I ruin the band and try to resume music as a solo artist? Do they even give a fuck? They still make music. It has been months since Sam walked in on his younger brother too dazed from crack cocaine. I swear I didn't know. I was such a mess back then, getting high off cheap drugs to go with the tide and cope with the pressure. Once you start the drugs, it's hard to go back, especially when you only feel normal during a high.

Pushing those thoughts back where they belong, I continue reading the email. The producer fixed a date for this weekend. Mum will still be on her honeymoon. As my first supporter, I should forward the message to her, but I don't. I check my Instagram, and there is a shitload of tags, comments, and reposts of that day from the runway. Most people want me back on stage.

A smile flies across my lips. Adrenaline pushes into my veins, and warmth pumps through my chest. I peek at the time on my screen. 15:45. Where did the time go? Where's Cathie? I peer at the sky and open my arms to welcome the soft rays of the sun. Should I call her? No, she is fine with Amelia. If she needs me, she will let me know. Still, I pick up my phone to type out a text.

Me: Hey

But I don't send it. I return to the room and climb into bed. If Cathie is not back by 7 pm, I will call or text her. My eyes close. I jerk awake at the sound of my phone going off. A yawn escapes me, and the ringtone in the background cuts through the fog in my head. I sit up, my thoughts scrambled as I try to figure out where I left the phone. Oh, the balcony. It's still ringing when I swipe it off the chair and answer the call without confirming the ID. Heavy breathing from the line makes me pull the phone away from my ear to check the caller. It's an unfamiliar number.

A thin sliver of dread curls around my spine. My hands vibrate, and I end the call. It's him. No. It can't be. It's been months. Red should be over it. Then who sent that note? I pace to my room and toss the phone on the bed. Why did I agree to that dirty deal? I know why. I was so high and fucked I didn't know how to function without the drugs. I did what I could to survive.

To float through life.

The sound of my ringtone sirens through the air. If I pick up, I'll have to explain to Red why I didn't return his money or drugs. The truth is, I have no idea what happened. The

memory is a haze. Mostly a blurred vision of Mum's sad face before a group of men hurled me into a truck.

What if it's not Red but someone else? The producer who emailed me. But he doesn't have my number. The phone stops ringing. I don't return the call but rush downstairs for a late lunch.

On my way up, my phone beeps. I release a sigh. It's a text from Tessa with a list of producers recommended by Maria. In case I'm interested in signing with them since they are in Yorkkrinth City. I have no intention of staying here a day past the end of this session. New York is my only home.

I slump to the bed and place a pillow on my face. What is my plan? My phone beeps again. I'm slow at getting to it. When I do, my blood runs cold. I shoot out of the bed. A weight sits in my chest. I swipe the back of my hand over my eyes to be sure the pictures on my screen are real.

Why is a strange number sending me pictures of Cathie and her friend Amelia in front of a cafe? Another text with a timestamp and location enters. A slow, crippling fear starts from the sole of my feet and consumes my entire body. I smack my forehead. Fuck. Fuck. *Fuck!* Not again. We saved Nate, Sam's brother. But who is to say I can save Cathie? I dial her number.

Once.

Twice.

Thrice.

She doesn't pick up.

My heart drops to the pits of my stomach. I hit the call button again. *Come on, pick up.*

No response. Fear roots me to the spot, and my head blanks. My phone buzzes. I stare at it for a few seconds and slowly shake out of my reverie. I call Pete, and he picks up on the first ring. My hand runs through my hair. I had one job: to take care of his daughter. Not only am I such a shitty stepbrother, I am a horrible stepson. As the call connects, I cough to clear the nerves.

“Hey, Pete.” Last night, I had to call him to find out where Cathie was. Today, I am about to do the same. He asks how I am, and I tell him, “Fine. I, uh, was trying to call Cathie. Unreachable.”

“Oh. Is she okay?”

“Yeah. Why not? She’s fine. Just lost her.”

“Where are you?”

Home? Church? Can anyone get lost in those places? Yes. No, Cathie hates churches. I clear my throat. I’m not sure why I’m lying to him. “The supermarket. We, uh, went grocery shopping.”

Pete laughs. It’s a relief. “I get you. I will call her.”

The call ends. I pace the room anxiously, waiting for Pete to call me back. When he does, it’s with bad news. Cathie didn’t answer his call. My heart sinks even more. Where the hell is she?

“Once you find her, have her call me, okay?”

A bead of sweat rolls down my temple. “Yes, sir.”

I end the call before Pete says anything more. My phone beeps with two more texts from the anonymous number, but it’s the second one that makes my heart and breath stall for a nanosecond.

Unknown: *Your time starts now. Tick. Tock. Tick...*

The knot in my throat threatens to choke me. I blink at the time and location from the first text. Based on the message, I have only ten minutes to get there before the worst happens. What if Cathie is still at Amelia’s? I dial her number once more, but it’s the same heartbreaking silence. I punch the wall. My knuckles split open, and a painful sound tunnels out of my mouth. It’s my fault.

It’s my fucking fault. *If anything happens to her...* I throw on a shirt and jog to the car. Grabbing the steering, I rehearse what I’ll say to Red. *If it’s him who sent the photos, we can end it today.*

CHAPTER 45

Operation forget Calum



THE GIRL in the mirror looks like me.

Blue eyes. Freckles. Pouted lips. But her hair is black, its natural colour. The door to Amelia's bathroom swings open while I'm doing my inspection, and I drag the pink beanie over my head. Only Amelia has seen the changes. It happened after Jackson left. A post-breakup makeover.

Amelia walks into the bathroom and joins me in front of the mirror. Her gaze strays to my hair, and she shakes her head. "I still can't believe you dyed your hair. You look like someone else."

That's the point. To look like someone else, someone more mature.

"Are you sad?" she asks. Yes, but for other reasons. She learnt about the breakup yesterday. I convinced her I was fine, but I guess she sees through the facade. She stares at me through the mirror. "I think you did the right thing. You were not happy with Jackson. He will get over it."

"I hope so."

Amelia struts back to her room, and I follow behind. There's a tray with ice-cream and a burger instead of chips on the bed. It was her treat. I refused to go to TTTT, so we drove around until we found a cafe with great snacks. I check my phone to see if Calum sent any texts after that of last night. Nothing. I should have told him I was sleeping over the first time he asked. Or not.

I shove a spoonful of ice-cream into my mouth, smearing some of it on the corners of my lips. Amelia hands me tissues to wipe the stain, and my mind torments me with a picture of Calum and me in this same position. I kick those thoughts out of my mind. Today begins *Operation Forget Calum*. I haven't checked his social media, and I only reread our texts twice. I can do it.

“What about him?” Amelia asks.

“Him, who?” I know who she means, and I'm done with him. She pokes my cheek with the tip of her spoon. I swat it and stuff my mouth with more ice-cream. She is the only one I can talk to about Calum without fear of being judged. “We kissed once or twice. But it's in the past now.”

The bowl disappears from my front. “I knew it. Did you two fuck?”

“No,” I say. I stretch my hand for the ice-cream, and she dumps it on the tray. My smile morphs into something more real. Her calmness comforts me. “He says he can't give me what I want.”

Tapping a finger to her lips, she frowns. “What do you want?”

“Him, I guess. Well, I wanted him before.”

I don't know anymore. He seemed torn that day. But why? He's the one pushing me away. We don't need to have a public relationship. Just Calum and Cathie doing our thing, singing duets, kissing, and cuddling. Throw in TTTT dates and hot make-out sessions, and we are perfect.

“Why do you even like him?” she asks.

Memory spills over me, and my eyes close. “I feel like he gets me. Not like you don't,” I quickly add. “His dad is dead, so he knows what it feels like to lose a parent. I don't feel like I'm boring him when we talk about our grief.” Amelia takes my hand. I smile without opening my eyes. “He sings, too. That's the best part. He doesn't let me put myself down. I told him I loved him.”

The quiet has me opening my eyes to be sure Amelia is still here. She is. I stare into space and my chest sags. To him, kissing me was a mistake. I may forgive him for not telling me about Regina, but I can't say I'll forgive that remark. The mistake was leading me on for that long.

“What if you're not in love with him?” Amelia whispers. I smack her with the pillow, and she stops me from hitting her a second time. She is chatting shit. I may have never been in love, but I feel something strong for Calum. “Maybe you are in love with the idea of loving him, Cathie.”

A yawn escapes me, and Amelia laughs. “Are you sure you don't want to spend the night?”

Her big sister is back. I wouldn't want to ruin the sisters' bonding experience for them. “I'm fine. Need to go home to face him.” Her smile dims. “Not looking forward to it, but I have to.”

“Talk to him,” she offers.

Talking doesn't work. I take a scoop of my ice-cream and steal a big bite from her burger. My stomach riots. I think I have had too much to eat. I get off the bed to drop the tray on the table.

“I'll pass.”

“You're working on assumptions, Cathie.”

“Let's just drop it,” I tell her. She squints. “Are your parents still getting a divorce?”

Amelia's excitement lights up the room. She launches into my arms and engulfs me in the biggest hug. I hold on to her for a second too long, hiding my face in the curve of her shoulder.

“Nope. I'm fine now,” she says.

My head rears back. I cup her face, checking for any sign of invisible illness. She rolls her eyes, and my eyes narrow. Did I miss anything? I've spent the last hours talking about only myself.

“Were you ever sick?”

She pales. “Did I say that? No, I’m fine, Cathie.”

“Amelia Greene.”

“I’m fine.” She juts her pinky finger. “Promise.”

