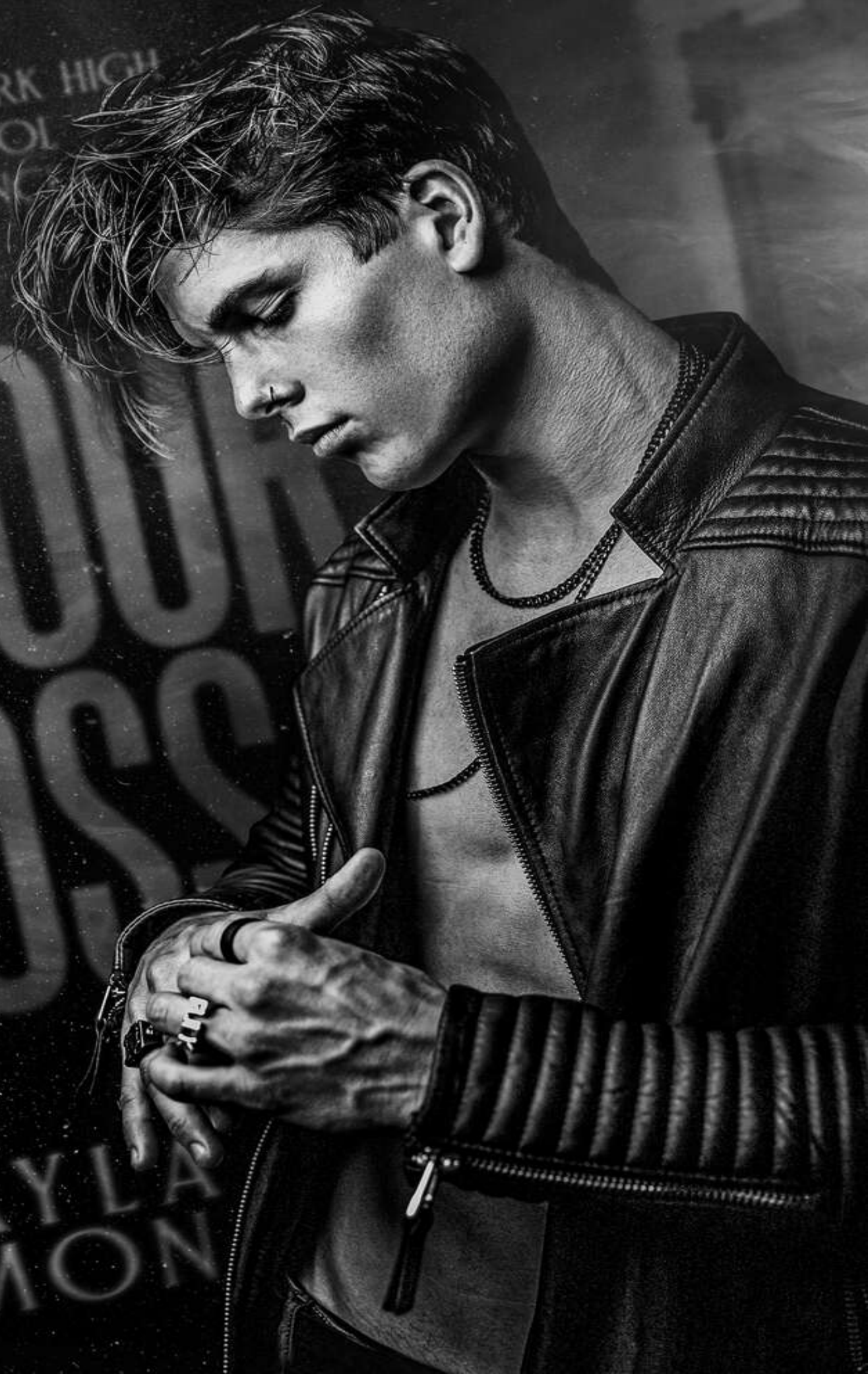


A DARK HIGH
SCHOOL
ROMANCE

YOUR LOSS

LAYLA
SIMON



YOUR LOSS
A DARK HIGH SCHOOL ROMANCE

LAYLA SIMON

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PREFACE

TRIGGER WARNING: This book contains dub/non-con, humiliation, knife-play, biting, spitting, somnophilia, coercive manipulation, physical abuse, references to sex trafficking, gambling addiction, and murder.

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CHAPTER ONE

GEORGE

I FLOAT home from the bus stop, buoyed along by the two good—no, *great*—things that happened today.

The first is I got an A on my history exam, the class I struggle with most because of its absurd reliance on dates and times and titles and names. Collectively, my nemesis.

The second is I think I've made a friend. My first in the three months since the golden teens of Kingswood College took one look at my raggedy scholarship arse and decided I was Not-Like-Them™.

But all that good energy is wiped the moment I see the drops of blood on the top step.

Not just blood. I think it's my *father's* blood.

It's fresh. I know that even before I drag the toe of my sneaker across the largest spot, smearing a crimson streak on the off-white rubber. Know it before I hear the faint thump inside as whoever has come to collect their debt uses their fists to convince my dad they're serious.

As if he didn't realise. As if we hadn't been on this roundabout a half-dozen times before.

My stomach, which had been sending a few nudges to my brain on the values of toast versus apples as an after-school snack, crawls up the back of

my throat to hide.

I clutch the doorhandle with my shaking fingers and twist the knob, but it catches. My keys are at the ready in my front jeans pocket, but it takes so long to snag them out that I'm sure somebody will get there first, will pop their head out the door, will grab me and drag me inside, slipping and sliding across the pools of blood my father is leaking over the kitchen floor as he stammers all his excuses, his reasons, his lies about how if they just give him time he'll be good for the money, he'll earn enough to cover it, he'll pay it back, every cent, just please—*please*—give him more time.

Half the images that flood my mind are conjured from the same inventive imagination that never wants me to get a full night's sleep. The rest is pulled from my memory bank, from the file labelled things-I-never-want-to-see-again.

I rub my hand against my jeans before retrying, this time succeeding.

The key slips into the deadbolt lock and I bite my cheek, holding my breath as I turn it, hoping nobody inside will hear. I don't own much, but there's one thing of value I've hung onto all these years. My mother's rings. Hidden away in my bedroom at the far end of the hall.

They're worth a lot to me—far more than just their monetary value—but I doubt the debt collectors will care how much sentiment I've invested in the jewellery in the years since my mother's death. My tears haven't given the gold and platinum bands any extra shine.

The only other thing in the house worth more to me is my dad. He's even harder to replace. I've bundled far more emotional energy into him.

I doubt the men beating him see his value, either.

The door releases and swings open, a relief after two weeks of mild weather left the jamb just as likely to stick and squeal when opened.

With one foot on the top step and the other in the hallway, I gently flick the catch on the bolt, then swing fully inside as I close it, turning the handle so the tongue doesn't bang against the frame. When it's flush, I let it go and step back, ears cocked for sound.

Low voices tell me there are two men in the kitchen. Two men apart from my dad. I hear the soft mutter of someone asking a question, then a slap. A second voice, deeper, more commanding, also asks a question. When the response doesn't suit his needs, there's the solid thud of a head being bounced off the table.

The same table we picked out of a second-hand shop together, getting it for five bucks and putting about two hundred worth of effort into sanding out the dents, cuts, and scratches of careless ownership, then varnishing it with a warm chestnut stain, making it ours.

I listen, but I already know what the conversation will be. This isn't the first time I've come home to find my dad at another man's mercy.

My increasing pulse, dry mouth, jittering hands—they're not from despair that he forces me into these situations, the fear that one of these days, men like this will break me apart as they try to extract payment from me.

It's anger at *them* that burns inside me. Not anger at my *dad*. Not anger at the only parent I have left.

He's an addict. Anyone can see it. For these men to know that and use it to enrich themselves rather than help just proves they're not worthy of mercy. He's worked so hard with his sponsor to put this all behind him, but every day brings a fresh battle.

To take advantage of someone at their lowest is the worst kind of crime. And these men will be criminals. Banks and lending societies take their jobs seriously. Whatever dark hole these lenders crawled from, they won't be legitimate. They'll be shady guys who frequent the back tables in pubs and clubs, charging interest in direct proportion to their victim's desperation.

We fled these men once already, stealing out from our home in the dead of night, praying no one would see us, running halfway down the country to land here, Christchurch, a place where we don't know anybody and, more importantly, nobody knows us.

I can't believe all that effort to be free of his debt, of his gambling, is gone. Wasted. Just because these vultures won't leave him alone.

There's another slap and then a low giggle that makes my skin crawl. Men don't giggle often and when they do, it's usually a prelude to some insanity. Right now, that insanity will be at my father's expense.

If you go in there, it'll be at yours.

I stop, wrestling for control over my emotions, over my mind. Later, I can feel anything I want to. Right not, I can't afford to think of how big these men will be, how I won't be able to fight them off if they want to hurt me. I won't think of what weapons they might have or how ready they'll be to use them.

A second passes, then another. My body thaws until I can tiptoe along the hallway, keeping as close to the far wall as I can while slipping past the ajar kitchen door.

From there, I can move a little quicker. One enormous step over the squeaky floorboard outside the bathroom, then I'm at my bedroom door, easing it open while my entire face winces, anticipating a rusty squeak from the hinges.

But my luck holds. Either that or the WD40 has finally worked. It swings inward with barely a sound and when I close it behind me, I sag against it in relief.

I step away after a moment, the hammering of my heart returning to a normal level. I cross to the bed and drop to my knees, reaching an arm under. My fingers brush against the toy, stuffed in the corner, but I can't get purchase. With a sigh, I lay flat on the floor and wriggle underneath.

A door slams farther along the hallway and I freeze, breath catching in my throat. The man with the lower voice is speaking into a phone, his tone sharp with urgency. I can make out maybe one in three of his words. Not enough to make sense of the conversation. There's a loud banging on the hallway wall, then a muffled shout, then nothing.

I wait until a full minute has passed without a return of the voice, then snag the toy and unzip the stuffing pouch. Hidden in the middle of the springy cotton is a small velvet ring box, in red with my mother's initials imprinted in gold, and my throat tightens as I clutch it in my hand.

My mum's ring box.

I've thought to sell the contents a dozen times over the past year; to use as a buffer so the threats against Dad's life didn't escalate. The closest I came to actually doing so was just before he told me we needed to run.

Now, I'm glad I held onto them. Hopefully, they're enough to sort out the debt for today. Assuage the men beating my father. Buy him a few days. Maybe a week.

Enough time for us to run again, even though the thought makes me exhausted. Still, it's not like I've settled into our new city. It won't be as hard to leave here as it was to leave my family, my friends, my *boyfriend* up in Auckland.

The door to my room swings open and I go rigid in horror. A dump of adrenaline lands in my system, sending every nerve into code red, tripping my anxiety into extreme mode.

“Don’t hang up on me,” the man says in a rumble that makes every hair on my body stand to attention. “You’re coming along to the party tonight. Everything’s arranged.”

There’s a burst of shrill energy from his phone and his voice takes on an even more menacing air. “Don’t you dare do this. I don’t give a shit about your reasons. Don’t you dare embarrass me.”

Another trill of frenetic speech bursts from his phone’s speaker, and he paces the width of my room, his foot kicking against the wall before he turns, and his footsteps tread back towards my corner.

I curl into a ball, trying to fold myself into the tiniest shape possible to avoid detection.

Stupid. The man’s having an argument with his girlfriend. He’s hardly going to stop and peek beneath the bed.

The thought does little to soothe me as the speed of his pacing picks up. The kick as he turns sounds like it’s denting the plaster. Much more damage and we’ll lose our security bond.

The thought hits my funny bone at full speed, high on adrenaline, making it seem like the wittiest, most laughable joke ever written. I squirm until I can clamp my hands over my mouth, terrified that hysterics will take hold and give away my hiding place.

“Jesus, it’s not like you have to do anything more than show up. I’ve arranged your dress, your hair, your makeup. How much fucking easier do you need things to be?”

His voice sounds oddly familiar, and I try to place it. An ad on TV? A late-night radio host? A teacher?

The recognition tugs at me, dancing around my straining ears like a word sometimes dances on the tip of my tongue.

Just as I want him to speak, there’s a pause, punctuated by him kicking his shoe into the far leg of the bed. The frame judders above me, the springs of the base taking his energy and doubling it. Rattling the side of the bed so I’m getting a vibration from it and from where my shoulder rests against the far wall.

“This isn’t funny.”

Another volley of kicks at the bed leg.

“If you don’t get your arse to the store before closing, we’re finished. Do you understand me?”

Another indignant squawk from the phone then his rage overflows. “Don’t you give me that! You know exactly how much this night means to our families. If you have even the slightest—”

He breaks off, punching into the wall, his knuckles digging through the tatty brocade paper, tearing into the plaster and gib hidden beneath.

“You think I like this situation?”

Another long pause, this time without the energetic punctuation.

“Come on, Kari.”

And suddenly I know who it is. The man pacing my bedroom, idly destroying its walls, isn’t a man. It’s a boy of eighteen—my age.

Lachlan McManus.

Son of Creighton McManus.

My heart sinks so much further that I want to cry.

My dad didn’t just get into debt again. He got into debt with the largest crime family in the South Island. The McManus clan has a stranglehold over the city; they take a cut from every income-generating crime that occurs within its boundaries.

A shady deal with a second-tier bookie hanging around the back of the TAB I can handle. A debt to a family this powerful, a debt so bad he’s sent his only son to deal with it, no.

This is so far out of our league that I’d be impressed if I weren’t about to get a front-row seat to the aftermath of my father’s compulsion.

Lachlan goes to my school, but that’s where our similarities end. And it would be more proper to say, I go to Lachlan’s school. Given the money his family has invested in Kingswood College, not to mention the legacy of attendees stretching back ad infinitum, he exerts more power there than the principal.

The only way I can even attend the private school is through a scholarship, turned down at the last minute by another deserving candidate. A set of circumstances I mistakenly took as a sign our luck was turning.

I doubt he knows my name; I learned his on the first day.

Kari Abercrombie’s father is a lieutenant in their enterprise. A power couple of the underworld in the making. The only person with enough standing to defy him and apparently, she’s putting that to good use right now.

Couldn’t have picked a worse time, girl.

My shoulders tense so hard, they're close to cramping. No blood flow can get through while they do their best imitation of concrete.

I clutch the ring box in one hand while the other tries to punch nail holes in my palm—finally a good reason to keep biting them, a habit I've never been able to shake, even when painting them with that horrible polish that tastes like Chernobyl took a dump on my hand.

"If you do this, I'll make you regret it."

The warning sounds terrifying to me, but I hear the careless tinkle of her laughter, a response that eats away at him so hard I can actually hear his muscles tensing.

For every new bit of anger surging through Lachlan's body, there's a likely target for its release.

My dad.

"You'll be the one crying to your father when I dump your arse and find someone who doesn't need to count money to get wet."

The low growl turns the insult into a threat. If I thought there was a chance in hell of me making it out of there if I bolted right now, I'd take it.

Instead, I listen as the conversation devolves another notch.

"Then fuck you and fuck your family."

Something hits the wall, and it takes a second to realise it must be his phone. When I turn my head to the extreme right, so extreme my neck is in danger of seizing, I can just see it, lying on the floor.

Two heavy boots appear either side of it.

I hold my breath. He's so close if I were a complete madwoman, I could reach out and touch him.

Instead, I try to stop moving, stop even the blood travelling around my body. Become something that absorbs sound rather than emitting it.

Freeze so solid nobody could suspect there was a living, breathing human being tucked under the bed.

Lachlan squats, one hand seizing the phone, the other dangling between his legs.

My eyes bug out as my blood pressure goes full throttle. Spots dance in front of my eyes. The room dims.

Then a hand reaches under the bed, grabs my hair, right up near the elastic, and drags me out from underneath.

The shock of the pain is exquisite. A thousand hairs being torn from their roots, all screaming in symphony. A discordant tune. Fingernails on a

blackboard in B minor.

I claw at him, forgetting who he is, who his father is, in the frantic need to get free. Panic at being caught elevates my senses until I'm close to fainting.

I kick out and strike the bed, sending a wave of pain up my toes.

Good one. Miss Uncoordinated strikes again.

He releases his grip, still holding onto my hair but not tugging at it, not dragging my entire body along like it's a handy rope affixed to the bow so strangers can reel me closer.

I lie still. Gasp in a breath, puff it out between clenched teeth, then huff in another one, my head swimming at the overdose of oxygen, lights startlingly bright.

"We heard you from the moment you came in," he says, smiling from a face that could tempt the most recalcitrant truant back to school.

His cheekbones catch the light, plunging the rest of his face into darker shadow, aided by the dark curtain of his too-long fringe. The eyes assessing me from under his smooth brow are hazel, shards of pounamu green glowing in their depths.

He untangles his hand from my hair, wiping the long strands that come away on his shirt before straightening.

"Get up," he says, nudging at me with the steel toe of his boot. "We're having a family conference in the kitchen, and you're invited."

I tuck the jewellery box into the corner of my bra—finding plenty of space there—and stand, locking my knees to stop my shaking legs spilling me straight back on the floor.

"After you," Lachlan says, a grin elongating the plump cupid bow of his lips. He waves his hand towards the door like he's a gentleman instead of someone who has my father's blood drying to a crackle glaze on his knuckles.

I obey him, so eager to follow his directions that my cheekbone comes dangerously close to smashing into the door. I twist at the last second and make it through the gap instead, pausing in the hallway to cast a curious gaze back at him. Hoping like hell he'll direct me anywhere other than the kitchen.

I don't want to see my father. Don't want to see him beaten for the stupid choice that he just keeps making, again and again, no matter what his intentions. I don't want to force a smile and pretend everything's fine while

the two men who might soon kill us parade around our tiny flat, treating it like home.

But of course, that's where he points for me to go. Where else?

The moment I walk into the kitchen, my father's eyes well with panic, with regret, with apology.

I reach out my hand to touch his shoulder and Lachlan slaps it away, shoving me forward while his companion pulls out a seat for me. The best reassurance I can offer my dad is a watery smile that falters as I see the lumps and bumps, the blood, the bruises already forming, the leaks of crimson staining the whites of his eyes.