I smile. She can’t lie on a pinky finger. “Okay.”

“It’s late,” she whispers.

We look out the window where grey skies have gathered. How did the day go by so fast? I take out my phone. There are missed calls from Dad and Calum. I call Dad first. He is okay. He just wanted to let me know Calum was on the lookout for me. I force out a laugh when he asks how I got lost in the supermarket. For old times’ sake, I make up a lie to cover for my stepbrother.

“Your dad?” Amelia asks when I drop the call.

Rocking on my heels, I nod. “Calum called him.”

Amelia sits on the chair while I remain standing. “Why?”

“I don’t know,” I say. Curiosity bugs me, but I refuse to return his call. “He called me first.”

“Are you going to call him back? Maybe it was something important.”

“Do I need to? I’m already going home.”

Amelia shrugs. “Well, I mean, he called your dad.”

She has a fair point, but I’m not ready to face Calum. The plan was to sneak into my room and avoid him for the rest of the holiday. I glare at my phone’s screen. There is another notification.

Two unread messages. The first text is nothing to worry about, but the second is confusing.

C: Help!

That’s all. Nothing more. Is this a sick joke? Wait. I clap a hand over my mouth. Is he okay?

“What is it?” Amelia mutters. I push the phone towards her. “Is he pranking you? Yeah, he is.”

“What if it’s not a prank?” I reply. My heart races like a bulldog. I drop onto the table, and Amelia holds down my wrists to stop me from clenching my hands. “What if he’s in trouble?”

“*Or* he misses you so much he’s using this to get you back home. You ignored him last night.”

I stomp my foot on the floor. “Amelia. Be serious.”

“Fine. What do we do about it? Maybe you should call the police. It’s their job.”

Shaking my head, I tell her, “No. If he wanted the police, he would have called them himself.” Right? Right. My best friend looks sceptical. I start for the door, and she follows me. We head downstairs, and she walks me to Dad’s car. “We won’t know what the issue is until I get home.”

“Are you sure home is safe?” Amelia asks. I’ll have to get there first. Amelia opens the door for me and locks my seatbelt in place. “Call me, okay? If you don’t, I’ll call the police. I promise.”

Laughter dies in my throat as she waggles her pinky finger in a threat. I sober up. Calum has to be fine. “If I don’t call in one hour, you can call the police. And I’ll share my location with you.”

“One hour?” she says, her lips curling into a sneer. “That’s too long. Five minutes?”

Nervousness drums a tune on my chest. Her fear leaks into me, and I rub my hands over my knees. The longer I stay here, the more the anxiety builds. I need to get going. I hope he’s fine.

“Thirty minutes,” I whisper.

She points a finger at my nose. “Twenty-five.”

“Okay, Amelia. Fine.”

Amelia hugs me and shuts my door. From the side mirror, I see her waving until she’s a dot. I drive home like a criminal being chased by the police. The lights in the entire house are

off, and it sends the alarm bells in my head blaring. I use the spare key to get inside and flip the switch.

“Calum?” I yell. My voice echoes after me. I race to his room. Empty. Swiping my sweaty palms over my shorts, I return downstairs to check the kitchen. Empty. The ball of fear in my chest grows into something bigger and dangerous. I should have picked up his call. “Where are you?”

Dialling his number is a waste of time. No reply. Tears fill my eyes, and my heart clenches. If anything goes wrong, I will blame myself. Standing in the middle of the living room, I smack my cheek. Nothing will go wrong. My stepbrother is fine. My phone vibrates in my hand, and I jump in relief at the ID. It’s Calum. I unlock the phone, and my relief transforms into confusion.

What’s this? There is a new message from Calum. It’s not exactly a text. He’s sharing a live feed of his current location. What if Amelia was right, and this is a prank? What if it’s not a prank?

I call him to confirm, and he answers. Heavy, laboured breathing fills my ear. I tear the phone away from my ear to breathe. “Cal?” I whisper, and he groans. Oh, God. “Are you okay?”

Nothing.

“I’m coming for you, okay?”

Nothing.

I race to our parent’s room. Thankfully, I still have the spare key from all those months ago. I ransack Dad’s cabinet and grab his shotgun. Instead of instant relief, my fear doubles. It has been too long since I used or held a gun. For our sake, I hope I don’t have to use it today.

Getting into Dad’s car, I connect to the GPS. An automated voice breaks the silence, and my heart takes a deeper dive with each instruction. The streets get lonelier and emptier, and the suffocating darkness doesn’t help. Calum didn’t get into any trouble with the wrong guys, did he? He quit the weed. Or was that a lie like everything else he told me? My head pounds

from the amount of information I try to process at once, and my chest constricts in fear. I park by the roadside to catch my breath and automatically reach for the shotgun in the passenger seat.

Everything will be fine.

God, please, let it be okay.

I resume the drive with no stops. The automatic voice directs me to a darker, lonelier street, and my heart spikes. Everything is deserted. For miles ahead, it's only the headlights of Dad's car illuminating the road. My fear subsides when I make another turn. I spot Dani's car first, with her headlights flashing into the distance, then I see him sprawled on the floor by the tyre.

The fear returns with a violent force. I park the car hastily and make a run to my stepbrother. The metallic smell of blood hits my nostrils, and I stumble to a stop. Images flash through my head at a hyper-speed. Bile rushes up to my throat. *Just breathe.* I squat beside Calum, doing my hardest to keep it together. There's blood all over his white shirt, and his eyes are swollen shut.

"Cal?" I whisper, afraid of my voice. I touch two fingers to his wrist but feel nothing. My heart slams against my ribcage. I shake him and peel his eyes open to check for signs of life. "Calum."

The roaring in my ears drowns out the voice of reasoning. My chest heaves. My mind is a blur of thoughts. Is he dead? I jump to my feet and place both hands on my head. My breath drags.

I'm freaking out.

I'm panicking.

I'm losing it.

How do I check for his pulse? What the bloody hell am I supposed to do? I take deep breaths. I can do this. I just have to pretend I'm about to render first aid. Pressing my ear to his chest, I listen for his heartbeat but hear nothing. My ear moves to his nose, and I feel a faint rush of air.

He's okay.

Kneeling behind him, I slide my hands under his armpit and push my injured stepbrother into a sitting position. His head lolls to the side. "We need to get you to a hospital immediately, Cal."

A groan breaks out of his lips. His voice is a faint whisper when he says, "No hospital. Please."

The first drop of tears falls from my eyes to his matted hair. I don't want to lose him. Friends, right? I can be his friend, I accept. His head falls back to my chest, and I press a kiss to his hair.

"What did you get yourself into, Cal?"

CHAPTER 46

No hospitals



CALUM IS HEAVY. I'll never know how I get him into the car, but I do. I call Amelia on my way to her place. My breath drags with every passing second. I clench the steering, convincing myself not to look at the man in the passenger seat. She finally picks up, her voice low and words slurred.

She can't be asleep because I need her help.

"Hey," Amelia says through a voice inflected by sleep. I'm in worse shape. My hands and legs are shaking. Every time the car swerves because I'm distracted, I shiver. "Wassup? Is he okay?"

I choke on a sob, shaking my head like my best friend is here to see me. Without glancing at Calum, I know the poor state he's in. Someone stabbed him in the stomach. "He's not okay."

"What happened? Are you okay?" The sleep in her voice clears. "Hey. Cathie. Where are you?"

Words tumble out of my lips. I'm on auto mode, mumbling the little I know about the situation. Amelia gasps when I mention blood. There's too much of it, and I don't know where to start. I need to clean Dad's car before they return home. I need to get Dani's car back to the house.

"Take a deep breath, Cathie," Amelia says to calm me.

But it's not working. I drive off my lane twice, nearly swerving out of control. The roads are deserted, so there's no one to curse me out. Tears blur my vision. My pulse races. I hate this.

“Is it that bad?” she asks. If I could see past the blood, I would know. I hear her moving. A door opens from her end, and my grip tightens on the steering. “Can you get him to the hospital?”

“No. No hospitals.”

“Should I call the police?”

My foot slams on the brake, and I jolt back from the force. The seatbelt keeps me from flying out of the windshield. Calum groans in his seat. I clamp a hand over my mouth. I need to calm down. Tucking the phone between my ear and shoulder, I resume the drive to her place. I can do this.

“No police.” I make a turn to the right, and my heart pounds slower when the top of her house appears. “Just get Ashley. Tell her something. Anything. We are almost there... we are here.”

The call ends. Seconds later, Amelia bursts out of the front door in her nightgown. I unfasten Calum’s seatbelt, pressing two fingers to his neck and under his nose. He’s alive. He’s okay.

“Help is coming, okay?” I tell Calum, but his head only slumps further down the seat. I wipe the tears from my cheek. Ashley will fix him. She’s a nurse. Still in training, but it shouldn’t matter.

Amelia wrenches his door open. “Jesus. What the fuck, Cathie?” I join her on the other side of the car. We help Calum out, flanking him on each side to balance his weight. “What happened?”

I wish I knew. Are we safe here? My gaze drifts to the end of the driveway. Darkness blankets the streets except for a few lights. What if the people who hurt Calum followed us back here?

Calum groans every few steps. It’s a struggle to lead him inside, so we stumble to the entrance. His shirt has lost its original colour, and my head spins from the heady scent of blood. Ashley runs over to help once we step in. On the living room floor are a few medical tools, a first aid box, and a

blanket covering half the entire floor. She assists us in dropping Calum on the floor.

“What happened?” Ashley asks, picking up a tiny pair of scissors to rip Calum’s bloody shirt off him. I wince at the gash stretching from his abdomen to his belly button. Slumping to the floor, I hug my knees to my chest while she does her thing. “How did you say this happened, Cathie?”

Her voice holds no accusations, but I can’t stop myself from sounding hysterical. “No, I didn’t say.” My eyes seek Amelia, but she’s focused on Calum. “I don’t know. That’s how I found him.”

Ashley shoots me a look, and my eyes automatically leak with more tears. I’m not lying. Calum is the only one who can tell us what happened. She rushes out more instructions to Amelia. I sniff again and grab one of Calum’s hands. Maybe if I had answered his call earlier, this would never have happened. It’s my fault. I caused this. I’m not good for anything but causing trouble.

“What can I do to help?” I whisper.

Ashley slides on a pair of blue latex gloves and cleans his wound. My heart clenches at the sight of dirty boot marks on his stomach and chest. They kicked him. They tried to hurt him.

“Just be here. But we might need to get him to the hospital, Cathie.”

“No.” My hands jerk up in protest. He clearly was against that. “We don’t need the hospital.”

Ashley sighs but says nothing, resuming work once Amelia returns with a rechargeable lamp. We are quiet, but my ears perk up to catch the faintest sound of Calum’s breathing. I rest on the couch for support, and my eyes flutter open when something drops to my lap. A nightgown.

Amelia sits beside me, her arms locked around her legs. “You need to change. Your shirt is...”

Bloody. I must have got some of Calum’s blood on me while carrying him. Something flips in my brain. I rip the shirt

off me and move to my bra before Amelia grabs my wrists. Kneeling before me, she pins my hands to my sides and mouths words of comfort to me. I follow her breathing pattern, and another sob catches in my throat. Amelia hugs me, and I break down.

“I’ve got you. I’m not letting go,” she says in a singsong voice.

Holding her close, I cry into her chest like a little girl. It’s like I’m twelve again and just found out Mum will never come home to us. I’m so pathetic. But I don’t want my stepbrother to die. I can’t handle that. I’ll rather accept his offer to be friends. At least he will be alive. I’ll see him.

“Everything will be okay, Cathie,” Amelia whispers. The tremors finally stop, and she releases me. Blocking my view of Calum and her sister, she tries to cheer me up, but I don’t have it in me to fake a smile. “Don’t beat yourself up. You know that’s not what he would have wanted.”

I snort. “How do you know what he wants?”

“I just know,” she says with enough conviction for both of us.

Amelia hugs me again, and my arms hang from her waist. I’m afraid to let go of her. If I believe it, it might happen. He will be fine. But why is Ashley taking so long? I release Amelia to check. Ashley is wrapping up his stomach. She looks up at me with a grin, and my stomach drops. I crawl over to them and grab one of the wet wipes to clean some of the caked blood on his face.

My thumb lingers on the cut on his mouth, and I peck him on the lips. “Stupid Calum. Stupid stepbrother,” I murmur. Amelia and Ashley laugh. Turning to Ashley, I ask, “Will he be okay?”

Ashley licks her lower lip, and I clench my hands. I glance at Calum. He looks so calm. Stupid man. He must be okay. I wipe a spot on his forehead so they don’t notice the quivering in my hand.

“Cathie, I’m not comfortable with this.”

“But you cleaned him up,” I tell Ashley.

“Still doesn’t make me comfortable with what we are doing. Tell you what, yes? I’ll make you a deal,” Ashley continues. The weight in my chest expands, but I nod for her to keep going. “If he doesn’t show any signs of improvement, we are going to the hospital. All right? Deal or deal?”

But he will be fine, right? That’s why she’s a nurse. Nurses fix people. “Okay. We have a deal.”

His health matters more. Ashley smiles. “I gave him some painkillers to help with the pain. The stitches are not my best, but he’s pretty knocked out.” A word of gratitude leaves my lips, and she shrugs it off. On her feet, she tells me, “We will need to get him to a room and proper bed.”

The thought of carrying him makes my back ache. Ashley moves first, and Amelia assists her in lifting Calum. Three of us get him to the guest room downstairs. For the first time, I am glad that Amelia’s parents are the type to travel often. After tucking Calum in bed, I leave him to use the bathroom. In front of the mirror, I cringe at the girl staring at me. Dying my hair to its real colour might have been an awful idea. I clean up and change into the dress Amelia gave me.

On returning to the room, there’s a folded blanket at the foot of the bed and a bottle of water. I place the water beside the bed and switch off the lights except for the bedside lamp. Reaching forward to give Calum a goodnight kiss, I freeze when my eyes lock onto his blues. He’s awake.

“Cal?” I whisper. “Are you okay?”

Calum blinks. Tears roll down the corner of his eyes, and I kiss them away. Taking his hand, I bring it up to scatter kisses all over his bruised knuckles. My fingers brush his ear. He’s okay.

“I’m sorry for getting you into this.”

“Shut up, Cal.”

Calum’s lips split in a half-smile. I kiss him softly. He moans, and something primal takes over me. I deepen the kiss, careful not to touch him as my hands lower to his pillow. My

eyes smile as I stare down at him. He's such an ugly dickhead for scaring me like that. He tries to lift his hand, but it drops. I help him by flattening his palm on my cheek and placing my hand over his.

I plant a kiss on his forehead and another on his lips. "I love you."

"I love you too, Catherine Jenkins."

My head snaps back. Did he—? Looking down at him, my chest deflates. Calum is fast asleep.

CHAPTER 47

All of me



BEFORE CALUM WAKES UP, I leave Amelia's house to get Dani's car and drop it at the house. He is still asleep when I return, so I crawl into the bed. Ashley shows up a few times to check on him. A part of me knows she wants me to take him to the hospital. I also know I should do the same, but Calum didn't wish to involve hospitals. My eyes close. I place a hand on his chest and tell myself we will go to a hospital if he doesn't feel better by tomorrow or at the end of today.

Someone shakes me awake. I pry my eyes open and shut it. It's too bright. Amelia laughs as I sit up. She points at some objects on the nightstand, but my brain refuses to piece them together.

"I brought breakfast," she says.

Oh. That's a tray with our food.

"Thanks."

Our attention shifts to Calum. I touch my palm to his forehead. He's warm to my touch. Giving my hand a last squeeze, Amelia leaves the room. I drag a chair by the bed, but he doesn't stir. My stomach growls, and I have to force myself to eat. I'll need my strength to take care of him.

Berries float on top of the milky oats. I eat but taste nothing. The next time Ashley steps in, it's past noon, and Calum hasn't shown any signs of waking up. My feet drum on the floor as she does her usual check-up. She glances my way a few times, and my movements slow to a stop.

"So?" I ask when she's done.

“He’s fine.” Her hand drops to my shoulder, and she squeezes. “I gave him more painkillers.”

Is that a good idea for someone who smokes? No, marijuana is different. I stare down at my outfit. I need something of mine. For him, too. “If he starts feeling better, can we go home?”

Ashley shrugs. “Yeah.”

“Thanks.”

“You’re welcome.” Sitting on the edge of the bed, she takes my hands in hers. I try not to fidget, but it’s common knowledge that medical practitioners are nicer when they want to deliver bad news. “I have no idea what he got himself into. But luckily for him, the cut wasn’t too deep.”

I inhale a breath of relief. “Yep. Good. Lucky him.”

Ashley laughs, and the similarities between her and Amelia shine through. “Relax. He won’t need a hospital...” A note of seriousness strains her features. “But I think you need to tell your parents. He might be in bigger trouble, and you might not be there to save him next time.” I open my mouth, and she continues, “Think about it. You don’t have to decide now, all right?”

“Okay.” I nod, and she gives me another smile.

“Soo, is it just me, or does your brother look exactly like Calum Dissick?”

“Who?”

“Calum. Cal Dissick,” she says. I frown, shaking my head slowly. “From the boy band, Mending Hearts.” She fists the pillow when I pout, her frustration thickening with each clueless look I send her way. “Sam? Lucas? They were in the band. Just forget it. Amelia should know him.”

“It’s him,” I whisper. Ashley slaps a hand over her mouth, and the building jealousy fizzles out. My jaw rests on the chair. We stare at my stepbrother, and a sigh escapes both of us. Right now, we are just two girls fangirling over the same guy. “You can ask him for an autograph.”

Ashley fingers the end of her ponytail, a shy grin on her lips. “Wouldn’t that be weird?”

“Nope,” I tell her. Calum moans. His mouth puckers in the cutest way, and Ashley coos. I would have kissed him if she weren’t here. “It’s the least he can do to thank you for taking care of him.”

“I want an autograph on my boobs. Nah. Just my left tit,” she says, cupping her breasts. *No, she doesn’t.* Jealousy rears its ugly head. My mind fills with reasons they are perfect for each other. She’s pretty, single, and smart. Pointing a finger at me, she grins like she has been blessed with the best idea. I offer my fakest grin. “Then I’ll tattoo it. Sweet. What do you think? Great idea.”

“Yeah, sweet. I’m sure Calum would like to grab your boobs and give them an autograph.”

Ashley snorts. “I bet he would.” My sarcasm must have flown over her head.

Silence falls, and Ashley stares longingly at Calum. I’ve never witnessed a fan’s love for their idol this close. I don’t want him to like her. But with Calum, you never know what will happen.

I nudge her with my knee. “Is Amelia okay? I know about the divorce...”