It all becomes too much, and I turn aside, glancing instead at Lachlan's companion. A decision I regret the moment my eyes fix on him.

If Lachlan looks like he stepped out of the pages of a youth magazine, this man looks like he crawled out of a sewer, picking his teeth with the rigged arm of a dead rat.

"Take a seat, love," he leers at me. "Nice of you to join us."

"What've you got?"

I spin back to Lachlan, my eyes widening as he points at my bra. Creases appear at the corners of his eyes as he smiles. "Or do you want me to hunt it out?"

He hooks his fingers over, darting them directly at my inadequate bosom, and I fling up an arm to ward off the attack, my throat letting out a squeal that I did not intend to make.

"It's some jewellery," I say, panting because my chest has forgotten how to fully inflate. "As payment."

I continue to avoid my dad's gaze as I pull the velvet box out, sliding it across the table until my arm runs out and Lachlan has to lean over to pull it the last of the journey.

He flips open the lid, pursing his lips and arching his right eyebrow.

"The stone's small, but it's a good clarity, so it's worth more than it looks. The setting is platinum and so is the stripe on the wedding band." I wait a few seconds and when there's no acknowledgement, lamely add, "That's worth more than gold."

"I'm well aware of what it's worth," he says slowly, a frown briefly contorting that perfect brow before he snaps the box closed and taps its edge on the table. "Are you aware how much money your family owes mine?"

“Uh...” I stumble to form words, not sure if this is a game I should join in, or just let him make his point. “I’m not sure. A thousand?”

His debt had been ten times that in Auckland. It might sound small, but it soon compounds. The interest rate he agreed to added another grand every second week.

Lachlan grins at his colleague, shaking his head. “You think my dad sent me out to collect a thousand-dollar debt?”

“I don’t know.” Perhaps a phrase that would have gone over better if I’d started with it. “We can get you your money, I promise. I started a new job last week. I can transfer every paycheque straight to you.”

“How generous of you,” he drawls, keeping his face expressionless, so I have no idea if he’s agreeing or laughing at me. “What’s your new job? Executive of a fortune five hundred company? CEO of a bank.”

“I’m washing dishes, but I’ll take as many—”

“You think dish pig wages are going to buy you out of this debt?” Lachlan tucks the ring box into his jeans pocket and puts his palms flat on the table, leaning over towards me until his face fills my entire view. “Your dad owes us thirty grand, principal.”

The horror of that high number grips me and I cast a blame-filled glance at my father. It goes to waste. His head is bowed, so he doesn’t need to look at me. The shame creeps in red stains from the neck of his shirt to the tips of his ears.

“Want to hazard a guess at the amount of interest he’s chalking up?”

I shake my head, biting at my lower lip and wiping at my cheeks where the flush of colour is so intense it makes it itchy.

I don’t want to know anything unless it’s that this is an elaborate joke and a moment from now, someone’s going to reveal a hidden camera operator and yell surprise.

A phone rings, making my body twitch. I bite the inside of my cheek, trying to stop the useless tears that want to fall as though their tiny trails could wash this mess away. I’ve always been a crier. Always hated it.

“This better be a different answer than last time,” Lachlan growls into the mic, turning his shoulder towards the table as a belated measure of privacy. “There’s only two hours until the party starts.”

I grip the edge of the table in my hands, watching the expression of anger play out across his features. Wondering just how much pain the girl on the other end of the phone is adding to our current sentence.

My legs are crying from being held so tense. My scalp wriggles like worms are burrowing deep into my skin, the aftermath of where he pulled me by my hair.

I shoot him a wary glance, then catch my breath when his penetrating gaze locks on mine, staring straight into my tear-filled eyes. Slowly, slowly, his eyes rove over my face, my chest, my straining fingers. He stares so intently, it feels like he's cataloguing me, totting up an appraisal.

His stern expression morphs into a grin, sinister, predatory; a smile that makes my jaw clench and my stomach flutter with nerves before he barks out, "What size are you?" One ear remains pressed to his phone, though nothing on his face suggests he's listening to the call. His entire focus is on me.

"C-clothing size?" I clarify, shooting a concerned glance at the companion before remembering why I'd looked away from him the first time. I mutter the answer, still not sure if that's what he's asking.

"Fuck off, Kari. I'm sorted," he says, snapping his phone shut and shoving the folded device into his pocket with my mother's rings. "It's your lucky day, whatever-your-name-is." He checks his watch and raises his eyebrows at his companion before glancing back at me. "Get up. We've got a date."

"No!" my father yells, trying to get to his feet before the sewer rat kicks his legs out from underneath him. A knife appears in the collector's hand, and he licks the blade, staring intently at my dad as he flinches away.

I can barely breathe, shrinking into my chair. "Oh, I-I—"

Lachlan spins to fully face me, grabbing my upper arm and hauling me forward. "You, what? You have something better to do this evening? Planned to spend the next few hours washing your hair?"

I try to catch my father's eye, but Lachlan doesn't wait for an answer to his faux questions. He pushes me ahead of him, out of the kitchen, along the matted carpet of the narrow hallway, shoving me aside to pull open the door, then clutching my arm even tighter as he guides me outside, letting it slam behind him.

"There's a party," he says as though that's sufficient explanation. "You're my date. If you get a minute spare, test out a smile to wear. Everything else'll be provided."

My heart beats so hard it feels like it's trying to punch its way out of my chest. He lets go of me to open the passenger side door of his car, moving

around to the driver's side without glancing to see if I obey the unspoken command.

Never get into a car with an assailant. That's what someone on a long-ago talk show taught me. Never let an aggressor take you to a second location. Never let them pick a spot because it exponentially increases the likelihood that'll be your burial ground.

They were less detailed on how to avoid it. "What's happening to my dad?"

Lachlan's response is a long time coming. His fingers drum an offbeat rhythm on the steering wheel before he adjusts the rear-view mirror to his liking.

"You can get in the car, do what I say, and at the end of the night, you'll still have a father to come home to." His hazel eyes gleam almost golden in the late afternoon sun as he turns to me. "Or you can go back inside and take your chances." The predatory grin reappears. "I think my friend took a shine to you. I'm sure you can work something out."

A shudder of revulsion grips me, and my hand shoots out to grip the edge of the open door, glancing back at the flat. We've only been in there for three months, struggling the entire time. I hadn't minded because we were building something better. Something more stable.

My face flushes with colour, cheeks so hot it's like someone's shovelling coal into them.

I sink into the passenger seat, a thousand voices immediately shouting about why that's a bad idea, a mistake, huge, the worst decision I could ever make.

But fuck those people who 'make better decisions.' They should try it out with my choices and see how far they get.

CHAPTER TWO

LOCK

“WHERE ARE WE GOING?” the girl asks and I glance over to her, taking all of a second to assess her current level of wretchedness and decide that telling her anything will just add to it.

“To pick up a dress,” I say instead. A true enough statement without all the foreshadowing of what is going to be one very fucking long night.

I’m still burning at Kari’s dismissal. She knows we won’t break up for real; our parents married us off in their heads a few years ago. Well, not me precisely—I was still minding my own business back then—but the eldest son of Creighton was certainly getting hitched to the eldest daughter of the Abercrombies.

That my half-brother vacated his side of that equation, leaving me to fill the empty slot eighteen months ago, hasn’t put a dent in anyone’s plans.

“You said it was a date.”

“Yeah.” God, the traffic sucks this late in the evening. Half the cars in the city are heading out to the suburbs to lose themselves in screens until it’s late enough to go to bed. The other half are heading into the centre, determined to partake of all it offers before finding themselves a companion for the night who’s just as scared to spend time alone.

Mindless drones, all of them. I can't stand the dreary routines these sheep brainlessly follow.

Not that I've got a lot going for me right now, either. A night with the old man for company is just the kind of evening that I'd rather kill myself than endure.

Hyperbole. Obviously. Otherwise, I'd be finding a nice cliff to drive off instead of ferrying this little mouse to an appointment that Kari should have her moved her arse to meet instead.

It's a fucking bespoke dress. That's the bit that gets me. Thousands spent to get it fitted perfectly to her body and now she won't even wear it.

Not my thousands, not my wasted time, but still.

Kari and I have an understanding. She sucks me off when I need it and I eat her out when her toys and fingers fall short. If I want a real fuck I go elsewhere, thanks to her daddy's strange adherence to old customs—chief among them, his insistence she remains intact until wed.

Apparently, the fact no one is going to stick a speculum up inside me, taking a peek to ensure I've been as good as my word, hit the wrong side of her lately. She even offered me her arse one day, something I promptly refused.

If I wanted to fuck someone in the arse, I'd choose her brother. At least he comes with a name *and* a business fortune attached.

My dismissal didn't land as intended. Ever since, not one part of me has been allowed between those plump cherry lips. When I complained, she gave me the card for a full-service massage parlour. I returned the favour, pointing out the variety of ways that she could go get fucked.

Now she's on her high horse, determined to teach me a lesson. Like it's my fault her father insists on living in the fifties.

Still, if she wants to play silly beggars, I can do the same. It'll be fun to see how long her current abstention lasts when she sees shots of me and whoever-the-fuck-it-is-sitting-in-the-passenger-seat hit my feed.

I could send Kari a shot from my bedroom afterwards just in case she's worried that I'm missing out.

"How long will this take?" The girl's querulous voice breaks into my thoughts. "I have school tomorrow."

Jesus. I can't deal with this pick-pick-picking the entire drive. "We've got a family event. You'll be my date for the evening, and you'll do

everything and anything I tell you. Someone'll get you home afterwards, in time for school. Don't worry."

"And what about my father's debt?"

She's insistent. I try glowering at her, but I'm distracted by a random prick of a driver who decides the side street leads to a merging lane and have to lay on the horn. By the time I turn back to her, there's a small crease of worry between her eyes. Every cell in her body looks set to anxious.

"Do everything and anything I tell you tonight and it's wiped. All of it."

I can't even remember how much he owes.

It'll serve Dad right if it's an astronomical figure. He has no business sending me out on these paltry jobs. As much as he insists it's to teach me the ins and outs at all levels of the business, I know it's to shaft me because I don't have my nose jammed far enough up his rectum to satisfy him.

Miss Chatty settles back into her seat, apparently satisfied. The prospect of making small talk with a stranger for the entire evening annoys me, but nothing like it will annoy my father, and not even in the same ballpark as how much it'll upset Kari.

Still, Gerald better be waiting at the door with a large drink.

I turn into the carpark, winding around the storeys until I reach the second to top. There are hundreds of empty parks before the one I choose but, on this level, we just need to walk out of the parking garage and across the air bridge to reach the department store. It's closed to the public as of fifteen minutes ago, but that doesn't apply to me.

Most rules don't apply to me.

"Lock!"

I glance up at my nickname and smile as a cloud of fuchsia, rosewater, and blonde hair envelopes me. "Hey, Tandi. Slight change of plans." I jerk my chin towards my new companion, then frown. "What's your name?"

She blinks in surprise when I stare at her, taking so long to catch up that I'm worried she's a bit slow. "G-George."

"Right. G-George is now my date instead of Kari. She's about the right size, yeah?"

Even if she wasn't, Tandi isn't about to correct me. She's old school servile. Thinking ten steps ahead and barking orders to make sure the people paying her bills never have to think about anything twice.

If I had my way, I'd marry her, not some spoiled princess like Kari.

"Would you like a glass of champagne while you wait?"

See? The perfect woman. I hold out my hand and a full flute appears in it like magic.

“You’re very flat chested,” Tandi says, wrinkling her nose as she surveys George. “What undergarments do you have?”

She strips the clothes off my unfortunate date while the girl’s still trying to frame an answer, the four attendants darting in to get things done while she spins in a slow circle, completely failing to grasp what’s happening.

I sit in a nearby chair. I also need to get changed, but a suit isn’t exactly rocket science. I don’t need my hair cut and styled; my face painted over with a better-looking version.

Even if I wear the shirt stays that seem completely overboard, it’s still nothing like the intricacies of ladies’ underwear.

So, as another nail in the misogyny coffin, I get to sit here getting sophisticatedly wasted while George is sprayed and painted and dunked under water to achieve a fairly similar effect.

“We’ll have her ready to go by six-thirty,” Tandi reassures me after her staff have given my new date a thorough inspection. She’s bundled into the shower, probably with an attendant nearby with a stopwatch, telling her exactly when she needs to step out to make the deadline.

Honestly. Some days, being wealthy is a hassle and other times, it’s a sheer delight.

“What the fuck are those?” I snort when my date reappears, dressed only in her underwear. They’re some discount supermarket brand by the looks of them, washed until their original white has turned into a dishrag grey.

There’s no way I’m stripping those off with my teeth. I’d need to brush them after.

“Can you put her in something nicer?” I ask Tandi, looking forward to the afterparty more the longer I stare at George in her current state of undress. Her body’s so different from Kari’s I can’t wait to explore it.

“Get the white lace with garter belt and suspenders,” Tandi orders, after a glance at my expression, tutting over the inadequate provisions. “What bra size are you? B cup?”

“If they’re padded.” The girl blushes such a deep red she looks likely to give Rudolph a run for his money. “Otherwise, it’s an A.”

Tandi snaps her fingers at one helper, who rushes off to fulfil the request. As I sit back and watch her strip out of one bra only to don another,

I couldn't care less about their size. All I know is they're the cutest, perkier set of titties I've seen in a long while. More nipple than substance, but I bet they're sensitive.

My tongue licks away a drop of champagne from my upper lip, easily imagining what they'd feel like under its rough caress.

George glances over to me, seeming to realise for the first time I'm still in the room while she's being manhandled into and out of her clothing. Another blush joins the first until her entire skin looks like she spent a half hour too long in the sun. Delicious.

Kari is immune to humiliation. Something that sounds good in theory but makes her far too hard to manipulate.

This girl, though.

Not that I need more ways to manipulate her. Her father's debt seems like it'll work just fine by itself.

I work my way through most of the bottle by the time George is ready. Turns out Poverty McPooface scrubs up okay. Given the price tag, she ought to.

The deep green of the dress looks fantastic. It brings out slivers of the same colour in her eyes, making them flash as dangerously as emeralds against the ruby crimson of her painted lips.

Released from its elastic, her hair is dark blonde rather than the mousy brown I'd first thought. With a few highlights added, it's full of warmth, even under the cold glow of the store's fluorescent lighting.

Everything fits. Everything looks exactly like it should.

She grabs her phone off the makeup bench and stuffs it in the side of her bra. "Could I get a matching bag?" I ask Tandi, and she nods, grinning at the idea of adding another commission point to the sale.

"Oh, I don't need..." George trails off, biting her lip.

"You can keep it after," I say, unsure what's worrying her. A childhood trauma involving a purse? Seems unlikely.

"You've already spent so much..." She cups her elbows, glancing nervously after the saleswoman. "I don't want to cost you anything more."

The concept is so foreign, it takes me a few seconds to understand she's serious. "You don't want a free handbag?"

"I'd love a free handbag," she immediately retorts, then holds up one of the selections that Tandi hurriedly arranged. She flips the price tag around so I can see the four-figure sum clearly. "This isn't free."

I start to ask why she would care, then shrug. Either way, it doesn't bother me. "Whatever you want."

I tip Tandi a few hundred to make up for the loss and strip off my jeans and t-shirt, stepping into my suit and getting ready in about two minutes. One assistant folds my discarded clothing into a bag, handing it to me along with George's original outfit. After knocking back the last of my glass, I hold an arm out for my date.

An arm which she leaves hanging like I'm some loser who isn't worth the trouble to treat politely.

No. Worse than that. She's actively glaring at me.

"What?"

"Have you been drinking the whole time?"

I feel a hit that she didn't pay enough attention to me to know for sure, then forgive her the oversight on account of the parade of staff members who'd been fussing over her while they left me to my own devices.

Another hit comes because she's right. Even if she hasn't voiced the whole opinion.

I'm meant to be driving her to Dad's 'little house' in the country. Even with my tolerance, most of a bottle of champagne is at least half a bottle too much.

Nothing I can't buy my way out of, but I still don't need to court trouble.

"Here." I toss her the keys. "You're not on anything, are you?"

"No, I'm not *on anything*," she says, mugging me and turning on her heel like she's pissed off I just ruined her night. "Where are we even going?"

The change in attitude is startling, setting my curiosity alight. What happened to Miss Meek and Mild?

"I'll give you directions," I mutter, waving goodbye to Tandi with far less grace than I'd greeted her. "And you might want to try pulling your neck in." Thinking of the incident with the bag, I slyly add, "You're wearing about ten grand worth of dress and jewellery. A thank you wouldn't go astray."

The flush comes back, creeping out from her neck to the delicate curve of her shoulder. The dress only has spaghetti straps, one of which I pretend to fix into position just to touch her gorgeous creamy skin.

She jerks away like I burned her.

“Sorry,” she says, holding a hand to her throat, eyes staring at the floor. “My mum was ki—” Her voice breaks off, and she compulsively swallows once, then again. “Drunk driving is dangerous, that’s all. I didn’t mean to be rude or imply anything or...” she trails off for the second time, shaking her head.

A dead mother to add to her deadbeat father. The sharpness of her inquiry dulls to tolerable levels.

“Luckily, I’m at the stage of inebriation where I’m incredibly forgiving,” I say, throwing my arm over her shoulder.

She’s so tiny that it steers her off on a tangent for three steps before she counters the weight. The door back to the carpark doesn’t open as we approach; the time since closing enough that they’ve turned off the sensors for the night.

Like the gallant gentleman I am, I step forward to press the release, then hold the door open for George to walk through.

“D’you remember where the car is?” I ask, peering into the dim cavern ahead of us.

She responds by pressing the fob and the car unlocks with a thump, indicators flashing twice in case I was still having trouble locating the vehicle.

I head for the driver’s side, only correcting when she frowns across at me. “Are you sure you’re okay to navigate?” she asks with a tiny snort. “That must’ve been excellent champagne.”

“Either that or I’m drunk on the sight of your tiny titties,” I murmur, earning a scowl. “What? Aren’t I allowed to mention they’re the perfect size for my hand.” I get into the passenger seat and lean across as she gets into the driver’s side. “Allow me to demonstrate.”