Her smile fades. “Yeah, she’s fine. Why wouldn’t she be?” Maybe it’s my overactive mind, but they are both acting odd. She pats my shoulder. “Really, Cathie. She’s fine. No more divorce.”

“Yeah,” I say. On her feet, she stands by Calum’s bedside for a few seconds and tucks a strand of loose hair behind his ear. My eye twitches. Calum Dissick is mine, not hers. “Can we go home?”

“There’s no hurry. But I guess so,” she says, flashing me a confused smile. “Once he wakes up. I’ll give you painkillers and some prescriptions to help. You’re both lucky I could handle this.”

“Right? Thanks.”

Watching Ashley leave the room brings me some sort of relief. I weave my fingers into Calum's hair and peck him on the lips. When I draw back, glossy blue eyes blink at me. My heart skips. He raises his hand, and I intertwine our fingers. None of us speak, but tears crowd my eyes.

"Don't cry," he whispers.

He could have left me. He could have died.

I punch his shoulder twice, one for each shoulder. "You're so stupid for getting yourself into that kind of situation." He offers me a thin smile. "What were you thinking? What happened?"

His free hand cups my cheek, and I place mine over it. "Are you okay?" he asks me.

"How can I be okay when you're hurt?" I grumble.

"Sorry, superstar."

Shooting to my feet, I rush to grab the bottle on the table so Calum doesn't see my face when I say, "You owe Ashley an autograph on her boobs. Her right tit. Or was it the left?" He tries to sit up, and I push a pillow behind him. He winces and musters a smile. "I think it's her left tit."

Calum doesn't speak until he finishes the water. "Who's Ashley?"

The door opens. Ashley and Amelia walk in. I sit on the bed and push pillows between us.

"Hey, Ashley," I say with a wave. Noticing Calum, she blushes. Here we go. Amelia waves.

"Hi," Ashley says. "I'm Amelia's sister and a nurse in training."

"Oh." He peers down at the bandage wrapped around his stomach. "You did this? Thanks."

She blushes to her roots. We might as well leave the room for both of them. Amelia sits beside me. Calum grins. Does he like her? She saved him, but I was the one who got him to the house.

“No biggie... *Cal.*” She did not just call him that. Flirting with your patient should be illegal. Amelia steps on her sister’s foot, and Ashley clears her throat. “I mean, yeah. Sure. It’s my job.”

Ashley spends the next minutes checking my stepbrother’s vitals. Amelia gives me a side hug, and I rest my head on her shoulder. All done, Ashley declares us free to go with a promise to call her if anything goes wrong. As we are about to leave, Ashley requests for Calum’s number.

Calum darts a look at me, and I turn away. Her fingers lingered on his chest too much during her checkup, and he did nothing about it. “I don’t know my number offhand. Sorry,” he replies. I hide a smile. “But you can deliver any messages through Cathie if that’s okay with her. Cathie?”

“I don’t mind,” I blurt out. Amelia grins. I think she approves.

Ashley nods and pockets her phone. I rush to Calum’s side and slide an arm around his waist. He keeps most of his weight off me but still feels heavy. We fumble to the car, and I tuck him in the passenger seat. I might be fussing, but he’s not complaining. His eyes and shoulders droop.

He bows to the sisters. “Thank you, Ashley. And you too, Amelia. I appreciate this.”

“I’ll call you once we are home,” I yell above the sound of the engine. Amelia waves. Ashley only smiles. I don’t say anything for the first half of the ride. “I think you broke Ashley’s heart.”

“She will survive.”

I spare him a glance. “Like I have been doing?”

Calum’s smile is painful to see. He curls against the window and whispers more to himself, “It’s not the same, superstar. We’ll talk.” It’s pointless. All our talks yield the same result. “Later.”

The rest of the ride is quiet except for the voices on the radio. We exchange a few shy glances but nothing more. I help

Calum to his room, and he doesn't go right to sleep like I expected. He supports his weight on the headboard.

Another moment of silence passes. I point to the wall separating our rooms. "I'll be in my room in case you need anything." He stays quiet, and I drag myself to the door. "See you later, *bro*."

"Superstar, I don't feel clean," Calum says when I grab the knob. I count to ten before retracing my steps to him. He needs my help. I'll give it and then leave. "I would like to have my bath."

"Okay. But are you ready for a bath?" I ask. If the wound is covered correctly, it should be easy. That's not the issue, though. Who will clean him up? He can barely stand on his own. "Cal?"

"Yes, I am. As long as you're there."

Butterflies explode in my belly, but I maintain a straight face. He hasn't mentioned last night's confession. Does he love me, or was it pain-induced? He puckers his lips, and my resistance dies.

Damn my feelings and his handsome face. I move between his legs to take off his borrowed shirt. A painful lump builds in my throat when he winces. He tugs on the hem of my dress. Once. Twice. My breath hitches. I can't go down this painful, confusing route with him again.

"Cal."

"Take it off, superstar." My eyes widen, and Calum nods. I pull off the rest of his clothes so he's naked. My stepbrother hugs my waist, his cheek flat on my belly. "I won't do anything." Even if he tried, he couldn't. He is barely standing straight without my help. "I want to see you. All of you, Cathie."

My dress drops to my feet. My knickers follow. Calum sucks in a breath when I discard the last of my outfit. I guess I want him to see me, too. All of me. His lips curl in a smile that makes my restraints melt. I grab a chair and lead him to the bathroom, careful to avoid wetting his bandage.

Bathing him is awkward. I catch him staring at my lips a few times, but we don't kiss. Just dry off and cuddle. Over the next few days, we maintain the same routine. Cuddling and bathing together. There is nothing erotic about those moments, but I won't trade them for anything.

On one of those days, I'm lounging on his bed when my body collides with something firm. Calum groans. He peels one eye open and then the other. I love his blues. "Hey, pretty girl."

"Hey, pretty boy." Pushing myself up an elbow, I touch the bandage. It has reduced in size. "How are you?"

"Okay."

The blanket falls as I try to sit up, exposing my breasts. Our eyes connect, and my core throbs with an acute need for him. We've been naked together, but it's different. We were too focused on getting him back in shape. I withdraw to my former position, but he tugs me towards him.

"Come," he whispers.

On his command, my hands drop to the pillow, flattening on either side of his head. I whimper when he palms my back. My lips hover over his, so close, all I need is his permission. He pushes himself up, catching my upper lip between his teeth. My body turns to goo. I melt in his arms, and my breasts squash his chest as he explores my mouth. Everything I know flees my mind.

His scent and taste flood me. Sliding my fingers in his hair, I kiss him hard as punishment for those times he left me hurting. His hands descend to my waist, he cups my arse, and my body liquefies with a need for more. Panting, I break away from the kiss. The silly man grins against my lips, his hand moving behind my neck to pull me down to resume the kiss. But I want more.

"Cal," I whisper. "I need you."

Fire burns in his blues. He opens his mouth but says nothing. I slide my hand between us and touch his length. The first time I saw it was when we bathed together. Huge, veiny,

and thick. My eyes dart to his. I'm not a virgin, but I want our first time to mean something, to be special.

Calum places wet kisses on my breasts, and I forget about pleasuring him first. A gasp leaves my lips. He flips me under him, his breath fanning my heat.

A kiss here and there, and my toes curl. I push my stepbrother's head down for more of him, but he leans up to claim my lips again. Kissing him brings back memories of our first night at the pub. It's water to my starved soul. And I take in every drop he offers, giving myself to him.

Moans catch in my throat. His hand lowers to the sensitive skin between my thighs, and my body briefly lifts off the bed. I press my legs together to trap his hand. He quirks an arrogant smile that disappears when I cradle his balls. Groaning, he flicks a finger over my swollen clit, and I breathe out his name in an unholy chant. His breath grows heavy on my face, and my body aches for more.

This is torture.

Lust clouds my brain. My body lights up with his kisses, his touch, and his tongue. I need more, and I don't wait for him to offer. I fold my legs at the knees and guide his erection to my opening. He rubs his engorged tip against me, and a sound I don't recognise escapes me. I push myself up to take in more of his pulsing length. It's a necessity. A few inches inside me, and he freezes.

"Fuck," he yells, pulling out of me. An aching emptiness sweeps over me. I'm lost for words, but my eyes convey my worries. I try to lock my legs around his waist, but he gently pries them off him. *Please, no.* If he is about to change his mind on this, I'll kill him. "I don't have a condom."

Neither do I. "But we can..."

Another heated gaze, and my nipples pucker in response. Can't we fuck bare? I need him.

Calum rolls away from me, and a tortured moan tunnels out of my throat. Fury puffs through my chest, and I bang my fists on the bed. He grabs my wrists, and his hooded gaze

heats my skin. My struggles cease. He kneels between my legs, his dick so far away, and I'm painfully reminded of what I'm missing. I should have kept condoms. I should have been more prepared.

"Cathie," he whispers, and my thighs clench.

Using one hand to hold me down, he kisses his way up from my belly to the valley between my boobs. His tongue circles my nipple, and his thumb moves over the other. I sigh out his name, wishing for more. His lips cover mine, swallowing my moans as his hand lowers to palm me.

Every nerve in my body aches. I'm split open and pieced together by his gentle touch.

Another kiss below my ear, and Calum whispers, "Trust me, superstar." I'm not sure what he means, but I'm his. A thin sheen of sweat covers his body. His cock moves against my folds in a teasing motion. I jerk, but he pins me down with a stare. The friction created has a soft moan escaping me. My vaginal lips spread open for him to slide right through without penetration. Lacing our fingers above my head, he rocks his hip forward. We groan in unison. "God, Cathie."

This is not the real deal, only a hint of what our future holds, but it's enough for now. My orgasm starts slowly, a dull throb that builds from my stomach and shatters over me. Calum groans above me, the only warning I get before his seeds coats my belly. His lips meet my forehead. I blink sleepily at him, and he pecks me on the lips. Dipping a finger into his cum, I stick it in my mouth, and he makes the cutest face of disgust. I do it again to spite him. The third time, he grabs my hand.

"But I like your cum, Cal."

"Ew, Cathie."

"Does crème de la penis sound better?" I whisper. Calum's face crunches, and he shudders. That only encourages me. My voice lowers in my best French imitation. "Fine. I like your crème de la penis."

Laughing into his fist, he murmurs a soft, “Jesus. You are crazy.”

“A little.”

But he won't be saying that when his dick is lodged in my throat. My finger grazes his ear as he wipes his load off my belly, and his cheeks turn pink. He's too cute. My heart is so full of him. I can't look at him without smiling. I draw a circle around the bandage and grin. It survived this.

Calum sweeps my matted hair off my forehead. “You changed your hair colour,” he mutters in a voice that feels like a fist in my chest. I stretch his cheeks into a smile. “Why? Because of me?”

“No, not really. I wanted to look more mature.”

“Because of what I said,” he finishes. It's no use denying it, so I stay mute. “You didn't have to do it, superstar.” Maybe. Pulling me on top of him, he hugs me to his chest, and I hide my face in the slope of his shoulder. His fingers thread into my hair. “You're enough, Cathie. Always.”

CHAPTER 48

What happened?



CLEAN AND FED, I snuggle up to Calum on the couch. He smells so good I sniff him. Laughing, he ruffles my hair, and my body sighs in contentment. I look up at him, a finger moving above the bandage that has reduced to a square. His eyes wrinkle at the corners, and he let his hands fall.

“You... you look different,” he says.

Sometimes, I don't recognise myself in the mirror. I was so used to having a new hair colour each session I forgot what I looked like in my natural colour. Like my mum. I trace a line between his pecs. The living room couch isn't as comfortable as a bed, but we manage. A bang from the TV draws our attention to the drama we forgot about. I freeze as the car crashes into a pole.

Dark memories roll over me, and my pulse spikes. Calum's arm tightens around me, his finger moving in circles on my lower back. My chest closes in on me, each breath more painful than the last. Tears cloud my eyes. I want to look away from the TV, but I can't. While the people in the movie rally to get the lady help, her face slowly morphs into my mum's. She's bleeding from her head. And I'm here, cuddling with a man. I try to pull away, but something holds me down.

“Eyes on me, Cathie. Superstar.”

The voice is close but faint. Still, I don't look away even when the scene changes. Firm hands caress my cheeks, and my eyes eventually find Calum's. Blue to blue. I breathe along with him until the pressure in my chest dissolves. He swipes a

thumb across my cheek and follows it with a kiss on my forehead.

“You’re okay, superstar. It’s not real,” he tells me. I nod. “But I am, and I’m here for you.”

Until he’s not here again, or he thinks what we have together is a mistake. He changes channels to another drama. We are stalling. I need to ask questions, but I’m afraid to hear his answers.

“When things get better for me, I will buy you a house just like that,” he says against my hair. I try to move, but he places a hand on my head to keep me from looking at him. A slow smile spreads to my lips when I see the house on the television screen. It’s a white duplex with a cute porch in front. “We can eat ice-cream and chips on the porch. Do all the fun things you love.”

Does this mean we have a future together?

Hiding my excitement behind a smile, I whisper, “We will duet together?” Calum nods. “That will be nice. Things will get better before you know it.” A cloud of doubts gathers in his eyes, and a disbelieving laugh escapes him. I grasp his jaw. “No, Cal. You’re good at what you do.”

The memory leaves a smile on my lips. His performance was epic, but my best part was at the end when he tugged on his ear. He was one with the stage, a beast in his home and rocking it. St George won’t give him such opportunities. He’s wasting his talent conducting a school choir when he can be more. Draping one arm over the armrest, he makes a small sound of protest.

“I watched the runway show. It was perfect.”

Calum scowls. “You didn’t watch it.”

“I did.” His brow shoots up. I offer him my best apologetic smile. “You touched your ear.” Raising my hand, I drag a finger over his ear and tug on the tip. “Just like this.”

He blushes. At that time, I thought it was random. “I was thinking about you,” he admits.

Warmth bubbles in my throat, but I don't let it stop me from saying, "I told you I watched it." Calum grins, and I run my hand under his jaw. Too smooth. "But not the live version, sorry."

"It's okay, I fucked up too."

"You said we were a mistake," I remind him.

Not once. Not twice. The abrupt hug takes away the leftover pain. Calum plants a kiss on my hair and forehead. When I peer at him with teary eyes, it earns me a chaste kiss on my lips.

"When I said it was a mistake, I meant a good type of mistake, Cathie." He cracks a smile, and I flick a finger over his nose for hurting me. Prick. "The type you should regret, but you don't."

"But you didn't say that," I quip.

"Because I wanted to chase you away."

"Well, you did."

Silence is our only friend. Except for his fingers moving up and down my back, we don't move. If he won't talk about us, he should at least let me know what went down last week Thursday. Today is Friday, and our parents will return on Sunday or Monday. Do we need to tell them?

"What happened?" I whisper. The fear returns with violence, wrecking me from the inside out. A tear drops from my cheek to his chest. Calum tries to sit up. "Are they going to come back?"

"No, you're safe."

"What about you? Are you safe?"

"I think I am," Calum answers. I crawl away from him to sit on the floor, legs folded under me. He sighs and drops to the floor. His back rests against the couch, and he pats his legs for me to sit. I shake my head. One scowl later, and I'm planted on his legs. "Yes, I am. I am safe, Cathie."

“How can you be so sure?” I whisper. He leans back, his slender neck exposed for a kiss. I place one on his Adam’s apple, then his jaw and his lips. “What if you’re wrong? Why do you think—”

“For Red, it was always about the punishment.”

“Red?” I say. A shy smile appears on his features as he rubs the back of his head. “Who’s Red?”

“No one you need to know, Cathie. Just an asshole taking advantage of young boys?”

“Like a paedo? A paedophile?” I gasp, my hand going over my mouth. “Calum.”

Calum laughs. “Red is not like that. He loves his women. He was the dealer’s dealer, the boss of the bosses.”

Air returns to my lungs, and I exhale shakily. He’s too calm about his experience. I am the one who had to deal with seeing him battered. I cross my arms under my boobs, and he puckers his lips. My frown disappears. Life would be easier if I had a switch to control my feelings for him.

He folds his arm over his chest, and I outline the date tattoo with my finger. “You asked what it meant, remember?” I nod. I was interested because it’s 1402, my birthday. “It was a reminder.”

“For?”

“The day the band broke up,” he says. “It keeps me going, a reminder that I have been sober.”

My lips move into a pout, and he steals a kiss from me. I place my hands on either side of his head, locking him between me and the couch. “I don’t get it, Cal. You still smoke. I saw you.”

“You saw me with a blunt, not smoking.”

“What’s the difference? They are both bad.”

“It is. I was taking it to get high. That’s what got me in this mess with Red.” He rubs his palm over his forehead, a deep scowl stretching his lips. I lean in for a kiss, locking his arms

around my waist. He follows my breathing pattern until he relaxes. “At first, it was just to get high.”

“Why?”

“To feel good. To forget.” His eyes mist, and he hides his face in my shoulder. “It gets lonely at the top, Cathie. When you’re high, nothing matters. Nothing bothers you. Not the trolls, fame, or paparazzi. I wrote some of our best songs while high. At some point, it felt like I could only reach my full potential when intoxicated. It felt like I was good enough because of the drugs.”

“You know that’s not true.” His smile is half-real. I cup his face. “You’re good enough, Cal.”

“I know,” Calum tells me. His hand circles my wrists, he leaves a kiss on the inside of my palms, and my chest tightens. I’m hit with the need to give it back. “Back then, it didn’t feel like I was.”

“Good thing you know better now,” I add.

“Yeah. And I hope you do, too, because you have so much potential. I can listen to you all day and night.” His words warm me to the toes. We are going off-topic, but I can’t find the strength to redirect the conversation. “You’re a beautiful singer with an equally beautiful voice, Cathie.”

Laughing, I smack his chest. “Cal.”

“I mean it.” I roll my eyes, and he sticks out his tongue. Because I’m childish, I touch mine to his. “Anyway, I got used to it. I would take it before every performance. Made me so charged.”

“Yeah?”

Calum laughs, but it doesn’t reach his eyes. “The band tolerated me because we were making good money. That was until I gave some to Nate.” I lift my head from his shoulder, and he chuckles bitterly. “Nate was Sam’s younger brother. He was a recovering addict.” I put two and two together before he says the words. His face crumbles, and my heart aches. “I didn’t know.”

“I know you didn’t,” I tell him.

“He relapsed. We had a performance on Valentine’s Day. I think that’s when Sam found out.” He slows to catch his breath, and my hands fist on his chest. “Sam is usually the coolest one among us. Quiet, too, but he lost it and punched me on stage. I stayed there, taking every single punch because I knew I deserved it all. The video went viral, and well, the band couldn’t handle my shit anymore, so we broke up,” he finishes in a flat tone like he just read the items off TTTT menu.