Instead, I get a palm in my face for the trouble. “Do up your seat belt. I’ve already got demerit points on my licence. I’m not getting blasted because you’re too drunk to remember basic safety tips.”

I bury my entire face in her lap, laughing as she tries to move my head with her miniature hands. “Let me snap your garter, at least.”

“Do I...?” She frowns as I raise my head, hands on the wheel but taking no action to start the car. “How am I meant to return all this?” She waves at the clothing. “Do I get it dry cleaned or—?”

“Keep everything. It’s not my size.” I sit upright, leaning away from her so my shoulder rests against the side window. “If anyone asks tonight, you

go to school with me and you were happy to fill in when Kari was unexpectedly taken ill.”

“Okay.”

She finally starts the car and steers out of the parking building. With each descending level, her comfort increases until by the time we exit at street level, she relaxes back in the seat. “Which direction from here?”

“Head out towards Amberly. When we’re closer, I’ll show you the turnoff.”

“Sure.” She navigates through the city streets, the ebb and flow of traffic fading into a steady stream as we get onto the motorway.

When we approach Woodend, a sign calculates our speed, spitting out the results in flashing red.

“What are you? A racing car driver.”

“I wish.” She makes a concerted effort to slow and by the time we pass underneath the sign, it’s calmed down to green. “Why? How fast can this baby go?”

“Take the next turnoff and you can find out.”

She glances over to me for an explanation, and I smile as the light catches her eyes. For a desperate last-minute date, she scrubbed up pretty well. I won’t be embarrassed parading her through the doorway.

Kari will hate her on sight. I check my phone battery, making sure there’s enough juice left to record a plethora of photographs.

I point out the side road leading to my dad’s place, and she smoothly makes the turn.

“It’s not a private road but nobody else uses it much, so it may as well be. Dad owns all the land around here.”

“Is he a farmer?” she asks in such a sweet, polite voice that I’m halfway through framing a serious answer before I catch the humour lurking behind the words.

“You’re a comedian, too?”

“Racing driver first,” she says with a smile, then steadily increases the speed until we’re flying along the dark streets.

Out here, there’s so little traffic that streetlamps are only planted in the intersections. The sole light illuminating the stretch of road in front of us is from the headlights, the beams picking out a hundred metres clear before it turns into a black unknown.

“There’s a curve coming up to your left,” I warn her, grabbing the handle above the passenger door as the speedometer needle continues to climb. “After that, it’s pretty much straight roads until we hit the mansion.”

“You live in a mansion?”

I laugh, some of it releasing my nerves for the forthcoming evening, most of it at the gap between my father and me. “I live in a boarding room not much bigger than this car.”

“You’re a boarder?”

I glance over, wondering at the sudden interest but her eyes are glued to the road, her lips wearing a relaxed smile of such contentment that I feel a stab of envy. “Yeah. Otherwise, I’d spent half my week commuting.”

She nods as though that makes sense, even though it’s only taken us forty minutes to get where we are and another ten will see us to the door.

Cut that down to five. This girl really knows how to wrangle some impressive performance from a vehicle.

“There’s a grain road cutting through if you’re really interested in showing off,” I tell her, pointing to where it’s coming up, the actual turn not yet in view.

“Sounds like a challenge,” she says, her eyes sparkling, and her lips parted in enjoyment. Instead of keeping my attention on the road, I focus on her face. The sharp jut of her chin melding into the sweet curve of her jaw. The beautiful pout of her top lip, larger than the bottom, so plump my teeth ache to bite into it, to make her squeal and squirm.

“Here,” I say, belatedly pointing out the turn.

The whole car judders as she swings the wheel to the left, holding the vehicle on the road by sheer force of will, the gravel spitting out from its wheels to punch bullet holes in the darkness.

She shifts gears, eyes narrowing as she wrestles the steering column for control. The back-end shivers, making the car vibrate like its crossing a cattle grid.

For a split second, I think she’s lost it. Then she steers into the turn, easing off the accelerator until she’s back in charge. Laughing like a maniac with the wind whipping through her open window, tugging her hair out of shape, strands flying across to stick to her lipstick, her flushed cheeks, her mouth.

I laugh along with her, enjoying the difference between her and the women I’m used to. The mouse has briefly turned into a lion, roaring as

loudly as the car engine.

Another kilometre or two down the road and she slows the car, pulling to the side though not so far the wheels are in danger of sinking into the mushier soil of the pasture.

Her giggle warms me more than the alcohol still buzzing through my veins. Her hands stroke the leather contours of the steering wheel like it's a lover.

I tease her, feeling more like I'm sitting next to a friend than a captive stranger. "You need me to take over? You seemed to lose control back there."

Her eyes flash with the reflection of the dashboard lights. "No, I do not. Until you sober up, this pretty little tin can is mine."

Tin can. It's a late model charcoal C8 Corvette with green leather interior. If she weren't so obviously appreciative despite her words, I'd take issue.

Her laughter trills into the night as she pulls back into the road, performing a three-point turn that shouldn't be possible on the narrow strip of hard packed clay that passes for a road.

"How long till we need to be at the mansion?"

I reach over, pulling the loose strands of hair away from where they've caught on her mouth. "About right now."

She wrinkles her nose, twisting her lips to the side. "Are you sure your watch isn't running fast?"

"Not unless it's conspiring with my phone."

"Well..." She puts her hand on the gearstick again, raising her eyebrows and poking the tip of her tongue out between her teeth. "Better get you there pronto."

For a minute I'm tempted to tell her no. To drive wherever she wants, whatever speed she wants, just to see how much she enjoys the ride.

It's been a long time since I found such joy in the excess that my father brings to everything in our lives. Her happiness is intoxicating but reality kicks back in soon enough.

A night with the family shouldn't be something so dreaded but there's no avoiding the fact I'd rather be anywhere but on my way to a dinner sitting opposite the man who belatedly claimed me as his son.

But George doesn't know all the dirty secrets piling up in our closets. She can have an enjoyable time driving this expensive car, wearing her

expensive dress, fiddling with her expensive earrings while dining on the finest dishes and sampling the finest wines that money can buy.

And later, I can strip every last thread of clothing from her body. Kari's found her own entertainment for the night, so I have a free pass to do the same.

I'll strip her and see if I can find my own joy in the girl I just bought for the price of her father's debt.

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CHAPTER THREE

GEORGE

THE MOMENT I step through the front door, a man takes my phone. He's polite, dressed in a top and tails like an old-time movie star, and smiles apologetically, but he's resolute. When I sputter a few excuses about how I need it in case my father phones with an emergency, the man politely nods as he continues to extract from it my hand.

"Your dad's fine," Lachlan murmurs, checking his own device. "At least, he was when my friend left him. Sore enough to think twice next time but you won't miss any emergency calls."

Thank goodness. I briefly close my eyes in relief.

He puts his palm on my lower back, propelling me forward. The dress is so flimsy it does nothing to protect me from the cold and his touch catapults warm sparks up my spine, making me shiver at the temperature change.

The floor ahead of me is fashioned from large marble blocks, each tile at least a metre square. Two large doors bar entry into the rest of the house. They're double height and inlaid with gold accents that bring warmth to the reddish wood.

"This place is magnificent," I whisper, afraid to talk too loudly in case I'm not meant to be speaking at all.

My eyes dart in all directions, trying to see all the fancy details at once. A task they don't have capacity for, so they keep changing direction, picking at the small things and leaving the overall picture to form by itself.

"It's the foyer," Lachlan says, a small frown pinching his eyebrows together. "You should at least save your compliments until you see inside the house."

"Oh, I don't think I'm ready for the inside yet," I lob back, only half joking. Not that it matters either way because he strides confidently forward, the hand just above my waist steering me ahead of him.

"Wait," I say, panic rising at the thought of everyone who might be behind those impressive doors. "What's this party for again?"

"It's for me to endure and for you to smile, make pointless conversation, and nod your pretty head politely throughout. That's all you need to know."

As we step within a few feet of the internal entrance, a servant inside pulls the door open and holds it until we pass through. My steps falter while my head practically spins in a circle like the little girl out of the exorcist. Except, instead of spraying pea green vomit, it's pure admiration that comes spilling out of my mouth.

"Are you serious?" I exclaim the moment we're inside, openly gawking at the painting hanging to my right. "That's a Vermeer. Is it real?"

"Probably a copy," he answers dully, curbing my enthusiasm for a split second until I spy another treasure.

"Is that a *Faberge egg*?"

His hand moves to my side, its companion reaching for the opposite hip and turning me away from the things I so desperately want to look at. Instead, he aims me at an imposing figure with hair dyed as black as night, a beard using up most of his facial real estate, with bushy eyebrows making a solid claim for the rest.

The man's eyes are so deep in shadow I can't make out their colour—if they have any colour at all. With the way the rest of his face converts into an expression of distaste, they might just be blank holes poked into the fabric of the universe.

"This is my father, Creighton."

I hold out my hand and the man stares at it for a second. Despite the thickness of growth around his mouth I can still clearly make out the curl of his lip.

“We’re not into touching in this household,” Lachlan says with a soft snort, the puff of his warm breath teasing the hairs on the back of my neck. “Just in case poverty is catching.”

“Oh, I...” As the glare continues, clearly expecting something, I try a curtsy instead. “Pleased to meet you, sir. Your house is beautiful, and I love the artwork. I’m hoping to—”

“Where’s Kari?”

“Fucked if I know,” Lachlan says, his grip momentarily increasing on my hip. “Out enjoying herself with a variety of other men? Curled up in bed alone? I’m not her gatekeeper.”

“We were expecting you to bring her.”

“So was I until she called this afternoon to cancel. Now, I have this delightful... Georgina? Georgette?”

“George. Just George.”

“Right.” He smiles and shakes his head, bending so his warm breath sends tingles through my hair. “I have this *G-G-George* instead.”

“Surname?”

“Yes,” Lachlan butts in before I can get my mouth to frame the answer. “She has one of those. Is Mum about?”

Creighton’s eyes finally move off me, leaving a charred trail in their wake. I rub above my eye, trying to budge it, and belatedly remember I’m wearing full makeup for the first time in forever.

Makeup, minus the eyebrow pencil currently smeared across my fingers.

Creighton raises his hand and jerks two fingers. From the far side of the room, a staff member scurries across, dressed in a ridiculous French Maid outfit that seems more fitting to a brothel dress-up collection than an actual working uniform.

“Yes, sir?”

“Please show George where the bathroom is. She needs to fix her face.”

“Jesus, Dad. She doesn’t need an escort. Gerald took her phone.”

“When you’re inside my house, you follow my rules. How long have you known this”—that lip curl again—“young woman?”

“About three”—his father’s stern expression relaxes—“hours.” It tightens again.

“Stick to her side throughout the evening,” he tells the maid. “And you.” He points a finger at Lachlan. “Get her surname to Menzies so he can

perform a background check.” He reserves one last stinging glare for his son. “You should have done that immediately.”

“She’s not—”

“*Immediately.*”

He steps forward, looming into his son’s personal space. A pity because Lachlan’s hands have returned to cup my hips, so he mostly invades mine. Not that the elder man appears to remember I exist. He’s far too focused on his progeny to notice the girl being used as a shield.

“Unless you’ve finished playing whatever game this is, whereupon you can send her home.”

My chest lurches in excitement. I’ve been trying to live in the moment since whatever-this-is first started. Not a hard task given the moments after his proposal have been spectacular.

To have a clutch of staff at the city’s leading department store clean me, dress me, and fix my hair had been a dream. I’ve never been much of a girly-girl, but I have my moments and today fell squarely into the fantasy camp.

The car as well, that was excellent. I hope Lachlan’s still too drunk to drive when we leave because tearing along the highway at midnight sounds like a splendid end to the evening.

But leaving right now and not having to make small talk with party guests of such a high calibre that they don’t even pretend to be polite? That sounds pretty damn good.

Leaving before I find out exactly what Lachlan means by *everything and anything*, sign me up.

Instead he growls, “I’ll find Menzies.”

A man breaks away from a nearby group and wanders over. “Are you taking my name in vain?”

“Could you perform a background check on this young woman? George...?” Creighton looks at me expectantly.

“Lytton,” I say, then spell it out, nerves spiralling out from my clenched jaw.

“Just a moment.” He taps a message on his phone and smiles in that polite way that indicates he’s waiting, and it won’t be long enough for a conversation, then his phone beeps. “No one under that name.”

Lachlan’s hands tighten on me again, then he lets his arms fall away. It feels like he’s abandoning me to my fate.

His dad's expression grows even darker. "Any other names your *friend* goes under?"

"Oh... ah..." I gulp and wring my hands together. "Isn't me not being on a database a good thing?" The strained pause lasts long enough for me to get the message. *No*.

"Do we have a problem?" Creighton asks his son, raising his eyebrow.

"No problem," I hastily interrupt, trialling a laugh before giving it up as a bad joke. "George is short for Georgina..." I trail off as the man shakes his head. "But it's also my middle name, so you could try Yvette."

Another few taps on the keys and Menzies expression doesn't look hopeful. My dad has been adamant that we keep our real names under cover in order to skate under whatever radars might seek us out. He made me swear to keep it secret.

A simple thing to agree when I'm not standing in front of a man able to perform a background check almost instantaneously from his *phone*.

"There's n—"

"Or you could try my father's surname," I babble, desperate to confess anything if it means I'll be left alone. On the one hand, Lachlan's dad might just kick me out of the house if he can't verify my identity, leaving me to make my way home by myself.

That sounds like a pretty comfy option, but he might equally shoot me in the head, dump my body out the back, and research everything he needs to know in the morning.

That'll mean he uncovers who I am, revealing the extent of the debt we left behind in Auckland. Except by then he can't go, "No worries, just wanted to make sure you weren't targeting me," because I'll still have a hole in my skull where my brains leaked out.

"We've been using my mother's m-maiden name," I hurriedly say, my volume increasing in tandem with my desperation to get the correction out. "I'm not even sure if my birth certificate registers his surname but just in case"—I wave a hand limply at his phone—"you know, your system doesn't recognise..."

"Just give me your best name," Menzies says, his eyes as flat and filthy as an old bronze coin. "The name most likely to produce an accurate search."

"Yvette Georgina Worthington."

I stare at the floor, feeling a slight sense of relief as Lachlan's hands creep back to my hips, then link around my waist. "Little liar," he whispers in my ear as I close my eyes and miserably wish it were tomorrow already. Or next week.

Shit, if anyone's taking requests, then a decade from now would be fabulous.

"She's clean," Menzies says, letting out a whistle between his teeth. "Some overhang from a biker gang up north—"

"I'll clear it," Lachlan interrupts.

Menzies continues as though he didn't speak. "But it's under the limit and looks like she's a bit young to be the initiator." He tears his gaze from his phone screen to look me up and down. "They want her held as collateral."

The world slows while my blood forms into icy crystals, scraping the insides of my arteries with their sharp edges, cold flooding into my extremities. "What? What does that m-mean?"

"I said I'd clear it," Lachlan snaps. Menzies glances at Creighton, who inclines his head.

"Do it. The last thing I need is some MC gang deciding they have beef with us." His gaze turns back to his son. "This is your idea of a suitable date?"

"I evaluated her based on how good she'd be to fuck, not how much she owes to a gang nobody ever heard of." Lachlan pulls me back, so I'm under his arm rather than standing in front of him. The possessive touch scrambles my head nearly as much as his blunt words, sending my brain into freefall. "Perhaps you should prioritise your next marriage along the same lines."

Creighton dismisses him with a tiny shake of his head and turns back to me. "While you're under my roof, I want you to stay with Lock or have this maid"—he pushes her towards me—"escort you. No wandering off by yourself under any circumstances, are we clear?"

I nod so eagerly that I could qualify as a bobblehead. "Yes, sir."

Lachlan decides at that moment to curl his right hand into the fancy mess of my hair, grabbing hard enough that when he pulls, I tilt my head back. He presses his lips to mine, such an obvious demonstration of possession that I'm not sure if it's the exhibitionism or the actual kiss that robs my lungs of their next breath and sends my head into a tailspin.

I expect him to pull away when I hear his father moving. Instead, the kiss deepens, his lips softening as he moves his left hand from my hip to my cheek, cupping along my jawline and holding me exactly where he wants me.

Between my heart already beating hard from the strange situation to the slight layer of shame for being touched so publicly, my body struggles to deal with a host of confused information.

My excited delivery system bumps out its messages, speeding and colliding, trying to report on so many mixed signals that my nerves become completely overloaded, dissolving into full body tingles.

Lachlan pulls back, gently wiping his thumb over my bottom lip while my eyes fix to his, stunned. “That’s better. Now you actually have something to repair.” His voice drops lower, for me only, “Thanks for making me look like a jackarse in front of my father.”

“I didn’t mean—”

He nods to the maid, waiting by my elbow. “Go on. Your face is a mess.”

The statement echoes off so many similar sentiments lurking in my head that my expression must betray me, and he hooks me back towards him.

“I just meant your makeup. Don’t worry. I still have every intention of taking your beautiful arse to bed at the end of this.”

My head buzzes, my lips are swollen and hot. I’m not sure how I’m meant to take his statement and *not worry*. If I’d held doubts about how he plans to end this night, they’ve gone.

The waiting maid clears her throat. “It’s this way,” she says, taking my elbow and guiding me in the right direction.

I follow her without further delay, grateful when she leads me into a quiet space where we can shut the door on the imposing family. Unfortunately, the comparative peace gives my mind carte blanche to think its worst.

I haven’t been with anyone since moving here. My last relationship hadn’t been the greatest, something my ex took pains to point out repeatedly was my fault. I’ve never slept with someone for money or in trade, never even thought about it, and don’t have the slightest idea of how that will change things. Of how I’ll feel about myself when I wake tomorrow morning. Of what it will be like if I want to stop but can’t.

My stomach tightens so hard it pulls at the nerves in my throat, making it so I can't get a deep breath.

"I'm not sure how to fix my face," I tell the young woman since she's stuck in here with me. "I don't have any supplies."

She nervously cups her elbows, frowning. "Could you wash it off?"

I stare, biting my lip then stopping when I see that's not helping. My makeover is so pretty I don't really want to destroy it, so I dab at my eyebrow with a tissue, wiping away the smear at the edge and trying to push the pencilled outline back in the right direction.

Not too shabby but my mouth is a different story. The topcoats designed to make the colour stay for the entire evening crumbled under his lips. My mouth looks like it was coloured in by an enthusiastic but clumsy child, completely unable to stay within the lines.

I dab, dot, smear, lick, push, and return to dabbing with no noticeable improvement. Finally, I do as the maid suggested and wipe all the lipstick away, then muddle around with the edges, trying to make my natural skin match the foundation and God-knows-what-else used to disguise my blemishes.

"Are you really here as Lachlan's date?" the maid asks as I finish.

She blushes, eyes cutting away when I meet the reflection of her gaze in the mirror.

"That's right."

"You've... Have you been out with him before?"

I shake my head, remembering his instructions. "I know him from school and just filled in tonight when his date cancelled."

She chews on her bottom lip and glances away, fumbling in the apron that I thought was purely decorative but turns out to contain a handy pocket. "Here," she says, passing me a small plastic wrapper. Inside are two white pills. "They're like Xanax but quicker. If you take them a few minutes... *before*... then they'll help."

I stare at the tiny pills, my anxiety increasing by leaps and bounds at the coded message. I tuck them into my bra, my voice squeaking as I ask, "Help how?"

But the woman disengages, moving to the door and holding it ajar with a mask of politeness in place. "You're finished?"

I'm so nervous now that I shake my head, not because I need to use the facilities but because anything that postpones me going back to people that

I apparently need drugs to 'help' with, is a win.

She clicks her tongue, but lets the door swing closed again, standing next to it like a sentry, eyes cast down in a picture of demure civility.

Even trying to make things last longer, I'm soon done. I wash my hands so thoroughly with their fancy soap that it'll probably go down in germ legend as a battle to end all battles, every soldier killed in a devastating defeat.

But there's only so many times I can lather and rinse and with the maid's frown deepening with each passing second, staying becomes as nerve-wracking as leaving.

As I exit the room, my eyes immediately scour the surroundings for Lachlan. He's standing with another man of the same height but a slimmer build, and I head towards the pair despite the maid's bizarre warning pinching my stomach into a tiny, squirmy ball.

At least if he kisses me again, he won't damage my lipstick.

He wasn't kissing you, idiot. He was sending a fuck you to his father.

All true. The father who still lurks nearby, glowering at everyone in attendance. Lovely host. I must remember to never stop by again.

I close my eyes, wishing I could teleport to the end of this evening and curl up at home, alone, in bed.

CHAPTER FOUR

LOCK

I'M STANDING, staring into my drink and trying to ignore the vocal barbs from my cousin Patrick, ten years my senior, when George reappears at my elbow. Half her makeup appears to be missing, but it's not disastrous. Her complexion is so smooth and clear, she doesn't need it, but I miss the smeared lipstick.

On the other hand, it made her look so fuckable it might have proved too great a temptation to sweep her upstairs and introduce her to my bedroom, and there are hours of torture to go before I can get away with doing that.

As I push the thought away, I sling an arm around her shoulder, position my head next to hers, and take a selfie.

Her phone might have been confiscated at the door, but I've still got mine. She's here tonight to remind Kari that there are options in the world, even if our parents seem hellbent on denying them.

"Aren't you going to introduce us?" Patrick asks, eyes sweeping her from head to toe, licking his lips like she's about to be served as the feast.

"No."

"Don't worry," Patrick says, taking George's hand and kissing it while his gaze rests on me, checking to see how annoyed I get. I try to shield any

emotion but the amount I've had to drink works against me as I scowl.

A scowl that grows as he teases her about the fumble with her name. "My preferred name is Montgomery Archibald Wallace the third, but Menzies insists everyone call me Patrick."

"Only the *third* is accurate and your preferred name is asshole," I growl, taking her hand and tugging her away. "Come on. There's people to meet."

"Doesn't Patrick count as people?"

I pause us in front of a display cabinet to take another selfie, not yet posting. As always, I'll need to scour the images before uploading them, ensuring no details relevant to the family business are in sight. "He's family, and he's further down the line of succession than me, so no. The only family you need to concern yourself with are my parents and you've already met the more important half of them."

Patrick sends her an amused glance as I whirl her away so fast that if she didn't follow, she'd fall, tugged off her feet by my firm grip.

"You said someone would drive me home, afterward," she says when we draw to a stop.

Despite my intentions to introduce her, I realise there's no one in this room I care enough about to do that. At least not before I get another scotch into me. "Yeah. You're not leaving for a while yet."

"No, I didn't... I just..."

George bites the inside of her cheek, dimpling it in until it could serve as the illustration for uncertainty. "When you said about how you evaluated..."

I wait for her to finish but the sentence just hangs there as she runs out of steam. As I watch, the tips of her ears turn bright red and I want to flip open her head to see what she's thinking.

Maybe I can tell. Her eyes flick up to meet mine, then get wrenched away. Then again. Again. All the while her colour deepens, showcasing the dark pink against the shining green of her dress.

Beautiful. She's not just fuckable, she's beautiful.

Either that or my new set of beer goggles have arrived. Wine and whiskey goggles to be more accurate.

"You'll get home in time for school. That was our agreement, yeah? Don't worry." I signal to a passing waiter for a refill, who in turn gestures towards a bartender in the corner. "What d'you want to drink?"

“Nothing if I’m driving again later.”

“They know how to mix non-alcoholic beverages, too. Just ask them for a virgin, whatever.”

A new flash of colour hits her cheekbones and I chuckle, wondering if the label applies to her as well.

“Does everyone in your family drink this much?” she asks, a question that might have sounded innocent in her head but leaves her mouth dressed as the Spanish inquisition.

If I took my lead from other people, I might even interpret it as a signal to slow down.

“Could you get my date an orange juice?” I ask the waiter in a saccharine tone. “Or... would you like to splash out and have water?”

“Water, please,” she tells the man. “With bubbles if you have it.”

“Good lord. You think we’re rich enough to have fizzy water?”

“Lock!”

I jump at the excited squeal and spin us both to face my mother. Her crimson dress is far too formfitting for the occasion—no surprises there—and her sun-kissed brown hair is tied back in a ridiculously complicated style that must have cost her hours in a hairdresser’s chair.

“No need to act surprised, mother. Who else were you expecting?”

She comes in for a hug and I hold up my phone to ward her off, taking another set of selfies, this time on burst mode. While my mother clears her throat and pretends I didn’t just reject her, I scroll through the half-dozen results. George looks up at me adoringly in the last two. They’ll be perfect to annoy Kari.

Strange too, because when I glance at my date now, her expression is accusatory, not a trace of adoration to be seen. It’s only when I put my phone away that she softens.

Mum ignores my behaviour as usual, nodding excitedly at George. “Nice to meet you, darling. Lockie never brings any of his friends home.”

“She’s not a *friend*. She’s my date.”

“But surely you were friends first. And you must know Kari, too. Yes?”

I snigger into my almost-empty tumbler. “Real subtle, Mum.”

“We know each other from school,” George says with a wide smile, just as I instructed. Good girl. “You have a lovely home. Is that a real painting I saw earlier? The one with the—”

“You must sit next to me at dinner,” my mother interrupts, though she mightn’t have been paying close enough attention to know that’s what she’s doing. “I’m always interested in meeting more of Lock’s friends.”

“Date,” I correct again.

“Oh, hush. And what number drink is that? Your father won’t be happy you’re slurring your words this early in the evening.”

In response, I tip the rest of the glass down my throat and signal for another. The waiter brings it along with George’s water.

“Such a sensible girl,” Mum says in an approving tone. “You should follow her lead.”

“Where’s the fun in that?”

Her eyes turn brittle. “Tonight is work, Lockie. Not fun. Try to remember that.” She turns to the waiter. “Water only from here on out,” she instructs while he looks less than happy to be caught in a tug-of-war between us. “Anyone disobeying can hand back their uniform and see themselves out.”

She stalks off, turning heads as she does so. My mother’s never had a problem drawing the male gaze. More’s the pity.

We continue to circulate around the party, occasionally getting trapped by some blowhard keen to share their life story in all its boring detail. George handles it a lot better than I do. When we’re on our second circuit, I pay more attention to her than the other attendees.

A low gong sounds for dinner and I hold back as the guests flock through to the dining room, waiting until most everyone’s seated before I escort George through to our table. We’re with my parents, Patrick, a grey-haired man whose name isn’t supplied but who Dad must be trying to impress, and Kari’s parents, Soren and Imelda Abercrombie.

My mother holds out a chair and I switch positions with George to take it, amused when Mum’s lips twist in annoyance. Serves her right for cutting me off. I realise my mistake a moment too late as I turn to see Patrick sitting at the foot of the table, opposite my father at the head. Not only is that the position I should take but now he’s got free rein to talk to George.

I nod to the Abercrombies, seated opposite. Soren’s eyes are stony as they turn my way. His wife isn’t quite so upset, or at least isn’t so obvious, but neither of them acknowledge George.

Dad’s special guest is seated on his right, my mother on his left. The only welcoming face for my date to talk to is Patrick, and that’s not going to

happen.

“Don’t you dare,” I whisper to her when she smiles at him. “You can talk to me, or you can talk to yourself. No one else.”

She turns those wide eyes to me again and I reach out to grab her chin, tilting her head towards the light, memorising their colour. There are flashes of lime, darkest green, and playful flecks of teal.

There’s also an overdose of anxiety until I release her, watching her expression turn grateful as the servers dish up the meal.

The worry makes a reappearance as she stares at the small plate of food. Can’t blame her. I don’t know what it’s meant to be either. The cook must have been reading up on molecular gastronomy again.

After a few bites and a visible effort to swallow, she pretty much leaves it alone, turning to me instead. “What subjects are you studying in school?”

I lean a possessive arm along the back of her chair, raising my lip at Patrick when he looks far too entertained for my liking. “English, general science, art—”

“You like art?”

Her voice is as eager as a puppy. As eager as when she exclaimed over the decorative pieces I don’t notice any longer. “I like how easy it is.” I sit back, abandoning my attempt at the meal, too. “Anything subjective can be influenced. It’s far simpler to buy a passing grade in art than achieve one myself in maths.”

Not that I achieve anything in any of my classes. My weeks are a mess of students sending me completed essays and handing off notes. Anything to get the passing grades I need to stay right where I am. My father’s unbearable as it is; he’d become truly insufferable if I couldn’t keep my place in Kingswood.

“Right.” She stares at the plate of food in front of her, picking up her fork to poke at it again with no enthusiasm. I take it out of her hand so she’ll realise it’s okay not to eat it. Our staff don’t care whether we’re polite. “I didn’t realise it was a transaction.”

That startles me into an amused snort. “It isn’t for you.”

“And which university will you buy your way into?”

The words might be a dig, but her tone is light, so I respond more to that. “Why? Do you think I should have a preference?”

“For you?” She wrinkles her nose. “A performing arts college? You look good enough to be an actor.”

The compliment takes me by surprise. “Oh, I agree. There’s nothing quite like a drama degree to set you up for success in life.”

“It sure does.”

We pause as the servers change over the food. The main course isn’t met with any more enthusiasm than the last, at least from our table. At the four others dotted about the room, people are far more complimentary. They have to be. Half of them are trusted lieutenants employed by my dad and the other half are on the way into his favour or sliding out of it.

Once you get past the immediate family level, the pecking order gets fairly aggressive. Last year, after my father hosted a similar party, three of the guests later killed each other in a round robin of desperation, trying to upgrade their place.

George spears a piece of food that colour suggests will be a carrot and texture suggests will be jelly. One bite and she struggles to get it down, so I guess it tastes like neither.

Her attention returns to me. “Your performance tonight has been quite entertaining.”

“This isn’t the performance.” I drop my voice lower and move until my lips are almost pressed against her ear. “I’m saving that for the afterparty.” When she shivers, I take an aggressive sip of my water, taking delight in her sudden discomfort. “Want to put in some requests?”

Servers gather around the table, switching out the mains for tiny plates of some meringue-based dessert.

My date is suddenly tongue-tied, adjusting her bra.

“You’re going to uni?” When she nods, I tease, “And what fabulously useful degree are you going to study?”

“Accounting.”

I blink in surprise. If I’d had to guess it would have been art or music or photography or something equally creative. “You have a burning desire to type numbers into boxes?”

“And reconcile invoices. You forgot the best part.” She adjusts her bra again without thinking, her attention still focused on our conversation.

The repeated gesture makes me frown. “Did Tandi pick out the wrong size?”

George shakes her head, wariness lurking behind a strained smile.

“If you want someone to feel you up, I’m willing. You don’t have to resort to self-satisfaction.”

She jerks her hand down to her side again, fingers curling into fists. “I was just...”

“What do you have tucked in there? Another phone?” I lean across, slipping my fingers into the deep neckline of her dress, then sliding them inside the bra cup farthest from me. She closes her eyes, jaw clenching. Her nipple hardens against my wandering fingers. “Everything feels okay to me,” I say with a grin as I withdraw. “But if you ever want a free breast check, I’m game.”

“Can you keep your hands off your date’s tits?” my father snarls, clearly losing whatever small pinch of patience he has left with me. “It’s bad enough you bring a complete stranger along to a family event, now you’re going to grope her in front of us, too?”

My gaze lazily travels to meet his and I incline my head a fraction, hearing the ice crack beneath my feet. “I’m not sure we’re taking requests just yet, but I’ll think about it.”

He stands, leaning forward and glaring at me. “The study. Now.” He throws his napkin on the table and storms away, not checking to see if I follow.

“Lockie, be care—”

I shove my chair back, ignoring my mother’s plea. The same old anger that’s been bubbling beneath the surface since he made me take my place here sends up a geyser of fiery rage.

This stupid dinner is nothing but a showcase of the ins versus the outs, designed to impress the stranger to his right. The man he didn’t bother to introduce to me even though I’m meant to be second in line.

Another spurt of fury erupts as I think of Kari. Sure, we’re not in love, sometimes I don’t think we even like each other. But I’ve been playing the game as hard I can, not making waves, pretending that we’re a genuine couple.

Where the fuck does she get off cancelling on me?

We’re meant to be in it together. That’s the only thing that makes any of it bearable.

I glance back at the table to see everyone’s gone back to their conversations. Only George stares after us, her forehead wrinkled in concern. Not for herself but for *me*.

When I read the emotion in her face it warms me, filling me far more than the disastrous meal. She offers a tentative smile and I walk back a few

steps, stopping beside the maid tasked with keeping her in her sights.

“Show George to my room when she’s finished with her dessert. Leave her alone in there, you can go off duty after.”

She gives a tight nod and I lengthen my stride, taking three steps at a time up the staircase to catch up with my father. When he opens the study door, I’m right behind him. I walk into the room first while he slams the door, catching me by the shoulder and swinging me flat against the wall.

We’re the same height but we’re not evenly matched. I still have a few vaguely human impulses whereas the man who sired me feels nothing at all.

Except the thrill of the chase, the lust for power, the satisfaction of being top of the heap.

“I’d start with how your behaviour isn’t acceptable, but I guess you know that already, otherwise you wouldn’t subject us to this appalling display.”

“Don’t look at me. You should have a word in Soren’s ear about keeping his daughter in line.”

My father’s hand slams onto the wall next to my head. Palm only but I flinch, giving him even more advantage than he had already.

“If you want pointers on how to keep Kari under your thumb, I’m happy to help.” His eyes glitter like polished onyx, their darkness absorbing everything. “Didn’t our session breaking-in the last girl give you any pointers?”

Bile rushes into my mouth, my soul drowning in the memories I try so hard to keep at bay. The screams, the cries, the pleas. All of it underpinning the fear that one day I won’t even hear them, I won’t care. Just another cookie cutter copy of my father, my humanity stripped away.

It’s a struggle to keep my gaze level with his. I swallow but it does nothing to throttle back my rage, the lingering pulse of despair that this man is in my life. Not only in it, but guiding it, controlling it, hoovering up what should be some of my best days, leaving nothing but worthless scraps.

I joined a powerful family and outside these walls, that means something. Within its confines, I’m nothing. Completely powerless. At the dictate of this man and his whims.

If I’d known eighteen months ago, this was my fate, I would never have done my deal with the devil. I thought the money and power equalled freedom and by the time I understood the truth, it was too late.

My emotion isn't hidden well enough because he smiles. The only traces of joy he experiences always taken at my expense.

"I'd offer to tame Kari myself, but I think Soren might draw the line."

"I don't need your fucking help."

"Really. So, her non-attendance tonight was a mutual decision, was it?"

"I found a better offer."

He pushes away from the wall, retreating behind a large kauri desk, stained so dark it looks burned. I sag forward, breathing through the rage, trying to keep it pinned back so it won't explode out in all directions, leaving me vulnerable to his next attack.

"You've had a lot of leeway this past year while you settle in but from now on, I think it's best to keep you on a tighter leash." He picks up a silver letter opener, the blade dull but the tip sharp, and stabs it into the corner of the desk blotter. "Your judgement seems to be sorely lacking."

The way he looks at me, it's like he expects an answer, but my mind must be too dulled by booze to track the question. I stare at him with a blank expression while he stabs the opener into his desk blotter, again and again, until I swear I can feel the pinpricks along my back.

Then he gives a nod, finding whatever answer he sought somewhere in my appearance.

"To put a stop to this nonsense before it can escalate, I'm sending you to a training camp. It's for guards but I'm sure the lessons will come in handy in other walks of life."

I frown. "What camp?"

"Over in Europe. I'll send you details when I confirm your placement."

My lungs are suddenly far too shallow. "You're sending me to Europe because my date cancelled last minute?"

"Don't worry. You can finish out the school year as planned, then you and Kari will marry before you head overseas. I'm sure she'll appreciate the six months apart as much as you will."

My head spins from more than the copious amounts of alcohol I've poured on it tonight. A camp. It'll be full of men just like my father. Given the spark in his eye, I guess by the time I emerge at the end, I'll be like him, too.

More than I am already.

"You can't be serious."

“Before I can trust you to take over the business, you need a better head on your shoulders.”

“You told me I’d shadow you once I finished this year.”

“Really? Because a few minutes ago you seemed interested in pursuing a career in the performing arts.”