My forehead rubs against Calum’s. I don’t know what I can do to make him feel better. I hug him tight, hoping my presence is good enough for him. “Now, you would think I would stop the drugs after that,” he says in a voice laced with heavy sarcasm. “But I didn’t. Nope. I was dumb and too addicted to the high. I couldn’t stop. Even when I ran out of money, I would pawn stuff to get it. That’s when Red came in. He would let me have some for free if I could sell some.”

I clap a hand over my mouth. My body sags under the weight of his confession. “Jesus Christ.”

“Yeah. It was stupid. I was stupid.”

“You’re not stupid or dumb or anything of that sort, Cal,” I state. His blues lock on mine, but he looks right through me. I cup his face to drag him back to the present. “You just did dumb stuff.”

He smiles. I think I said the right thing. “Really dumb stuff I did back then. It’s kind of easy to sell drugs when people already know you. Red was counting on that. Me using my dying fame.”

Cupping his cheeks to keep him from shaking his head, I replay the words to tell him about the other reality of using his fame for the wrong thing. “You could have got into trouble, Cal. Or even arrested?”

“I know.” His smile is wicked, mechanical. “But you can’t kick a man when he’s already down.”

“This is not funny, Cal.”

“No, it’s not.” He sobers, and his hand slides up to the nape of my neck. I don’t want to picture him selling drugs to teenagers, but an unsolicited image pops up. “I didn’t go through with it. Nate was the only victim. I thought I could do it, but I realised I would be fucking up the lives of many people. And I couldn’t return to Red, not without the money. I was so deep in this shit, and instead of finding a solution, I kept going and going. To forget, hoping it will go away.”

I feel bad news coming, and I squeeze his hand for comfort. It’s over now. He’s past that stage, but my heart hurts from listening to him.

“When Mum found me, I was out cold, Cathie.” A tear falls to Calum’s cheek, and I wipe the evidence. My eyes water, but I will the tears to stay. This moment is about him. His lips press to mine in a soft kiss. “The first time I thought I would die, I was thinking of my mum. The second time, I was thinking of you. Of all the chances we missed. Of all the things I never said.”

My heart stops. He places a hand on my chest and smiles. I need more definite answers.

“What does that mean? Where does this leave us, Cal?”

“I don’t know, Cathie.” My chest falls as fast as it rose. “I don’t want you to not be in my life.”

CHAPTER 49

Gone



CALUM IS GONE.

I wake up alone on Saturday morning. My palm moves over the bed. It's cold. He must have left a while ago. I reach for my phone, but the blue note pinned to the headboard catches my attention. His handwriting elicits a smile out of me. It looks like he wrote the note in a rush.

I'll be back soon – C

Why didn't he just wake me up? I dial his number, but he doesn't pick up. The second time, it's unreachable. Who will check his wound? Is this him trying to avoid me after baring his soul to me? That's not unlike him, but I force the doubts out of my mind. Yesterday was different.

Calum loves me, and I love him, too. We can make this relationship work, even if it has to be our secret. I head into the kitchen to make breakfast for two. He will be back soon, right?

False.

It's 7:25 pm, and Calum isn't home. I pace the living room, phone in my hand to redial his number. Same response as the last few hours. It doesn't connect. Dropping to the couch with my head bowed in fear, I tell myself to take a deep, cleansing breath. He's safe. Red cannot get to him.

Scenarios play in my head. My chest falls and rises with each thought. He's okay. He's fine. I need to calm down, but I can't. I text Dad, and he lets me know they will be back

tomorrow for Easter. I don't know why he bothers about these celebrations. Another text follows Dad's first.

Dad: What about Calum? You two doing okay?

Last time, I was the one missing. Now, it's Calum. They will never trust the two of us to be alone again if I tell him the truth. But where is my stepbrother? What if Red has got to him?

Me: He's good, taking a nap. Goodnight

I stalk upstairs to get a pillow and blanket for the night and return to the living room to sleep on the couch. Something must have held Calum up. I will wait for him. A message lights up my screen. I jump in excitement before reading the content, and my heart rolls down to my belly.

C: Sorry I missed your calls. Will talk to you later?

What? Is this a joke? Are my feelings a joke to him? I type a long message and delete it before I hit the send button. Tears burn the back of my eyelids. Calum is playing me. I'm just another guitar, and he's having his fun. He lied about his feelings for me. I don't mean anything to him.

Me: I was worried

C: Sorry. I'm okay. I'm fine and we will talk tomorrow. Don't wait up for me, okay? G'night superstar.

Me: Where are you?

C: A pub. Too noisy for me to make or receive calls.

While I was sick and worried out of my mind, he was in a pub. Having fun. He chose a pub over me. I haven't seen that man all day. My phone vibrates in my hand. Two new media messages from Calum. One is of an empty stage. The second shows his face. His smile has the opposite effect on me. Anger sweeps in. I tap my feet to the floor and breathe through clenched teeth.

Me: Have fun. Goodnight

C: G'night superstar

There's nothing good about the night. I yank the blanket over my head. This back and forth, using me to feel good for a while, must end permanently. A wave of tiredness rolls over me, and my eyes droop. Fighting the sleep is hard, but I manage. I'll wait for him so we can talk and put a stop to this. I need to know if he's in or out. Someone taps my shoulder. I roll over on my side and stretch my arms. Something is off about the couch. No. I'm on the bed. How did I get here?

Dani laughs. I shift to the middle of the bed so she can sit on the edge. Wait a—! How did she get here? Dani squeezes me in a tight hug, and on instinct, my arms lock around her waist.

Why can't Calum be more like his mother? So warm and receiving? Where's he? Did he come home last night? Who brought me here? Dad? So many questions, and yet no answers to them.

"We missed you," she states. I missed her, too. Her fingers run through my hair. She tilts my face to the left, then the right. "How are you, Cathie? You look okay. Maybe a little skinny, but I can fix that in a minute." We laugh. I also missed her cooking. "Your brother is still asleep."

Will she still call him that if she knew we were on the verge of having sex? Bliss erupts in my chest at the memory, closely followed by anger. Calum is home and didn't think to tell me?

Dani hugs me again. "Sorry. I didn't mean to wake you. Your dad will be here later, all right?"

"All right. How was your trip?" I ask.

Dani blushes. I've not seen a lot of adult women blushing, but she's a pretty sight to behold. She clasps her hands under her jaw. I smile along, and a shard of guilt pricks me. She's happy with Dad. I need to stop going after Calum. It will ruin what they have, our family dynamic.

"Awesome, Cathie." Her eyes water with happy tears, and she dabs them with the hem of her shirt. She takes my hand,

and I adjust my pillow with the free one. “Your dad is the best.”

He can be a sweetheart. My lips twitch in a half-genuine smile. Why can't I get what she has? But with someone who wants me the way I want them? Since when do I care for commitments?

“He is,” I mumble.

“I'll leave you to sleep now. Sorry for barging in. Oh, don't worry about getting up early. Just sleep. Whenever you're ready, come downstairs. We got gifts for you and your brother.” Dani giggles like a schoolgirl, and a giggle burst out of my lips. I'm ashamed to admit I'm jealous of her happiness. She cups her cheeks, catching some flyaway hair between her fingers. Her hair is curlier than it was before they left. “I'm so happy. Anyway, let me go check on your brother.”

That's what Calum is to me, my brother. Sisters don't kiss their brothers. They don't pray for a chance to ride their brother's dick or suck him. As long as I remember that, I'll be fine. I'll say it whenever Calum is close, and I'll survive the session. He doesn't care about me or my feelings.

After a last hug, Dani pads out of my room. I snuggle into the bed. I'll do as she said. Sleep in. That way, I don't have to see Calum. He never wanted me to see him, right? He is avoiding me. Why? What did I do? Was it because I licked his cum? He could have told me he hated it. I burrow under the bedsheet, trying to blend into the mattress and hide away from the world.

The door opens. I don't want to talk to anybody, especially Dad. I don't want to fake a smile when he tells me about his honeymoon. I'm happy for him, really and genuinely, but I don't need to see his happy face now. I recognise Calum from his cologne, and my eyes clench shut.

“Cathie?” he whispers in a voice so low I doubt he meant for me to hear him. He tugs the cover below my chin. I feel his gaze on my face, but I keep my eyes closed. His lips meet my forehead, then my lips. I almost kiss him back, but his weight disappears from the bed. “I'm so, so sorry.”

My eyes snap open. We stare at each other. Was that his plan? To steal kisses from me and run? No fucking way. “Sorry for what?” I ask. He moistens his lips, and I feel his regrets. He is sorry for kissing me. For touching me. Is this how it will always be with us? I launch an attack on him, raining punches on his chest and his shoulders. “I hope you had fun at your dumb pub.”

“Cathie.” He darts a look at the door in warning. But I don’t care. I’m tired of him. “Cathie, stop.”

“No, you stop,” I snap. My punches grow more frantic. He grabs my wrists and pins me under him. The fight leaves my body, and my arms fall to my sides. “Where were you yesterday?”

Calum repositions himself on the edge of the bed and folds his hands behind his neck. I hate him, and I love him. “With a producer,” he says. That’s great news. Why isn’t he happy? “It wasn’t supposed to be the whole day, but we ended up at a pub. Well, he invited me, and I couldn’t say no.”

I kneel behind him and lock my arms around his waist. “How did it go?” I ask. A second or two passes. He shrugs, and I tighten my hold on him. “I’m so sorry, Cal.” All I get is a small nod. He peels my hands off him and jumps to his feet. My heart calms when he returns to stand by the bed after locking the door. I thought he was about to leave again. “Did you bring me upstairs?”