My teeth clench so hard there’s an ache deep in my gums. “It was some stupid fucking small talk.”

“You need to step up and take some responsibility. From the start, I was clear this wouldn’t be fun and games. I need someone with serious ambition to take over from me, otherwise, everything I’ve worked for will be lost. I won’t allow that to happen.”

“Pity you got rid of the competition then, isn’t it?”

I expect him to explode at the reference to his dead son. We don’t mention Sean any more than we refer to his late wife, Natasha.

But he taps his finger on the handle, plucking the blade from the pad only to stab it in again, expression unchanging. “There’s still Patrick spare. Remember that the next time you think it’s a good idea to invite a total stranger into my home.”

“She’s a pretty girl not an assassin.”

“She’s a desperate girl. Anyone could see that from a mile away. Desperate people do desperate things.”

I give a derisive snort and shake my head, something I probably wouldn’t do if my blood alcohol level was roadworthy. “George is a mouse.”

“A mouse who gave you a false name. What was in her bra?”

“Her left tit.”

“But you still had to go on an exploratory mission to find that out.”

I push away from the wall, striding to the desk and glaring across it at my father. “Tandi got her new underwear. She’s not used to it, that’s all.”

“Right.” His gaze is steady as it meets mine, not betraying the slightest emotion. He could give the Botox ladies a run for their money. “If this was a private date, and you wanted to parade the girl around, fuck her to teach Kari a lesson, I wouldn’t care. Hurt them both as much as you want.”

“Gee, thanks for your permission.”

He slams his palm on the desk then holds his forefinger and thumb a millimetre apart. “Thin fucking ice, Lachlan.”

I continue to glare, then drop my eyes, already exhausted. If I'd known what it would be like living with the man, I never would have accepted his offer. Much as I can't stand Patrick, he deserves a medal for putting up with Dad's shit for so much longer than me.

"You were well aware of your obligations before you slotted into this role."

Just like a caring father to call being his son, 'a role.' I give a vague grunt of agreement.

"Nobody hid anything from you and it's too late to change the arrangements now. Our businesses have been intertwined in the expectation of an alliance between our families. Fuck whoever you want on the side but be discreet for Christ's sake. If Kari's dad gets the hump with you, the deal's off and I think you know what'll happen if you lose me the multitude of millions it'll cost to pull out of this arrangement. If you ever, *ever*, bring a girl besides Kari into this house again, into *any* event, family or business, Menzies will dispose of her the minute she walks through the door. Are we clear?"

I nod but it's not enough for him.

"Are we clear?"

"Yes, we're clear."

"Have your fun tonight but if you want to be safe, kill her once you're done." I stare at him, hatred pulsing through my veins as a wistful smile twists his face. "Or do it during. It's a rush you can't get anywhere else." He stares into space for a second, then snaps his attention back to me. "If you do, text Menzies to clean up. He'll have a man ready for you."

"I'm not going to murder my date. What the fuck is wrong with you?"

He fists the front of my shirt, dragging me across the desk while he grabs the letter opener with his other hand, pressing the tip against my neck. "Don't speak to me that way."

"No, sir," I mock. "Sorry, sir."

The blade moves in time with the pulse of my artery. Half of me is drunk enough to wish he'd do it. I tilt my head to the side to increase the pressure against the blade.

Dad lets go of my shirt and slaps me across the cheek, then grabs my chin. "That's too easy, Lock. I didn't claim you as my son only to lose an heir again so soon." He removes the opener, tucking it away in a drawer,

only for show after all. “Now, why don’t you go enjoy your new friend for the two of us.”

My teeth grind together as I pull away, tugging at my cuffs and smoothing my hair back. When I have my hand on the doorknob, he clears his throat and I look back to him. “Yes?”

“If you do kill her, don’t fuck it up, okay? Menzies has enough on his plate.”

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CHAPTER FIVE

GEORGE

THE MAID LEADS me to a beautiful suite of rooms. It's at the top of a winding staircase, behind a door with intricate carvings around its edges, inset with mother-of-pearl and highlighted in gold paint.

"Lachlan said to wait inside," the maid instructs, and I nod, happy to agree. Happy to scurry through his open doorway, close it, and cower inside.

I'm less happy thinking about what mood Lachlan will be in by the time he leaves his father's company. The two men spark off each other so badly I'm surprised they don't have extinguishers mounted on every wall.

Instead of dwelling on what's coming, I turn to the room, trying to find something to distract me.

The large space has a full-size ensuite leading off one door, an entire room-size walk-in wardrobe off another. Even without those additions, it would be a luxurious size for just one person.

A king size bed is at one end of the room, set up with drawers either side, then a floor to ceiling shelf full of books, a reading chair, and one of those weird lamps that start at the floor and bulge out in a circle before curling over your seat, like a curious thin stranger reading over your shoulder.

At the opposite end is an entertainment centre, complete with large screens, larger speakers, and a stack of consoles gathering dust. Metaphorically that is. There isn't a speck out of place in the room.

It's luxurious. Welcoming.

I've never wanted to be anywhere less in my life.

The plastic packet stuck inside my bra catches my skin again and I fish it out. My poking and prodding at it earlier has driven it out of the cup and under the side seam, a lucky eventuality since it stopped Lachlan finding it when his thick fingers went roaming.

I hold it up, staring at the small white tablets inside. They look innocent enough but I'm sure every accidental overdose in hospital thought that at the start.

Despite the danger, part of me wants to swallow them. Anything to help with my rising anxiety, my increasing desperation to get out of here, to get home, before...

Before what, I don't know. Based on my brief interaction with the maid, I'm not keen to find out.

I shove them back in my bra before temptation leads me down the wrong path and drift back to the door, pressing my ear against it to work out what's going on in the study along the hallway. The sounds are too muffled to bring any enlightenment. I crack it open a sliver, just enough to see a metre along the landing.

Voices boom from farther along but the dampening effect of the thick walls and expensive carpeting mean that the individual words are entirely lost by the time they reach me.

Angry voices. Loud voices. Voices that make me hope no one has a gun within easy reach or someone's head might soon be splattered across someone else's wall.

There's a muffled shout, a cry, a thump, then the sound of a slamming door and footsteps head my way.

I duck inside, heart pumping with so much force that I can feel my eyeballs pulsing. With no time to compose myself, I'm only a step away, surely highlighting my guilt, when Lachlan bursts inside.

"Get on the bed," he snaps, slamming the door so firmly it must be audible from the other side of the house.

His beautiful mouth is twisted, brow thunderous as he stares at me from eyes that burn with ill-contained fury.

My nerves, already strained, thin to a hair's breadth while I try to work out how to get the hell out of here.

Earlier in the evening, flying along in a fancy car with a handsome boy at my side, I might have entertained visions of staying the night. Right now, nothing terrifies me more. I edge away from Lachlan, trying to sidle towards the door but I can't—he stands right in front of it.

"You're upset," I say, then watch as the words further enrage rather than calm him.

I try to add something, create a viable sentence, but my mouth dries to the point I can't fashion anything meaningful. Just a little squeak, like the pathetic girl I am.

It's him. I can't think of words while I'm staring at him. My eyes snap shut and I try again. "Perhaps you could give me my phone back? I'll call a car and get out of your hair."

"Get on the bed."

"Ooooooorrrr..." I draw the sound out as long as I can, not sure what to put next. "Maybe lend me the car? I'm happy to drive myself home and I can drop it at your school tomorrow, easy-peasy."

The laugh that comes out of his mouth doesn't bear any trace of humour. "Funny girl."

He takes out his phone, ready to put it on the bedside table, and I babble. "Lend me your phone real quick. Honestly, I'll just call a taxi and you'll never have to hear from me again."

"Taxis don't come here. The drivers know better." His eyes started the night as light hazel but they're now darker than night. Darker than obsidian. Darker than when you put your eye to a plughole, trying to see what's scurrying down in the depths of the drain.

"Uber, then," I suggest but he's already shaking his head.

"Them neither."

"Let m-me..." Fear chokes me to a standstill, and I freeze, my mouth open, my throat straining. I try to think of another solution. Anything that will get me out of this room, away from this boy who's a thousand times stronger than me. Whose dad just wound him up before setting him loose.

Lachlan steps closer to me, fingers resting on his belt buckle. My eyes fix to them. Helpless to look away. If he moves, undoes it, I feel like something inside me might crack.

Whether that lets out a scream or a whimper remains to be seen.

Then a slow smile spreads across his face. “How about your dad?”

I look at him, waiting for the twist, then seize hold of the idea with joy when none is forthcoming. “Yes. Yes, let me call my dad. He can come and pick me up.”

He puts the phone into my hand, and I stare at it in delight, my newest holy grail.

“The number’s programmed in there,” he says, scrolling through the contact list and stopping on a picture he snapped of my father earlier today, beaten and bloody. “You just need to dial it.”

My thumb caresses the button, eager to push, eager to speak to my father and get the hell out of this place. Get away from these people who aren’t the slightest bit like me.

I hover over the icon, letting my gaze travel up to meet Lachlan’s, asking his final permission.

“You’ll need to tell him his debt’s back on.”

The voice he uses is almost sad, like he’s watching some starving child on TV but doesn’t have one dollar a day to send them.

He reaches out to touch my face, his forefinger tracing my cheekbone with a touch so feather light it’s like being stroked by a ghost. His thumb takes over, rubbing across my bottom lip before he steps closer, so near to me his body heat warms my cold skin.

“Call him and tell him that if he picks you up, he’ll still owe the money, but if he leaves you here the rest of the night, he won’t.”

My eyelids weigh so much that when I blink, it’s work to lever them back up high enough to see. Lachlan’s face fills my vision. His hand tilts up my chin at the same time he bends over, closing the height difference, almost like he’s angling in for a kiss, but he stops short.

My lips pulse with memories from earlier in the night. They remember how soft his were as they pressed against mine, how enjoyable.

But there’s nothing malleable about them now. Those chiselled lips look like they’d slice straight through mine, cutting razor thin lines in my flesh until every piece of me is bleeding.

I was resigned to his plans, to what comes next, but with every passing second, my fear spirals.

“What’s the matter?” He removes his hand from my face and taps it lightly on the phone. “Don’t you want to make the call?”

What I want is to believe that if I do, my father won't care. He'll come and he won't waste a second of thought on what-might-have-been on his way here.

I want to believe that. My trembling hands and ringing ears are proof I don't.

Don't show him. Don't show him your fear.

The order comes too late. A tear slips from my eye, a renegade making a break for it while the going's good. Lachlan raises his hand again, catching it on the ball of his thumb before gently sucking it into his mouth.

"You can cry," he whispers, the words twisting into my ear like an aural snake. "It's okay. I like it when girls cry."

My breath catches, a scream swelling inside me; a desperate sound I lock behind my clenched teeth and clamped lips while his thumb strokes the soft contours around my eye. I can't look away from him any longer. Completely hypnotised.

"No more tears?" He rests his forehead against mine for a tiny fraction of a second before pulling away. "Never mind. I'm sure you'll find some, later."

He taps the phone again and I stare at the contact details, reading my dad's number before the screen plunges into darkness, falling asleep in a way I wish I could.

"Sometimes, it's better not to find out, don't you think?" He slowly removes the device from my hand and tosses it onto the table. I wince when it hits the hard surface, but he doesn't seem to care. "Sometimes, it's easier not to know for sure. Now, get on the bed."

When I don't move to obey him, Lachlan pushes me. My mind is so blank with fear, I reach for the zipper of my dress instead, sure that comes next, wanting to get ahead of the game so he doesn't get any angrier.

"No." He catches my hands, softly chuckling and twisting me around to face the king-size monstrosity that will probably feature large in my future night terrors.

He drops his lips close to my ear. "Leave everything on, even your heels. Get on the bed and wait for me." He gives another push, this time harder. "I enjoy unwrapping my presents."

I clamber onto the covers, settling on my knees in the middle.

"Lie down, face up."

I obey, holding my arms at my sides like I'm lying in a coffin, fighting for space, instead of able to spread out in either direction, the mattress so large even crosswise I wouldn't hit the sides.

My mind shrinks to a pinhole. Unable to handle the possibilities ahead, it narrows to the present, experiencing each second as it comes and not anticipating.

I stare at the stippled ceiling, my eyes tracing out every pattern. Hear the snick as Lachlan undoes the buckle, the purr as he slowly tugs the belt through the rungs of his waistband and hangs it on a hook on the back of the door.

The perfume Tandi sprayed on me earlier fills my nostrils, evaporating in my increasing body heat. My fingertips worry at the stitched design of the bedcovers, picking at them, picking, picking, until I force them to lay flat.

Lachlan's shoes go next, each nudged off with the opposite foot, then carried to the wardrobe where he lines them neatly on a rack skirting the floor, tossing his socks in the hamper.

He undoes his cuffs while sauntering towards the bed, rolling his sleeves up as he knee-walks across the covers then straddles me.

I flinch as he touches the jewellery that Tandi picked out to match the dress. He unhooks the dangling earrings, placing them on the bedside table and massaging the lobes where the heavy stones pulled them out of place. The choker goes next, my neck exposed without its expensive covering.

Then he sits back on his heels, running his hands along my torso while I hold myself tightly, trying not to shy away from his touch.

The second time through, that's easier. The time that follows, even more so. The strokes are comforting, pleasurable, relaxing.

He lifts my right arm and massages it from the shoulder to my elbow, using small rhythmic circles that relax me enough I can take deeper breaths. The circuits gradually move further, working along my forearm. He loops his thumb and forefinger around my wrist and laughs softly. "So tiny."

I return his smile though mine is far more tentative. The reminder that he physically outclasses me isn't as inherently amusing from my side.

Then he massages my hand, rubbing his thumbs into the centre of my palm while his fingers stroke the back, softly kneading out the tension, a state that miraculously spreads out to encompass the rest of my body.

"Does that feel good?"

I nod, captivated by the softness in his eyes, wondering where he hid the angry monster who stormed into the room. The emotion showing now is contentment. His entire focus on my hand, on me.

“Yes,” I whisper when his eyebrows raise. “It feels wonderful.”

He repeats the process on my left arm, my body sinking farther into the mattress with every twirl of his thumb. The rough pads against my palm send a pleasant buzz flowing along my nerves.

When he reaches the end and pulls away, I whimper and his smile broadens, his hands cupping the balls of my shoulders. I strain upward, anticipating a kiss but he shakes his head, lifting both my hands and pressing them above my head.

“That’s better. I want you nice and relaxed.”

Positioning himself lower down my body, Lachlan lifts my feet, one at a time, bending my knee so the heels rest flat on the bed, legs bent, a space just wide enough for him between them.

My dress hitches up with the movement and he slowly rolls it higher, one hand on each thigh, coiling it into a fabric snake that he lets rest on my lower belly.

“Look at how pretty you are,” he whispers, sitting back again, a hand on each of my knees, spreading me wider. Butterflies multiply at his words.

The delicate lingerie Tandi picked out for me earlier isn’t nearly robust enough to hide my private parts from his intensive inspection. Especially not when he hooks a finger under the thin fabric and pulls it aside, exposing all of me for his viewing pleasure.

He turns his head, kissing the inside of my left knee in a move that sends erotic sparkles streaming across my skin until they lodge deep inside my core.

I jerk, not away or towards but just in reaction to the unexpected touch. When he continues his journey, lighting a line of fire with his soft lips against the silken skin of my inner thighs, my clit begins to throb.

Whose fucking side are you on, sister?

From the enthusiastic reception, I’m guessing she’s team Lachlan all the way.

He reaches the inner seam of my thigh, licking the crease there, so near but so far from the goalposts that a moan escapes my lips. My elbows move upwards until they press together, a cage sheltering my face in case the sky caves in.

When he sits back, I try to get hold of myself. This is just embarrassing. I've become an enthusiastic recipient a few minutes after I tearfully begged him to let me leave.

Then he starts anew on my right leg, and I abandon my principals.

Later, I can call the feminist hotline and have a word about reinstating my membership. For the moment, I close my eyes and luxuriate in the sensations his lips call forth.

He snaps my garter and I give a startled cry, already unused to wearing such complicated underwear, now given a new vantage point to their usage.

"Don't you like that?" he asks, and I stare between my legs at his smirking face. Another first. The angle is strangely erotic, sending out a flood of cheerful messages to twirl in my lower belly, even though he's not *doing* anything down there.

A waste.

"It's... it surprised me, that's all."

He snaps it again and this time I let the sensations sink into my flesh, liking the sharp retort across my skin, the intense sting afterwards that slowly fades, not so much.

"Maybe once m—Ow!"

His raised eyebrow turns the grin into something more far salacious. The sting from the last snap intensifies rather than easing, until he rubs his palm slowly over the injured skin, turning the pain into something far closer to pleasure.

"Not a closet masochist, then?"

I shake my head, unable to tell from his tone whether he thinks that's a good thing or a shame.

His smile deepens and then disappears as he bends over me, hooking my panties to the side again and blowing softly over my curls. My hips bend towards him, seeking contact and he turns his head, pressing another kiss to my inner thigh while a groan strangles, caught in my tight throat, choking to death before it can wriggle free.

My noises make him chuckle and the soft vibrations of that add another layer to my exquisite torment. "So impatient," he whispers, the breath stirring a fresh wave of desire. "Anyone would think you had somewhere to be."

He's joking but I try to mollify him in case something runs deeper than his words. "I don't."

“Oh, yeah?” His finger traces along my outer lips, like he’s committing the shape to memory. “So, I can take all the time I want?”

“As long as you get me home before school tomorrow. That’s the deal, isn’t it?”

He rocks back up, grabbing my elbows and unfurling my arms to place my hands on his head. “Left for stop. Right for go,” he says, tugging each hand so I know he means *my* right and not his. “And we’ll see how long we can make it last since you’re in absolutely no hurry.”

“Oh, it doesn’t have to...” I trail off as his tongue flicks out to part me, licking deeper and deeper with each stroke.

I lose myself so much that I forget to tug on his hair to let him know that yes, that is acceptable work. I’m here for it. Thank you so much, employee of the month.

“If you don’t tell me what you like, I don’t know what to do,” he says, coming up for air. His hand wraps around the outside of my thigh, large veins throbbing just under the skin. The thick fingers curl over the top, fingertips rough where they clutch me.

I jerk on the right side of his hair, wincing a little when the pull feels too hard, but he doesn’t acknowledge any pain, just obediently doubles down, impaling my entrance with his tongue before he laps upwards, receiving another enthusiastic tug as he works some sort of magic before sucking at my clit.

Tug. Double tug. Triple... My hand briefly forgets how to function otherwise Lachlan’s scalp would be snatched bare.

I’ve never felt anything this satisfying before.

The most adventurous of my past boyfriends had attempted a few desultory licks and called it good. To be treated to such an exhilaratingly different experience along with the control allowing me to fine-tune the delivery would send my head swimming if his dedicated work hadn’t done that already.

Urgency builds as Lachlan continues to explore me with his tongue, laying his teeth flat against my needy clit and holding the position until I buck against him, uncaring of the danger.

He swivels one finger around my entrance, then again, again—tug, tug, *tug*—until he dips it farther inside me, curling back against my walls, stroking inside while his tongue caresses outside, creating too many dizzying sensations to keep track of.

Desire explodes inside me until I can't contain it any longer.

My hands grip at Lachlan's hair, pushing him, manhandling him, until he's in the exact right spot and I clench my thighs, crushing his head between them, keeping him in place until my body surges over the edge, recoiling in such a strong muscle contraction that I'm scared I've hurt him, am hurting him, only the low reverberation of his laughter against my thigh feeding back that he's okay.

As the softening spasms dissipate, I let go of his hair, wiping my hands against the bedcovers as they itch from the withdrawal.

He grips both of my thighs, using them as leverage to move farther up my body, his grinning face hanging over my pussy, over my abdomen, my naval, finally turning to the side and resting between my breasts.

"Did you like that?"

I want to say something sarcastic, or witty, or just clever, but my tongue is so tangled I can't think where to start. I nod, licking my lips and gasping in another breath while he changes position, moves to straddle me, knees near my armpits, pressing my hands above my head again.

"I want you to remember how this felt. How good it was to get yours without me complaining that the conditions weren't perfect, without me saying anything except the things I knew you wanted me to say."

There's an odd quality to his voice, like something's sneaking around behind the words but I can't hear them clearly enough yet to know their game. In my sleepy satisfaction, I note it but can't process anything further, so hum contentedly in agreement.

"Now, it's my turn." His hands move to my upper arms, encircling them as he slowly transfers his weight from his heels to his hands, pinning me. "And to show your thanks, to return my favour, I don't want to hear a sound from you unless it's something you think I want to hear."

Lachlan drops his head, kissing along my collarbone, grazing his teeth where it juts out most prominently. My sigh is as close as I get to validation. Accepting his terms and conditions while the afterglow keeps my thoughts nice and fuzzy.

"No struggling, no crying about how it hurts"—he kisses along my shoulder, tugging the spaghetti strap of my dress playfully between his teeth—"or how you can't breathe. Not a peep until I get mine, understand?"

I force my eyes open, the warnings penetrating my blissful bubble until it pops, letting in shards of pure fear.

Lachlan sits back on his heels, digging in his trouser pocket to pull out a knife, flicking out the sharp blade.

“Not a fucking word,” he says, leaning forward until the tip is pointing straight between my breasts. Aiming straight at my heart.

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CHAPTER SIX

LOCK

THE FLASH of terror in her face gets my pulse racing. Her eyes go so wide, I could fall into them, losing myself in the swirling colours of her iris, drawn deeper into the black pool of her pupils, never to escape.

Her breath hitches, mouth falling open.

It's too tempting to resist. I lean forward, plunging my tongue into the open cavity, feeling as she resists, then succumbs, then resists again, unsure what the rules are.

She's not the only one. I never know what I want to take until the need swells inside me.

I pull back, grabbing the top of her dress in one hand, holding the knife ready in the other. I control the cut, severing the fabric slowly until I reach the roll where it bundles atop her abdomen. Then I twist the blade away and tear the material with my bare hands, enjoying the tiny shriek George gives as it rends apart.

Sitting back, I let my eyes wander over her exposed flesh. The creamy skin flushes with deep crimson stains over her chest, the blotches stretching up to claim her neck with its scarlet fingers.

I touch the tip of the blade between her breasts, stabbing into the front clasp of her bra. Her throat works, contracting as she swallows, but she

keeps whatever words her eyes desperately want to say locked inside that luscious mouth.

Again, I lean forward, this time taking her top lip between mine and sucking. Her tongue darts out nervously, like a redshirt venturing out to see if the way is clear. I pull back, letting my teeth graze against the underside of her lip, switching top for bottom and starting the process again.

My teeth sink into the tender flesh, sampling it with a nip, then strengthening that into a bite. Her muscles grow tenser, hands twitching on the pillow above her head like they want to join in the action, but she's being good. She's obeying.

The pulse in her neck throbs with such force I can see the jump from each heartbeat. I release her lower lip, seeing the line my teeth made go from pale pink to darkest red as her blood soldiers march in to repair the damage.

Her eyes flicker to mine, then dart to the side, like she's afraid to look at me. I tilt her head to face directly upwards with my free hand, the other one bringing the knife up to touch the tender skin of her upper throat, dimpling the skin but not yet breaking.

I move it down, letting the blade press against her skin but not so hard that it risks cutting her, of drawing blood. Just indenting a line in her flesh, the knife moving in tandem with my eyes as it discovers her body, gets used to it, commits the finer points to memory.

At first, she flinches away. The longer I rest the blade against her skin, the less she responds like that, instead relaxing and softening her body where the metal touches her. When I reach her belly button, I insert the tip into the hollow, smiling as it looks like it's driving into her flesh.

Lower down, I use the blade to slice through the legs of her underwear, gathering the remaining scrap of fabric and throwing it to the side, revealing her pussy in all its glory. I hold the lips apart and she recoils, panting, her chest visibly moving up and down.

I hold the position for a moment, letting her get used to it, to filter through the possibilities in her mind. Gradually, her muscles lose their tension. I can't work out if it's sorely misplaced trust or if she's physically incapable of staying in such a high state of alert.

Either way, I want to test those limits.

I move the knife, teasing either side with the blade and watching her react, then overreact in the opposite direction, then react again. She's trying

not to move, her hands fisting above her head, but wriggling and squirming in her efforts to stay still.

A sheen of wetness clings to her inside flesh, the prettiest shades of pink, from the palest rose to the flushed intensity of crimson.

As I watch, she becomes more aroused, now slick with her own fluids. Beautiful. Entrancing.

When I lay the tip of the knife against her inner folds, her thighs briefly squeeze and I hold my breath, wondering if the change in pressure is enough to cause an injury.

She makes a sound, a slow whimper like she's sprung a leak. I move the blade, cautious, careful, wanting all the sensation of danger but not wanting to hurt her beyond the fear.

I withdraw it, turning the knife and placing the handle against her entrance. The whimper turns to a gasp, but she's still being such an obedient girl for me. Even though she doesn't know the blade now faces away from her. I increase the pressure and lean forward, placing my tongue against the handle, against her. Licking as her wetness increases, welcoming the invasion, inviting it inside.

"Do you want me to fuck you with it?" I ask in a low whisper. "Are you going to be a good girl and let me fuck you with my knife?"

She inhales a gasp and I take that as an invitation, inserting the handle two inches inside her. As her thighs twitch, I wonder what it feels like. To be in such a vulnerable position with someone she doesn't know.

To think at any moment, she might feel the sharp pain as I slice her insides.

If I could rewind, this would be how I'd make her come. Not with my tongue but with a knife, drawing an orgasm out of her with the constant threat of injury propelling it forward.

Perhaps later if my hand is equal to the challenge. I'd hate for the tremor of a hangover to turn the intended pleasure into accidental pain.

But for now, I've seen enough. I want more than a tease.

I withdraw the knife, sucking her juices off the handle. I grip it in my fist and put it to the side, where she can see it and know it isn't still poised ready to slice through her skin.

Getting to my knees, I move up her body again until I'm staring directly down at her. With my right hand, I hold the knife against the bed, visible from the corner of her eye if she glances in that direction.

My left hand grips her chin, ensuring we're face to face. Even with her head held steady, her eyes escape to the side.

"Look at me," I command in a low voice, as gentle as I can make it with my thickening vocal cords.

She forces herself to comply, teeth tugging on her bottom lip before a wince shows I've left it in too tender a state to do that. Her blinks multiply, tumbling over themselves to offer a brief respite, a rest, a tiny break in having to meet my gaze. Fluttering like she's trying to flirt with a stranger across a crowded dancefloor, when I know the reverse is true.

"You want me to fuck you or cut you?"

Her arms jump, the muscles trying out fight or flight on their limited scale. Her nostrils pull together and I wait, wondering if she's going to lose her current battle and give in to tears as sweet as the one I sampled earlier.

The last time I asked a girl this question, she collapsed into hysterics, pleading with me not to hurt her, tears and hitching breaths and squeaks and plea after plea after plea while snot ran down her blotchy face.

But George rallies. I'm almost pulling for her when she whispers, "Fuck me."

"Take your bra off." I lean over to stab the knife into my bedside table, the wood scarred where I've done it a dozen times before. When she scrabbles behind her back in a panic, I cup her shoulders, holding her steady. "Slowly. I'm not in any hurry tonight. Make it sexy."

The order wipes her brain for a split second, and she freezes, then manages a watery smile. She slips her arm from one strap, then holds the cups in place while she reaches for the other, and abruptly stops moving altogether.

"Come on," I say in encouragement, wriggling my fingertips close to the lower edge. "It's far too late to be shy."

The panic in her eyes increases at my words and I notice she's gripping one side of her bra more than the other.

"Put your hands above your head again," I whisper, curious what she's hiding in there. The world's tiniest knife? Another jewellery case? A nipple ring that got knocked askew during the evening.

My mouth waters at the last; I can feel the sharp zing of metal against my tongue. She takes an age to follow my instructions and when she does, I see the crinkle of plastic poking from the side of her cup.

“You got on my case about drinking but you’re hiding drugs?” I say, gleefully pulling her stash out and shaking the tiny baggie in front of her. “What’re these? Oxy? Molly?”

She shakes her head, tongue nervously darting out to wet her lips. “They’re like Xanax?”

“Sounds like a question rather than an answer.” I pull open the seal and tip the pills into my hand, rolling them back and forth. No stamp. No number. No markings at all and the pills have too crumbly a surface to be factory made. “Have they been sitting in there the whole time?”

The panic explodes, convulsing her features before she gets control of them. “Yeah. I thought they m-might help me relax enough to sleep.”

“Sleep?” I click my tongue against my teeth. “What’s keeping you awake at night?” I tip forward, bending to her ear. “Do you lie there fantasising how you’ll pay off your daddy’s debt?”

She licks her lips again, the bottom one swelling now from my earlier nip.

“One each?”

I press a tablet between her lips and watch as her eyes contort with messages she desperately wants to conceal. The pill sits below her lips, pushed out of her mouth. My fingertip pushes it between them again, and I watch as her tongue refuses it for the second time.

Refusing to swallow *her* pills.

Her pills. That she brought into *my* house.

Refusing to take them like she knows they’re not what she’s making them out to be.

Startled tingles swirl across the back of my neck. The thrill of danger. My brain tries to rally, to think things through, but it’s drowning in the alcohol I poured over it earlier.

“What the fuck are these?”

“I t-told you—”

I reach over and take the knife, jerking it out of the wood. “Take the pill.”

“N-no, I don’t want to sleep just—”

She falters as I point the tip of the knife towards her eyes, resting it against the sensitive skin at the side.

At dinner, I moved her. Just to the other side of me, but still...

If I hadn't, my mother's plate would have been easily accessible, along with her glass. My father seated just one place setting farther away.

Not an impossible feat. Not for someone with determination. Someone who I don't really know the first thing about. Someone who has fake names up the wazoo. A trait I found annoying and amusing but which my father might have been right to question.

My voice is soft as I tell her, "Take the pill."

That more than anything gets me. That he might have been right. I can't stand my father being right.

She sticks her tongue out, searching for the tablet she so recently rejected. There's so much fear swimming in her expression that I can't parse out what belongs to the knife, the threats I've already given, the threats yet to come, or the unmarked white tablet that she so far has failed to snag.

"Here. Let me help you." I push the pill nearer, watching as her tongue sticks to it and pulls it inside. "Show me," I say after she grimaces her way through swallowing. "Let me see you've taken it."

She opens her mouth wide, tongue flicking up to the roof, then lolling out like an overheated dog. "Can I...?" She swallows again, wincing. "Can I have some water?"

"No."

Her reaction is a slight frown but there are no other symptoms to suggest the contents of the pill were anything other than what she described. I'm tempted to take the other because tonight has been a disaster but have enough sense to leave it. Even if it's just what she claims, on top of what I've drunk tonight, it won't be a good idea.

"You want the second one?"

Her head whips from side to side. "I didn't want the first."

She blanches a moment later, apparently her brain and her mouth aren't quite in synch. A strange decision, to bring drugs she doesn't want to take to a party, but I let it go.

Now I'm reassured she's not trying to kill me or a member of my family, other considerations come back to the fore.

I tug at her bra with the tip of the knife, holding it aloft like a prize being ridden out of battle.

Her tits are as tiny and perfect as the glimpses in the department store promised they would be. I toss the bra aside and spear the knife into the

sidetable again to concentrate on them, brushing one nipple with the ball of my thumb then changing sides, making them contract further than the chill air alone could manage.

“So sweet.” I bend and take one in my mouth, palming the other. It’s so flat it’s ridiculous, like feeling up a small boy. The slight curve underneath is almost lost at this angle, lying on her back they’re even flatter than when she’s standing.

I trail my tongue from her nipple down to that curve, then swivel my face to the side to draw more into my mouth, trying to get enough purchase to bite. I can’t, my teeth graze along the skin rather than finding a grip. I change position and attack from another angle, this time earning enough of a mouthful that I can close my mouth and experience the sweet give of flesh, biting deeper until I hear the cry catch in the back of her throat. I release it, smiling against her skin as I kiss the abrasion all better.

“Do you like that?” I ask, my words muffled against her midriff where I try to gain purchase with my teeth, again failing against her concave stomach. Far too concave, even for such a small girl. Scrawny instead of thin.

She needs just the tiniest bit of fattening up and my grin grows wider at the thought of force feeding her just so there’s enough padding to bite her from head to toe.

My molars ache with the desire to chew on something substantial. Craving the sensation so badly I pull one of her hands down from over her head, sucking her forefinger into my mouth and clamping my teeth over it, eyes closing as the resistance sends a pulse of pure pleasure to my crotch from my jaw.

“Ah.” The sound escaping her compressed lips is tiny, but I open my eyes, drinking in her pain.

It’s exquisite.

I release her finger and move lower, snapping my teeth over a chunk of her thigh, applying enough pressure that when I pull my head back, an imprint of my teeth remains behind, like I bit into a receptive mould.

Retracing my path, I kiss each of the marks I’ve left on her, rubbing them with my thumb when they’re not blushing enough for my liking. At her tits, I stop again, sucking in a nipple and holding the very tip between my front teeth, holding it, holding it, hearing the whimper while she wonders whether I’ll increase the pressure, bite down, bite it off.

With my right hand, I reach down between her legs, stroking her wet slit, easing my finger inside, feeling the slippery rush as her body reacts so positively to my actions that it might as well spread out a warm wet welcome mat to usher me inside.

My head draws back, keeping the same pressure, until the bud pops free. Then I fall on her neck, nibbling, biting, sucking, grazing her tender, tender skin. Marking her. Biting so hard that the metallic warmth of her blood is just the tiniest sliver away.

“Should I... Do you want...?”

Her words crumble as I draw back to examine her face, unsure what she could find pressing enough to ask me about right now.

“My last boyfriend liked me to...” her fingers spasm as she trails off.

“Liked you to...?”

“To touch him.”

“If you want to grab my cock, you can just say so.”

She bites her bottom lip, wincing as she remembers too late that I got there first. “Only if you...”

I thought she’d be crying by now and instead of being afraid of what I might do next, she’s offering to help. To wank me off while I eat her in a far more literal sense than she should be used to.

The confusing response makes me curious enough that I roll off to the side, landing on my back. “Go ahead. You can touch anything on me you want to.”

George sits up, biting on the side of her thumbnail as she looks at me. To help her make a choice, I unbutton my shirt, then my trousers, then lie back with my hands behind my head.

Her hand darts over to rest against my abdomen, so cold that I belatedly consider buying the girl a jacket and gloves.

“Your boyfriend liked you to put your icy hands on his stomach?” I tease, watching as she wrinkles her nose and gives the tiniest shake of her head.

Her hand heads south but so slowly it’s going to miss the last train if it doesn’t get a move on. The fingers dance over my naval, light enough to make me quiver, then duck under the waistband of my boxers.

“I feel like there should be a rule. If you’re going to touch sensitive objects, you should warm your hands the same way a doctor would warm a stethoscope.”

“I thought you liked pain?”

She sneaks a glance at me, mischievous, possibly guessing my answer is ‘yeah, other people’s.’

Her head dips low, her eyes redirecting to what her hands are up to rather than looking at me. I brush some hair away from the side of her face to give me a clearer view. Now her lower lip is swollen nearly twice its size, her beauty is even more obvious. I feel a pang of hatred for the ‘last boyfriend’ she referenced. Right now, I’d prefer to be the one and only. The first. The last. The only one in between.

Her hand clasps around my cock, tentative fingers growing more confident as they slide up and down the full length.

I could grab her hair, force her head down, clamp her jaw, hurting her until she opens her mouth and gives me access. The gentle touch doesn’t offer nearly enough stimulation, but I wait, still entranced by the thought of what she might do.

“Is that okay?”

“If we were in year ten, sure.”

She stops moving. The derogatory tone acting like a handbrake.

It’s not even true. If someone had offered to touch me like this in year ten, I would have been ecstatic, but I would have been equally thrilled in years eleven and twelve. Right until the moment my father rid himself of his old family to replace it with a sparkly new one, in fact.

From then on, my name alone has been enough to attract attention. The money. The notoriety. The power. It’s like girls think they can suck a piece of that straight out of my cock, even if I’m the Mark II version of the golden child.