“Yeah,” Calum whispers. Our eyes lock again. He finally lowers himself to my bed, and I scoot to his lap to straddle him. I kiss my stepbrother so hard to drown my doubts and insecurities. He holds my face when we pull apart. My breath becomes one with his, but the emotions in his eyes are the opposite of mine. Uncertainty and fear. “I’m sorry I made you worry last night.”

In his arms like this, anger has no place. I slide my hand into his waistband, but he grabs my wrists before I do more. I whine. “Did you get condoms? You can make it up to me now, Cal.”

“Cathie, I don’t regret anything we did, but we can’t keep this up.”

“What do you mean?”

Calum runs a hand through his hair from the back to the front. The same hand disappears into his pocket, and he pulls out a crumpled note. I don’t need to be told what to do this time. I put some distance between us. My legs shake so badly I’m surprised I’m able to stand on my own.

“I had time to really think about us. About where this leaves me and you, Cathie. I don’t think I can give you what you want.” But that’s the problem. He never asks me what I want, just makes assumptions on my behalf, and rolls with it. He looks down at his note and, in a rehearsed tone, he says, “You need a boyfriend, Cathie. Someone who is more available. Who can show you off.”

And I can have that with him. I’m willing to try. We will work around it if he’s committed. I draw closer to him. My feet are so close to touching his. “It’s not a big deal, Cal. I don’t mind.”

“But I do mind, superstar. Don’t you get it?” Calum tells me. A sob catches in my throat, and I slap a hand over my mouth. What’s wrong with him? If you love someone, you protect them. Oh, I get it. I’m not worth the fight. “I can’t give you that stability, Cathie. Here I am, trying to figure out my new life, to get back on my feet. The things you want are with someone else.”

“Jackson?” I spit out.

Calum nods. “I think we need time apart.”

“What? Why?” My hands deflate at my sides, and my feet forget to move. We have had enough time apart. Tears roll down my cheeks as our eyes connect. “What are you even saying, Cal?”

He stands, but there’s a sizeable gap between us. “I really appreciate you, and I care about you.”

“But you don’t show it,” I whisper-yell. It’s so hard to keep my voice in check when I want to scream.

“Because one of us has to be in control. If you don’t care about the consequences, Catherine, I do. We both have our lives ahead of us. Being with me will do you no good,” he says. He takes a step towards me and stops. “*Please*. If things ever go wrong, I’ll surely go to prison, and you’ll always be labelled as the girl who fucked her stepbrother, or even worse. It’ll ruin your image.”

Calum takes another step forward, and I lock my arms around myself. I see the pain in his eyes, but I refuse to acknowledge it. He wants the easy way out. Unfortunately, I can’t give him that.

“We are not even fucking.”

“That’s besides the point, Catherine.” I glare at the note in his hand, and hate builds inside me. He took his time to write a note. On what? Why we can’t be a couple? I waited for him all day yesterday. “I love you, but I won’t let you ruin your life and future because of me or for a fling.”

How dare he call this a fling? A fling is what I had with Jackson and the many random boys I can’t recall their faces or names anymore. He’s the one I want. I step closer and poke his chest.

“So what?” I say, stabbing his chest with my index finger. “You wrote some bullet points to get your message across? Tell me, what else is on that note? Go on, say it. Let’s be done with this.”

“I’m trying to protect you.”

“No. You are trying to protect yourself because you’re too much of a sheep. Bloody fucking American,” I yell. This fanny farting, cocksucking, motherfucking coward. “You’re a prick.”

Calum’s face goes pink with rage. I’m just as pissed, so I square my shoulders and brace for the worst.

“Protect myself? I was stabbed, Cathie. Do you have any idea what they would have done to you if you were with me? No, you don’t. I don’t either, but I damn well know it wouldn’t have been good.”

“Didn’t you say we were safe?”

Calum sighs. “You don’t listen, superstar.”

“And you talk too much.”

He lowers one hand to his scalp, and I jut out my chin. “Let’s just take some time apart, Cathie.”

“I hate you. I really, really, hate you, Calum Dissick.”

“No, you don’t. And I don’t hate you either,” he says.

“Who cares?”

“You do, superstar.” He reaches for my cheek, but I swat his hand, walking backwards until my back hits the wall. “We need some time apart to decide what’s best for us. Just think about it.”

“No. You. You, Calum. *You* are the only one who needs time apart to decide what’s best for you. Only you, you selfish prick.” The idiot cracks a tiny smile. I grab the note in his hand and slam it at his feet. “You spend so much time trying to push me away than on making us work. You would rather write a hundred reasons we can’t be together than call or send me a detailed text about your whereabouts. I’m the one always fighting for us. For you. And I’m exhausted, Cal.”

His facial expression cracks the same way my heart did listening to him try to ruin us before we had a shot.

“Cathie. It’s not like that.”

The last of my restraints snaps, and I shove him back. He needs to be out of my space. He needs to be out of my life now. He tries to protest, but I interrupt him. “It’s exactly like that, Calum.”

“Cathie.”

“No, let me finish. You are the one always talking, so maybe it’s time to listen to me for once.” I raise a finger to let him know I’m not done. “Your happiness is not with me. You have already established that. From the bottom of my heart, I hope you meet the right person for you, Calum.”

My smile is plastic and fake, but it's all I can offer him now. One would think that night would change everything, but he's an asshole. I pause to catch my breath and blink back the hot tears brimming to the surface. He opens his mouth, but I shake my head. He has had a chance to talk.

"You want some time apart, right? Then you have it. Thanks for bringing me up to my room."

"Superstar," he says.

I pick up the crumpled note on the floor and shove it into his palm. Walking away from him as elegantly as I can, I stop at my bathroom door. One hand closes around the knob, and I spare one last look at my dumbstruck stepbrother. "Please, shut my door on your way out. Thanks."

CHAPTER 50

Mother's Day



I HATE Mother's Day because it reminds me mine is gone. That her death brought Calum into our lives. It's the first time since her death that I forgot to keep track of the dates. I thought Dad did, too, since he didn't mention it during Lent. But it turns out he only wanted to celebrate it today with his *living* wife. People in the US celebrate Mother's day on a different day from us. This year, Dad is using that date.

Instead of letting guilt suffocate me or ruin my mood, I request a ride to church from Dad so I can visit Mum after the evening mass. Calum would have offered to drive me, but we haven't said a word to each other since the third term began. It's been almost a month now since he asked for space. He's good at making himself invisible, so avoiding him has been easier than I thought.

Away from the eyes, away from the mind, right?

All lies.

Voices from downstairs have me faltering on the staircase. I hear Dad's voice, and my grasp tightens on my phone. He asked me to join them in the living room when I was ready. Dani's voice is louder. She must be laughing at something Dad told her. I'm on the last stair, so close to them, but my heart begs me to race back to my room and hide. I don't want to see him.

The living room grows quiet once I step in. Calum flicks a glance my way, and my suppressed feelings float to the surface. He stiffens, and I know I'm the only one who noticed.

Dani waves me over and pats the couch for me to sit. Calum is on her right. I drag myself beside the couch.

Dani picks up one of the wrapped gifts at her feet. “Look what Cal got me for Mother’s Day.”

It’s flat, so I can’t guess what it is. Dani unwraps it and gasps softly. It’s a portrait of her and Dad. Her finger traces their faces. The photographer captured the heart of that moment. Their smiles and the love shining in their eyes. Tears cloud her eyes, and she pinches Calum’s cheeks in appreciation. My heart breaks again. At least he’s not a terrible son; he’s just an awful lover.

No, he doesn’t qualify as a lover. Lovers don’t quit.

“It’s beautiful,” I tell her.

“Thanks,” Dani replies. She holds the portrait in front of her. This must be a picture from their honeymoon. If Calum put half this effort into us, we might have stood a chance. “Thank you, son.”

I feel his eyes on me before my head cocks in his direction, but he quickly averts his gaze. Dad’s loud footsteps announce his presence. He stops behind the couch and squeezes Dani’s shoulders, ignoring us as they kiss. Calum and I exchange a glance. I miss kissing him. I miss being his.

“Ready to go?” Dad asks.

“Yeah.” I am so ready to be out of the house.

We are inside the car when he says, “Hey.”

“Hey,” I reply when he starts the car.

The car speeds up. I leave the window down to let in cool air. “Are you okay?” Dad asks.

“Yeah. I guess it’s time to see Jesus,” I say with a fake laugh that draws a tear out of my eyes. Dad slows the car by the side of the empty road. I don’t know if I’m crying because I miss my mum or because I saw Calum, and it hurts too much. He has moved on. “I’m okay. I’m fine.”

Calum is doing good for himself without me. I must do the same. Dad draws me in for a side hug, and I sob into his chest. He thinks it's because of the celebration, but it's more than that.

We resume the drive after my tears subside, and he passes me another side glance when we are on the path to Mum's church. Dad only started attending every Sunday after she died. Before then, he was inconsistent. I was the one who followed her to every church program judiciously.

The old building becomes visible from a distance, and my fingernails dig into my knees. It will be fine. Will it? The church is the last place I want to be, but I am not sure where else to go.

Dad drives off after eliciting a promise to call him when I'm ready. I don't know if I'll ever be ready. But I continue into the church and sit at the back. After the mass, which I attend mostly for her sake, I head towards the church's cemetery. It's a fifteen-minutes' walk from the church.

The cemetery is empty, which isn't surprising. Dry leaves crack under my feet. Guilt hits hard as I step further into the deserted place. I haven't visited Mum in a while. I do hate visiting her. It's too final. I know she's gone, but reading her epitaph is one of the worst feelings on earth.