A difference then to be touched by someone who’d probably rather be anywhere but here. Who’d rather she just be left alone.

“You need some lubrication, otherwise, you’ll rub my skin off.”

“Oh.” Her eyes flick up again to check I’m not kidding, then she gently moves her hand again. “Do you have like a tube or something?”

There’s always some hand cream within easy reach but that’s too simple a solution to suit my current mood. I want her tongue on me. “Most girls use their saliva.”

She stares at me with her brows furrowed, creating the cutest little V on the bridge of her nose. When I nod, *believe me*, she turns back to the job in hand. Moving a little to sit upright, she spits straight on my dick.

In a second my enthusiasm is replaced by revulsion.

“What the actual fuck?” I push her to the side, stripping off my shirt and using it to wipe myself clean. “Are you for real?”

“I-I... You s-said...”

“By *licking* it. Jesus.” I shake my head then stop, doubling over as I fight against the urge to dissolve into laughter. “Have you never given someone a hand job before?”

She moves away, hitching her knees up to her chest, looking equal parts worried and embarrassed. “Not with my *tongue*. I’m sorry. I didn’t—”

“Come here.” I grab her by the back of the neck when she doesn’t move fast enough, dragging her back where she was. “You’re a virgin, yeah?”

George shakes her head so violently it’s like I just insulted her family going back ten generations.

“Right.” I roll my eyes. “But you’ve never—”

She cuts me off, blurting, “You don’t have to be so judgemental!”

I sit back for a second, trying to work out if this little Miss Nobody who’s only in my house because I saved her from the consequences of her father’s habits actually believes she’s living in some crazy parallel universe where it’s okay to *shout* at me.

Because, no. It is not.

I stand, removing my trousers and boxers and tossing them in the hamper before coming back to the bed, mounting it from the side closest to her.

“Let’s get back to where we started, okay? You lie down and keep your trap shut. I’ll do whatever the fuck I like to you, then you can go home and lick your wounds.”

“You could explain.” She holds her arms in front of her like a shield. “I’m not as experienced as you but that doesn’t mean you have to shout at me for not knowing something. How else am I meant to learn?”

“Do I look like your fucking teacher?” I roll back on top of her, pinning her in place with my weight, staring into her narrowed eyes. “Learn on your own time.” I grab her jaw in one hand, pinching my fingers to grip it in place. “But fine. Lesson one. No. Fucking. Spitting. Okay?”

The force of my words means some spittle lands on her face, but I guess that’ll serve her as a reminder of why it’s so incredibly gross.

Detour over, I reach down with my other hand and slap her thighs apart. With her panties sliced and diced on the floor, only her stockings and

suspenders remain in place, her heels catching on the sheets as she tries to move away.

“Wait!” Her voice is so full of panic that I stop, holding onto my last scrap of patience. “What about protection?”

And... I’m done.

I sit up, grabbing her hips and flipping her over before settling my weight back on top of her, jutting my pelvis so it drives her deeper into the mattress. Her tentative strokes might have been a million miles from anything that could bring me to completion, but it made me hard as granite.

While she tries to wriggle her arms free, I reach down and spread her from the rear, dipping my middle finger in, then curling it out, spreading her juices all the way along to the clenched bud of her hole.

“I’m going in raw, so you get to decide. If you’re that worried about protection, do you want me in your pretty little asshole, or should I go back to plan A and take your tight wee cunt?”

She jerks, trying to scrabble away, but it’s such a mismatched attempt I laugh. Her efforts grow stronger, bucking wildly under me, each action making me grow harder, wearing down my thinning restraint.

“Please... don’t...”

As I sit back on my heels, I grab her by the throat and tug her backwards, standing up on my knees as she rises and pulling her hard against me. Her hands fly up to tug at my hand, encircling her tiny neck. So tiny, I could probably snap it with little effort. I position my fingers an inch apart along her windpipe and squeeze. Not even hard, just to let her know how much worse things could get.

“I gave you your choices. Pick one or I’ll pick for you.”

While my left hand holds her neck, I fist myself with my right hand, guiding it between her thighs, my head nudging into her entrance, feeling how ready she is for me, no matter what her current protestations are.

“Is that what you want?” I press my forehead against her cheek, speaking directly into her ear, voice barely above a growl. Then I let go of myself and stroke her again, teasing my finger around her tight hole. “Or is this—?”

She bucks against me in such terror that she’s almost strong enough to break my hold. Whatever experience she has with anal, her current distress suggests it wasn’t good and that’s fine by me. I’m a tab A into slot B type of guy, not yet so bored with basic fucking that I need to experiment. I wrestle

her back down until her head is flush against the pillow, cupping her cheek and pushing back her hair for a better view.

The panic. The fear. The sweat gathering at her hairline and dotting her upper lip. I love it.

My thumb strokes the same path as my finger, taking its own sweet time, while my eyes devour every change to her expression.

When her pupils have blown out so far I can barely see the irises, I relent. My hand gives one last stroke of her hair, then moves to grab her hip, holding her steady as I line myself up with her entrance. “You’re so cute. Why would I stick it inside your filthy little asshole when I can fuck your tight, sweet cunt instead?”

She’s forgotten all about condoms, forgotten about safety, forgotten everything in the moments of blind panic. Forgotten it so when I pump my hips and bury the head of my cock inside her, she moans with pleasure instead of tightening with trepidation.

I leave myself there, her muscles gripping me, trying to pull me deeper. Her pelvis tips, making it easier for me to drive inside her and I do, going from zero to a hundred in one thrust, then pausing again, reading every change on her face, my cock feeling every vibration in her body.

I slowly withdraw, relishing the drag as her walls try to hold me in place and utterly fail. She’s so wet, there’s a soft slurping noise as I ease back. Her mouth is open, sucking in breath and as I pump my full length inside her again, I lean forward, thrusting three of my fingers into her mouth at the same time.

She opens around them, sucking, struggling a little when I get so deep that she’s close to gagging. Like a trooper, she fights past the urge.

I let go of her hip with my other hand and stroke her cheek, trace the path where her watering eyes release their tears. I press the heel of my hand onto the back of her head, holding her steady with the pressure against the pillow, against the mattress. Hold her steady as I thrust my fingers inside, pull them back, thrust them forward again, the soft cave of her mouth and the wet muscle of her tongue so similar to her tight cunt wrapping around my cock that the surge of desire almost makes me come even though I’ve barely started.

As I pull my hand back, she sucks each finger clean, her tongue almost as rough as a kitten’s. Her mouth pulls again at nothing as I wipe my hand

against the sheets and return it to grip her hip, to hold her steady as I pound into her.

I go slow at first, relishing the friction, the wet heat that announces how much she wants me inside her despite her protests. When my full length is buried within her, I pause, relishing the sensation. The one thing that Kari can't give me, even if she wants to.

It feels so good. Like everything about this girl, it's better than expected. Like God smiled on me and decided I needed a treat for every piece of shit I've grimly fought my way through these past years.

I slam into her, picking up speed, thrusting so hard and fast that I'm surprised she doesn't break apart under the force. Even when I grab a handful of her hair, using it to pull her head back until I can grasp her throat and squeeze, she gives a groan that sounds like appreciation, not discomfort. It sounds like she's begging for more.

Even if more isn't what she asks for, more is what she gets.

Her muscles work on me, squeezing and releasing like milking my cock is a fad new exercise on all the morning tv shows. Her backside is smooth, the flesh surprisingly plump, begging for a smack.

I slap her right cheek, barely using any force, turning the pale skin just the slightest shade of red. The left cheek gets one degree harder, the stain lasting longer until I smooth it away with my palm.

Her throat vibrates under my hand, soft sounds emerging, fuelling me to slow down, work my way deeper inside her, take my time, rewarding her until she purrs, the same way she feels like a reward to me.

To choke her when she's being so lovely about taking my cock seems cruel.

I loosen my grip, leaving my fingers where they are so I can still feel the sounds she's making, more vibration than volume, but they no longer dig into her flesh, they no longer drag against her windpipe, threatening her air.

She gasps in a breath, and another, then her arm reaches behind her, searching for something. I slap her arsecheek again in case she's forgotten who's in charge. The movement pauses, then resumes until I understand she's reaching for my hand, and I let her take it.

For the second time, she confuses me. Does something unexpected.

She intertwines her fingers in mine, clasping them tightly enough my knuckles protest. Using me as an anchor as her breathing quickens, like

she's welcoming me into her pleasure.

I pull her upright against me, my hand moving to cup her chin rather than staying wrapped around her throat. She drags our clasped hands to press between her tits, clenching so tightly that my bones rub against each other.

The soft cry deep in her throat as she comes is perfection. Her muscles move around me, the orgasm taking hold in small pulses that take a while to build, then twice as long to fade away.

She turns her face, her large eyes staring straight into mine before I claim her mouth, not caring how I twist her neck to access her lips, just needing the touch, needing that softness, almost startled when her tongue reaches out to tease mine, coaxing me as my final thrusts carry me into my release, convulsing inside her as she pushes her arse back against me, urging me deeper and deeper until I'm spent and we collapse forward onto the bed.

For long minutes, I don't move, breathing in the scent of her, of me, my arms holding her firmly, my forehead lost in the soft hairs on the back of her neck.

When I disentangle from her, my cum coats her thighs. I slip off the bed, then disappear into the ensuite to clean myself with a washcloth. Once finished, I rinse it out a few times, then walk back to the bed to find her crying. Something I wouldn't have minded earlier but that I'm at a loss to explain now.

"Sorry," she says, wiping her tears away with the back of her wrist. "I'm not upset. I promise."

Taking her at her word, I gently push her back until she's supine on the bed and wipe her clean. When I finish, she's gained control of herself and after I toss the cloth into the sink, I return to lie behind her, enjoying her small frame within my arms.

For long moments, we stay like that. All the stress, anger, and anxiety of the day disappears into the past as my body relaxes, curling around hers like a wall of protection.

"I've never..." she starts, then dissolves into tears again.

I roll her onto her back, catching one with my thumb and tasting it, saltier than the tear she shed earlier, but that could equally be sweat from our exertions.

"You said you weren't a virgin."

“I’m n-not,” she stutters out, hitching in a new breath. “But I’ve never come before. Not with somebody.” The tears leak out again. “I thought I was defective but that w-was s-s-so g-good.”

She gives a funny little snort, then falls asleep.

I lie beside her, propped up on one elbow, staring with contentment at her peaceful face. Even when I stroke my forefinger along the side of her cheek, she doesn’t wake. Nor when I explore further, cupping one of her perfect, tiny tits in my hand.

I would have preferred to be her first, but, on consideration, being her best has its own appeal.

There’s shit I should go downstairs and sort out. My dad expects an apology. If I give it to him now, I won’t have his cold shoulder to bear for the next couple of months.

But I don’t want to move. Not from this strange girl who went from thinking I’m a monster to a saviour just because she’s never had serious D.

It’s weird to be the good guy.

I pull her closer, wondering how long I should wait before initiating round two. A nap first sounds like the ticket, then I’ll have to make a mental note to wake in an hour or so. I don’t want to waste the entire night.

CHAPTER SEVEN

GEORGE

MY HEAD IS fuzzy when I wake. Nearly as fuzzy as the inside of my mouth where my tongue seems to be growing a fur coat for the coming winter.

Something holds me in place. A weighted blanket? But no. I had to leave that in Auckland. Not the most practical item to cram into a suitcase when you're leaving everything and everyone you've ever known.

Apart from my dad.

My dad. *The blood.*

My eyes spring open and I twist my head, being rewarded with a sickening swing from my internal camera, nausea rising until I grip the side of the bed and close my eyes, swallowing saliva to fight back the urge.

Where am I?

I am not at all sure and the tiny mind-picture my eyes just took doesn't match to anything held on record. A soft cramp teases the back of my calf muscle and I stiffen, relieved when it decides that's enough for now and I can relax.

A soft snort sounds near me and I roll in that direction, freezing when I see the boy in bed next to me. Lachlan. Enough alcohol wafts from his pores that I hold my breath, afraid I'll get second-hand drunkenness if I inhale.

Pieces from the night flicker in my mind. My clothes being stripped off before I'm poured into a new outfit. The desultory comments from the department-store aide, over the smallness of my bosom and the largeness of my rear, all made while she flashed a needle to correct the situation.

Creighton McManus. A man I've never wanted to meet and never want to meet again.

Strange food. Forbidden conversation.

Tiny fragments from what should be a full night of memories.

Did I drink? It doesn't feel like it. The pain's different. The sickness deeper. My thoughts have never felt so thin, dissipating like smoke.

I need the bathroom. My slow slide off the bed doesn't wake Lachlan and I take a few deep breaths in relief once I'm behind the safety of the ensuite door. There's a low glow from the window but not enough for good visibility.

My skin crawls at the thought of turning on the light, waking the man sleeping in the adjoining room, but I do it anyway. My body feels weird. I want to examine it to see if it holds clues to what's going on.

The first thing I see is the bruise on the side of my throat. Fingertip marks. With each new discoloured patch, my panic increases.

Do these bruises explain why I can't remember? Did he choke me out until I was unconscious? The thought swamps me until I cling to the vanity unit to stay upright. Did he take advantage of me while I was asleep?

Because I've had sex. Or, more precisely, it feels like someone's had sex with me.

My stomach flutters in a bad way. I put a quivering hand on my abdomen, my breathing becoming shallow as I notice a strange red mark on my belly and another few on the side of my left breast. My bladder reminds me of the reason I came in here in the first place and, when I sit, I see another of those red marks on my thigh.

This one is clearer.

This one is very evidently a bite mark. I can see the individual imprints of his teeth.

A sob catches in the back of my throat. I press my hand over my mouth, scared the sound will leak through.

I'm distraught. Wanting to know everything. Scared to find out anything.

I can't remember.

Why can't I remember?

A few tears spill and I catch myself. I can cry all I like at home. There, crying is free. Here it costs me time and time might cost my freedom.

I finish and close the lid to suppress the sound as I flush. The water in the sink sounds a thousand times louder than normal. When I wipe my hands on the towel, wipe my face, it makes noises I've never heard so clearly before.

My clothes are gone. The only thing I'm wearing is the suspender belt the lady at the department store picked out for me, along with the stockings. If I can't find clothes, I can't leave. There's no way I can hitchhike home from this place that no driver for hire will venture near without clothes.

Wait.

With my hand on the doorknob, I pause, wondering where that knowledge about drivers not coming here came from. An echo nibbles at my mind, then disappears before I can reel it in.

It doesn't matter. Clothes. Sensible shoes in case I have to walk. What else? I didn't have a wallet, but I started the evening with a phone. A vague bell dings, suggesting someone took it off me.

In the foyer. Someone took it away in the foyer. It could still sit there, in a box, waiting to be claimed.

My eyes move to the towels. They're large and fluffy, exactly the type of thing to wrap around yourself after a shower, tucking in the corners to hold it in place. Fine if you want to go from the shower to the wardrobe. I can't imagine it being sufficient to walk for hours, at night, all the way home.

There's nothing I can do in here. I need to go back into the bedroom. I turn off the light and rest my hand on the doorknob not yet turning it. I want to stay in here where I'm alone and it's safe. A room without an occupant who might wake up and bite me again.

Do whatever else he did to me again.

A breath hitches in my chest and I lean my forehead against the smooth wood of the door. The surface is cool, familiar, calming.

There's no lock on the door. You're no safer here than in the bedroom.

True. I know it's true. It just doesn't feel that way.

Five count. Five. Four. Three. Two. Wait a second...

I take my hand away, stretch and shake out the fingers that feel like they belong to someone else's body. My mind recreates the layout of the house.

En suite. Bedroom. Hallway. Staircase. Ballroom. Foyer. Outside.

I mumble them under my breath, then again, then again. When I recognise I'm just stalling for time, I take the doorknob in my hand again and force myself to open it. My heart jumps as it sees the shape of Lachlan, lying asleep in his bed. My feet refuse to obey me, trembling instead of walking.

Another five count and I move. I have to move. If I don't move now, I'll be trapped in place forever.

The first step is hardest. By the time I reach the end of the bed, my legs are fully under control again. I whip my head around, trying to see the entire space at once, trying to find what I need so I can get them and get out of there.

My dress lies in tatters on the floor. Even in the dim light, I can see it's ruined. I snag the heels neatly lined up at the foot of the bed. It looks like he took them off my feet and set them ready to step into again, in the morning.

They're ridiculously tall, completely impractical to walk more than the length of a driveway. They're also better than nothing so I clasp them to my chest while peering about me for anything I can use to cover my body.

A shirt. Lachlan's shirt. I clutch it to my chest along with the heels and scurry for the door.

The sidetable near it catches my eye. My mother's jewellery box is sitting on the top, next to Lachlan's phone. I stretch my hand out, then retract it, hesitating. It feels like stealing, though really, I was the one stolen from. He got his date, he got his fun, my dad got his debt wiped. The least I should get is my heirloom jewellery back.

I tuck the shirt under my arm, leaving a hand free to flick open the box.

It's empty.

My eyes immediately scan the vicinity, in case the rings fell out, then I stop. Another, more logical thought occurs to me.

I replay Lachlan, sitting at the table, glowering at my father. He'd taken the ring box, flicked it open while I explained how much value the items inside had. His expression hadn't altered in the slightest.

Then he'd snapped it closed and tucked it in his pocket.

Did I really believe he'd later emptied it, leaving just the box sitting out?

No.

The answer to that is no.

With a sickening bump, I understand there was nothing in it when I handed it to him. My dad must have already taken the jewellery, returning the box to its hiding place because he always plans to pay back the things he takes. Always.

The betrayal on top of everything else that's happened tonight makes my knees weak. I want to slide to the floor, curl into a ball, and cry.

But I can cry anywhere.

I like it when girls cry.

My memory repeats the words so loudly, my eyes dart towards the bed to see if Lachlan uttered them aloud. He's still sleeping. With the amount of alcohol he drank, I'm not surprised.

I put the box back where I found it and move to the door. No more time-wasting. I need to get home, then I can wallow in the poor-me's as much as I like.