I uproot the weed growing beside her tombstone and roll it between my fingers. When she was still alive, she was a part of the Legion of Mary society, and sometimes they volunteered to visit or feed the sick and clean cemeteries. I guess the same group has been taking care of her grave.

After the guilt passes, a wave of calmness rolls in. I sit and tuck my knees under my chin.

"Happy Mother's Day," I whisper. "I forgot to come earlier."

The leaves rustle like they accept my greeting. She always said she would be watching me.

What if she is? I look around. For a stretch, all I see are rows of tombstones. Some neat, some unkempt. The blades of

the nearby grasses are so high I can hide away, and no one will see me. I can join her. The thought grows more appealing as the seconds roll by, but a memory of Dad smiling draws me out of the darkness. I can't do that to him, not after fighting it the first time.

“I met a guy, Mum. He's an arse. No, a dickhead.” I laugh despite my grief. My fingertips sweep the dirt coating the marbled surface. “He hurt me. A lot, Mum. All the time. What should I do?”

The sky rumbles. Dark clouds gather. I should leave, but I don't want to face my reality. I send Dad a text with my location so he doesn't go to the church with a search team. He asks if I'm okay, and I answer sincerely with a promise to call or text him when I'm ready to come home.

Rain doesn't fall. I hug my knees to my chest, waiting for Dad to get me. Footfalls sound from a distance, but I don't care to check it out. This isn't a private cemetery. I'm not the only one who has lost someone important to them. The sound ends and someone sinks beside me.

Calum.

Almost on instinct, I lean into Calum but straighten up before my head hits his shoulder. But that doesn't discourage him. His arm circles my body, and he pulls me in to rest my head on his shoulder. Tears blur my vision. The words and figures on the gravestone become unreadable.

“I cannot do this with you again, Calum.”

“I'm not asking you to do anything, am I?” he says. Whatever that means, I don't know. But we remain that way, my body supported by his. Nothing else matters but the relief of not being alone anymore. After this, we will return to being familiar strangers. “I'm sure she was a good woman.”

I hate that he's good with words. Because he's so right. She was an angel, and angels deserve to live.

“You don't know the half of it.” I sniff. One second, I'm sitting on her grave, and the next, I'm in his arms, eager to be comforted. I loathe him, but he's here, and I just need a hug.

He hugs me tight as I sob into his chest, rocking from side to side. “She shouldn’t have died, you know?”

“I know,” he whispers.

I peer at him. “You don’t know.” I hit him on the chest twice. “You don’t know anything.”

“I know I love you,” he says. His blues flash with adoration, and I might have believed him if I hadn’t been on the receiving end of his words the past few weeks. “I also know I’m an asshole.”

“Yes,” I readily agree. “You’re a big asshole. When you love someone, you don’t hurt them.”

“But protect them,” Calum finishes on my behalf. I scowl, and his lips curl in a sad smile that breaks my heart. He’s hurting, too, but he can put an end to these. “I’m protecting you, Cathie.”

“From what?” I whisper. He stays silent, and that annoys me. “That’s what you keep saying.”

All attempts to get off him only result in him tightening his hold on me. I hide my face in his chest as he sings Alanis to me in a whisper. He would have bonded with Mum over this song. I calm down, and by the time he’s done, I’m ready to talk to him. To propose a solution that works.

“I want more than a fling with you,” I say to his chest. For him to think I only want a fling with him freshly hurts. His palms bracket my cheeks, and I stare into his blues clouded with sadness. If his protection is hurting both of us, we need a better plan. “I tell myself I will never speak to you again or let you touch me.” His gaze softens, and he allows me to press a kiss to his lips. “But when you’re here, my heart wants you. I know you want me too, Cal. It can be our secret.”

Placing my hand over his chest to confirm what I know, I drag his lip between my teeth.

He grabs my hand. “Our secret?”

“Yes. If you didn’t care about me, you wouldn’t be here.” Calum gulps but doesn’t deny it. His brows knit like he’s

processing my words. I cup his face and drag a finger over his ear. We need each other. I need him, and so does he. I want to fight for us until he realises that, but I'm exhausted. "I promise I won't ruin anything for you. And I won't tell anyone. I'll be a good girlfriend, Cal."

Calum sighs, but his eyes shimmer with honesty. "I don't know if I'll be a good boyfriend to you."

"You will be, Cal. You're already a good friend."

"Loving me is a punishment, Cathie."

"Then punish me," I say. "Well, you already are."

We chuckle. "Never done this before," he confesses.

"Me too. We can do it together." I kiss him fully on his lips. Switching to a straddling position, I join our foreheads. I sense no hesitation from him, so I whisper, "We will take it slow, okay?"

"I hate it when that guy touches you," he says.

That guy is Jackson. Though we haven't spoken since I broke up with him, satisfaction blooms in my chest. I lick his nose, moving lower to maul his mouth. "I only do it to make you jealous, Cal."

"I know. But it still works."

"I was jealous of Miss Gates too," I murmur.

Calum chuckles. "I see." Cupping the base of my neck, he runs his tongue over my bottom lip but pulls back before I can kiss him. He sighs, and it creates a crack in our bubble. His doubts grow bigger. I fear for what he's yet to say. "I won't be able to take you on dates, Catherine."

"We went to TTTT," I remind my stepbrother. My lips curl from the memory. It's one of our best dates to this day. "You can take me there again, Cal. We can sit in the car and eat chips."

"Cathie, even if I'm not your stepbrother, I'm still your teacher." I doubt it counts, since he isn't handling any of my

classes. He shakes his head. “You won’t be able to tell anyone we’re dating.”

Where does he get his excuses from? He wasn’t kidding when he said he thought long and hard about us. Meanwhile, I didn’t do any thinking. I am letting my heart do it since his brain is evil.

“Amelia knows. Well, I’ll tell her. And the girls.”

“Do you really want your first boyfriend to be someone you can’t introduce to the world?”

He has a fair point, but who cares about the world? I want him, not the world.

“If your dad asks if you have a boyfriend, what will you say?” I open my mouth to reply, but he interrupts. “If you tell him yes, what happens next? I’m not ready to face him.” Neither am I. Dad might be cool, but I don’t want to ruin what we have before it even starts. “And if you tell him no, then it’s denial. I don’t want to put you in that situation. There’s no winning for us.”

“Because you don’t want there to be, Cal. Why are you so focused on only the negatives?”

His lips meet my forehead. “One day, superstar. You’ll meet someone else and remember all these great memories you had to hide from your favourite people, and you will resent me.”

My confidence shatters. Calum is wrong. I will never resent him, and I don’t want anyone else.

“Shut up, Cal,” I say with fake confidence. I tuck his curls out of his face. “Enjoy the moment.”

“You’re giving up a lot, Cathie. I need you to understand that. I want you too, but my desire for you to be happy is greater than what I feel for you.” Christ, this man talks too much. How can I be happy when the man I want is hell-bent on keeping us apart? He’s not as smart as he thinks he is. “Superstar, you deserve to be happy and with someone who isn’t forced to hide you from the world.”

“Stop it. It’s not your place to make that choice for me. It’s mine, and I choose to give it up for you,” I say. My arms lock around his neck, and my forehead touches his. “I just want you, Cal.”

For the first time, I glimpse a side of Calum I’ve never seen before. A range of emotions gather in his eyes. His blues gleam with tears, and it sends a pang to my heart. Is this really it for us?

“I’m scared.”

“But why?” I ask.

“Aren’t you scared?” he whispers. I’m not. Maybe I am, but not so much that I don’t want to be with him. I don’t want fear holding us back. “I am scared of all the things that could go wrong.”

“I’m scared of wasting so much time worrying about the things that could go wrong. I’m scared of being so scared I fail to live in the moment or enjoy life to its fullest.” His smile is sad, but it lights up his face. “I want you, but I need to know. Are you in or are you out, Calum Dissick?”



First, thank you for giving *TSCD* a chance. I’m deeply sorry for the cliffhanger and promise to deliver a worthy continuation in book two: [*To Love Calum Dissick*](#).

Second, if you’d like to read their first meeting at Pete’s house from Calum’s POV or gain weekly access to book two as I work on them, [*grab a spot at Maraville now*](#).

Did you know Ben and Tessa have their own books? Join the two love birds on their journey in [*The Bad Trilogy*](#).

Acknowledgments

These characters took more from me than I wanted to give them. But we are here now, and it wouldn't have happened if I didn't have help from so many lovely people. Thank you to Kim, Marija, and Presley (*yesss, she's the one in the song on page 1*). Their beta feedback helped a lot. To my awesome proofreaders: Shelby and Raven. Thanks. It didn't matter how much of a late request it was; they were happy to help. And to my venting partner, Lynn, *are you still resting?*

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Getting the cover right was hectic. In fact, I almost dislike that process as much as editing, but Prince, the cover designer, came through for me. So, thank you. My editor was also very helpful in going through every single line and getting the book to this point. A huge thank you to him.

Writing is such a lonely, isolating, and sometimes depressing job, but I've been lucky to have a great support system. Even if I don't mention your name in this note, I still appreciate you. To all new readers, thank you for taking a chance on this author. You're the chips to my ice-cream.

Connect with me

I am a sucker for chatting with my readers. Don't believe me? *Find out yourself!* If I don't reply, then I must have been turned into chips and melting ice-cream. Even worse, my phone got lost. But you can sign up for my newsletter [here](#) and also connect with me and other readers on:

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