Opening it a tiny sliver, I put my eye to the gap and stare through. I can't see far but the bit I can see shows me a clear hallway. I pull the door wide enough to slip out, closing it with a tiny puff of relief.

I drop the shoes and pull on the shirt, fastening the buttons. I swim inside it but rolling up the sleeves helps, and the length means that on me, it looks more like a dress than a top.

The shoes, I continue to carry as I walk downstairs on tiptoes. The large house is silent but full of noise. Creaking and groaning as the boards, beams, and struts contract with the cold. There's the low patter of rain and I grimace at the thought of trying to walk along that long winding entrance road in high heels in the drizzle.

Downstairs, the ballroom is dimly lit by glass cases with artefacts inside them. The low lighting illuminates the objects and the resulting glow spreads far enough for me to see my way across the cavernous space with ease. I pause at one case, displaying a suit of armour, dented and rusted. There's a plaque but I tear my eyes away before I get close enough to read. I'm escaping, not taking a tour.

The entrance from the foyer is locked. I jiggle the handle in case it's just sticking, but it doesn't budge. To my right is the large dining room where we ate our meal, to the left, who knows.

I opt for who knows, opening the door slowly as though that helps make me invisible. There's another long hallway and I head down it, not

expecting to find an exit but needing to keep moving before fear grips me into paralysis.

When I push open the door at the end, I expect it to lead me into another corridor, and it takes me a second to work out I've walked into a room instead. There's a crackling fire halfway along the right-hand side, the blast of warmth as I enter reminding me it's freezing out and I'm freezing inside.

No one else is in there. No one should care if I take a few moments before the fire.

There's a long line of paintings on the opposite wall and I glance at them, then move over for a more thorough examination. The large oil on canvas triptych steals my attention first off.

It looks like a Colin McCahon, aggressive strokes, muted colours, overlaid text, but not one I've seen before.

From habit, I hunt for a signature but the glow from the fire isn't a great help there. My eyes steal to the door I came through, the switch there, then return to the art. It's one thing to wander into a room by accident and quite another to draw attention by turning on the lights.

My primary motivation is still to escape this mansion but since I'm warming my bones anyway, a few more minutes of gawking at the fantastic works can't hurt. I step closer, straining my eyes to make out more and more details in the dimness.

Then a man clears his throat.

The sound comes from half a room away, but to my overtaxed mind it might as well be an inch. The adrenaline spikes in my bloodstream.

Every hair on my body stands on end. My senses douse me with so much information that I'm giddy.

The time it takes for me to spin around can probably be measured in seconds, but it feels longer, ridiculously long, like someone took one of those fanciful scientific theories about string and wormholes and dark matter and twisted it all around to make each tick of the clock take hours, years.

Something that would be great in a movie and is far less thrilling when applied to real life. My neck turns so slowly a creaking noise wouldn't be out of place.

There's a polished shoe. That's the first thing I spot. Shiny patent leather that reflects the dancing flames across its smooth surface. A shoe you'd wear to a funeral.

Then my eyes crawl upward to find Patrick's torso twisting towards me, face glowering, the studded leather chair so large he disappeared behind its tall back. His gaze rests on mine for a second, then he puts his drink aside on a small table next to him, getting to his feet.

He swivels my way, pulling at the cuffs of his shirt to straighten it, smoothing his tie, and pulling at the lapels of his jacket.

With each slow, staged adjustment, my blood pressure increases until it feels like my eyes must be bugging from my head. I inhale but no oxygen reaches my bloodstream. My lungs scream for air even as I breathe in, hold it, then suck in another breath.

In the light from the fire, Patrick seems made of flickering shadows. He was pleasant earlier, smiling, but there's no trace of that persona on display. His eyes are hooded, mouth pressed in a straight line.

He rubs a finger across his top lip, then steps my way.

I calculate the distance to the door and my chances of making it there. Not good. Not with my knees locked in place and my heart pounding like it's about to knock a clot free, send it pinwheeling into my brain, offering me the mercy of death.

My skin bunches into gooseflesh. The cotton fabric of the shirt feels thinner than tissue paper. I scarcely have time to raise my hands, the shoes still dangling from one, then Patrick's there, right there, standing over me, his face so hidden in shadows that it turns menacing.

"Hey, George," he says in such a low tone it sounds like a rumble of thunder.

His finger hooks the top button of my shirt, pulling it out far enough to amply show I'm not wearing a bra under the flimsy garment. A slow smile winches up the right side of his mouth, lips twitching at the strain. "Didn't Lock warn you about wandering around our house after hours?"

He moves slightly to my right, letting the flickering glow from the fire light my form. His eyes dance from one feature to another, their resting gaze so heavy I can feel their passage as they wander over me. I try to back away but I'm already flush against the wall. There's nowhere to go.

Patrick inches closer, reaching up to brush my hair back from my face, his body pulsing with so much warmth he's a better heater than the fire. I tilt my head back to meet his eyes, but his gaze is occupied elsewhere. His finger slowly edges along the buttons on the shirt, lightly touching each one before sliding down to the next.

When his gaze returns to mine, he raises an eyebrow. "You don't have an answer for me?"

My shoulders tremble as I jerk my mind back to his words. "N-no, he didn't," I whisper, all the air evaporating from my lungs.

"Negligent of him, though I'm sure I remember Creighton appointing you a chaperone." He ducks his head low, bringing his face near to the curve of my neck and inhaling deeply. When he breathes out, the cognac scented warmth sidles along my collarbone, making my skin prickle. "You agreed not to wander around the house alone."

A vague memory flickers. The maid in her ridiculous outfit. I did agree. My stomach plunges to the soles of my feet. "I f-forgot."

He sniffs me, moving his head from my neck to my shoulder, then angling back across my chest. "You especially shouldn't be walking around dressed in nothing more than a shirt." His tone is lighter now, amused. By some strange feat, it doesn't lessen the threat any. He sniffs in another deep inhalation. "And not when you absolutely reek of sex."

One of his hands cups my shoulder, rolling over the ball of the joint before pressing it firmly against the wall. My breath hitches, fear rising until my lungs are too compressed to take in another.

Like he can smell that as easily as everything else, Patrick nudges closer, my heart now so fast I can't discern the individual beats.

Tears well and spill from my eyes, escaping while the going's good. With his lips now close to my ear, I doubt he sees. I doubt he would care.

"Some McManus men are into sharing," he tells me in that same teasing threatening tone. "Not at the same time, obviously. Incest is a step too far. But we don't mind taking turns. Each of us taking the same girl, one after the other, after the other."

His fingertips touch lightly against my collarbone, dancing their way along the ridges, then tracing a path over the tender skin of my throat.

"Is that what you'd like, George? Is that why you're out late at night, so eager for your next partner that you didn't even bother to put on underwear?"

His other hand latches onto my thigh, under the edge of the shirt fabric. It runs up my leg until he touches against the bare cheek of my arse.

I cry in earnest, making loud blubbery noises as I try to suck in air. Patrick lets go of me and backs up a step, then another, until finally he crosses to the door to flick on the lightswitch.

The sudden influx of brightness makes my eyes water for a different reason. I press the heels of my hands hard into my eyes, sniffing back the worst of it.

“It may have been in bad taste, but I’m just joking,” he says, eyeing me cautiously then shaking his head as though he thinks I’m practising my amateur dramatics for his benefit. “You won’t last long around here if you take things too seriously. Even Kari has a sense of humour.”

He retakes his seat, reaching for his glass, then tips it towards the open drinks’ cabinet. “If Lock sent you down here for more booze, help yourself, but I have to warn you, given what he’s already consumed tonight, that’s probably a bad idea.”

My mind struggles to catch up with the sudden change. It’s still frozen in place, terrified, while the perceived threat calmly sips his drink. When I finally take a step forward, it’s like a key to unlock the rest of my body. My shoulders and throat muscles relax, and I shuffle closer to the spare seat. “I’m just trying to get out of here, but I can’t find an unlocked door.”

“And you won’t.” He turns back to me, frowning. “We keep it like Fort Knox for a reason.” His eyes skate up my naked legs, then land on the high heels still dangling from one hand. “You can’t go outside dressed like that, anyway. I don’t know what car service you called but if they told you they’d come here to pick you up, they’re lying.”

I shift my weight, eyes flicking towards the fire but finding no help there. “I don’t...” Tears flood out of me again, embarrassing in their number. “I can walk, I just need to find a door. The one to the foyer’s locked.”

Patrick shakes his head, staring at me like I’m the village moron. “You can’t walk home in heels and a shirt while it’s pouring with rain.”

My tears now flow so copiously that my nose is running as well, and I really need to wipe it on something but the shirt’s the only thing I have. I try to do it surreptitiously, but since the only other person in the room is staring straight at me, that’s a hard ask.

“Here.” He shakes out a handkerchief from his pocket and I move over to grab it, blowing my nose and wiping away the worst of my tears. “What did...?” Patrick shakes his head. “Never mind.”

He strides back to the fire and flips a switch that turns a hood over it. After a few seconds, he rolls it back and the flames are gone. He places his

glass down on the sidetable next to his chair and gestures me forward. "Come on. I'll give you a lift home."

A kind offer that, given what he whispered to me, sounds more like a trap. "Oh, you don't need—"

"Yeah," he interrupts, gazing at my attire again. "Yeah, I really think I do. Wait here. I'll be back in a minute." He strides over to the door again, then pauses, resting his fingers on the handle. "Did he hurt you?"

The word sets my brain on fire, melting any serious thoughts into a waxy sludge. "N-no."

"It's okay to tell me. I know I—" He breaks off, running a hand through his hair and puffing out a breath. He moves closer, stopping when he gets near enough that my muscles tense. "Look, I was just playing games before, okay? It wasn't... I wasn't going to..."

His scrutiny makes me so uncomfortable I hug myself, wishing I could curl into a little ball.

The altered position makes the shirt rise higher on my legs, exposing the dark bite mark on my thigh. Patrick stares at it, reaching out a fingertip, then jerking his hand away before he touches me, ducking his head as he inhales a deep breath.

"Do you need a doctor? There's a private clinic I know where they won't ask questions. They won't take your—"

"No." His sudden change in demeanour is just as frightening as his initial interaction. All I want is for the evening to be over. For me to be tucked up in bed. "I don't need anything except a way out of here."

"You can't..." His composure cracks a little further. "You can't go to the police. I'm serious. Even if..." He stops to clear his throat before continuing, "Even if he raped you, you can't go to them. Creighton will kill you if you do."

It's not even a threat. Just a simple statement of fact, uttered with no accompanying emotion.

"I'm not going to the police." My voice comes out in a shocked rush. "I really just want to leave. I won't bother anyone, I promise. Please."

He still looks uncertain.

"Lachlan had... I gave my consent," I assure him. It's almost the truth, just leaving out the bit about my father's debt, the only coercion he needed. "I just... I have school tomorrow and I need to get some sleep. Truly. I just want to go home."

Patrick continues to stare at the mark on my thigh. When his eyes return to meet mine, I can't hold the gaze, even though his expression is kind, even though I understand he's offering help.

The thought, just *the thought*, that I might need a doctor twists me inside until I'm faint. The next time I shift my weight it's because my head is too dizzy to remember where it put my body.

Patrick grabs my hand and tugs me towards him, giving me his jacket and putting an arm around my shoulder when I'm still shivering. "Did Gerald take your phone?"

I silently nod, relieved we're onto easier subjects.

"He's probably left it in the lockbox near the door. We'll go out the front, then." He sets off at a fast pace and I scurry after him, struggling to keep up with his six-foot-plus-however-many-inches frame.

"Do you...?" I ask once I get within talking distance. "Have you been drinking?"

"You caught me on my first." He shrugs and shakes his head, grinning a little. "Unlike some people, I know better than to get off my face at a family event."

At the doorway to the foyer, he pauses, sliding across a wooden panel and tapping a code into the keypad hiding underneath. The door unlocks with a thump, and he slides the cover back in place, then waves me through.

The marble tiles are cold underfoot, my toes curling for entirely the wrong reason. I crouch, putting on the heels, though they're more strap than shoe, so offer little protection. Patrick shakes his head as he crosses over to a table and picks a wooden chest from the shelves beneath it. "Yours?" he asks, wagging my phone.

"Yes, thank you." I grab hold, eagerly clicking into it. Battery level is under fifteen percent, earning a nice red exclamation mark, but that'll be plenty if I really need help.

Meanwhile, he's moved to the outer door. Another keypad, then we're outside, the rain picking up in intensity, hitting against the outer steps so hard that the droplets bounce back into the air.

"Mine's the blue one," he says, pointing to the far side of the sealed parking bay in front of the house. It's two over from the one I drove here, and there's a pinch of regret that his is a sensible boxy SUV instead of something sporty.

I take a few steps across the rough tarseal, then Patrick must grow sick of my pace because he lifts me into his arms, jogging through the pouring rain.

The sudden change in position makes my head spin, a sensation that continues even as he helps me into the passenger seat. He runs around the back of the car and jumps into the driver's seat.

"Should have bought a towel," he says with a laugh, shaking his head and scraping a hand over his hair to get rid of some of the moisture.

I do up my seat belt, miserable as I see a rivulet of water find its way down the back of his neck, making him shudder. "I'm sorry to be so much trouble."

He frowns deeply, shaking his head as he starts the car. "Compared to some of the high-maintenance people who've been through our house over the years, you are no trouble at all."

Music blasts from the stereo and he pushes the off button, grimacing. I wouldn't have minded having some sounds going, no matter what he listens to, but I keep my mouth shut, shoulders hunching.

"Where in town are you?"

I list my address, and he nods. "Yeah, I know it." He glances over at me, before refocusing his attention on the road. "Your suburb's zoned for Kingswood?"

My suburb isn't zoned for shit. "They accepted me in one of their charity spots."

"You're a smart cookie, then?" His eyes sparkle as they dart across to me, then return to the road. "Those placements are hard to get."

"Everyone at Kingswood has to be smart," I answer. It's true. Every student has to pass the competency exams to earn a place. Although, given Lachlan's earlier answer to my question about him taking art, perhaps some people receive a different set of questions than mine. Something like, can you pay? And if the answer is yes, step right in.

"Have you and Lachlan been friends long?"

There's a weird note in his voice and I don't know what it means. Given the marks on my body, I shouldn't have any allegiance to Lachlan, but I hedge my answer just the same. "A while. I've only been in town for three months."

Patrick smirks. "So, you didn't know him prior?"

"Prior to what?"

We come to an intersection and Patrick's eyes rest on me for longer as he obeys the red light. "Prior to the upgrade. His mum only married Creighton eighteen months ago."

"Really?" I trawl through my brain, trying to find evidence I knew this before. It doesn't find anything, then I think of the pair, standing toe to toe, both filled with fury. "But Lachlan looks so much like him."

"Oh, yeah. He's Creighton's son. Just from the wrong side of the sheets." Patrick glances over to check on me again. "Creighton's wife and eldest son died. Luckily, he had a spare family ready-made to replace them."

A spare family.

The dismissal in the words makes me wince in sympathy. I know what it's like to come second with someone you love; with someone who's meant to love you.

Although, thinking of Creighton and his thunderous reactions tonight, given the inherent cruelty of his profession, maybe Lachlan thanked his lucky stars to escape being his father's son for so long. "I had no idea."

"I suppose most people know better than to gossip about our family, even school-age children."

"Young adults."

"Hm." He wrinkles his nose, and the expression transforms him from dark and brooding into completely adorable. "Nah, I think children works better."

I fold my arms, trying a humph on for size. His gaze abruptly drops lower, and I follow his gaze, appalled to see that my nipples are now clearly visible through the straining fabric. I duck my head forward, cheeks so hot they're about to catch fire.

"Don't worry, I'm not into cradle robbing."

"Sorry. I usually wear more clothing than this."

"You don't have to explain yourself." Patrick flicks on the indicator and a moment later we've turned into my street. "Not to me."

I point out my house, terrified that my father will be waiting up and I don't know what to tell him. I'm not yet stable enough to talk about it. Not yet. Possibly never.

"Should I come inside with you?"

The offer nearly makes me burst into tears again. He's already pointed out he thinks I'm a child, so it's not like my image can go farther downhill,

but it leaves me embarrassed, anyway.

“Thank you. That’s very kind, but I’ll be fine.”

He pulls to a stop outside. The house is dark. Even if a light were on in the back, I’d expect to see some sign of the glow.

Dad’s probably sitting there in the dark. He’ll have worried himself sick for hours, waiting for you to come home.

I shed Patrick’s jacket, and he throws it into the backseat. My hand spasms as I grip the handle, so I have to wait a moment before opening the car door.

“Thank you for the lift,” I say, getting out and immediately turning my ankle in the ridiculously high heels.

Before I can protest again, Patrick gets out and offers me his arm to walk to the front door. “I’ll wait around until you’re inside and have checked it’s safe.”

I don’t have my keys but there’s a spare in the fake rock in the corner garden. He shadows me at every step and once I’m inside, he insists on walking along the hallway, checking to see if there’s anyone else in there with me.

“It’s okay,” I tell him all the while, twisting my hands in the baggy shirtfront. “Dad’s probably just gone to the n-neighbours for a drink. He often does that.”

“At three in the morning?”

I don’t have an answer, so I just hang my head, not sure what the protocol is. I’ve already told him enough times that he’s okay to leave that saying it again will seem churlish. But I just want him to go. I want to get into my bedroom and close the door and maybe cry again without an audience to temper the severity.

“I can wait until your father gets home,” Patrick offers, frowning with concern. “I’ll just nap on the couch.”

My chest feels hollow as I turn him down again, walking him to the door as I assure him I’m fine, perfectly fine.

“Make sure you lock up behind me,” he says as he lets me usher him onto the front steps.

I obey his instructions, waiting by the door as I hear him get into the car and start the engine, idling at the roadside for a few minutes before he finally drives away, leaving me alone.

My first stop is the bathroom where I take two doses of my birth control pill, just in case. I'll need to make an appointment tomorrow at the student health clinic on the premises. Not the ideal place to get checked out, but it's easy to access and almost no other students use it—for the obvious reason of not wanting to be seen in there—which means I can get everything done on the spot.

But that's a worry for later.

I check the kitchen bench for a note but there's nothing, just smudges of blood left behind on the table and floor.

My fingers find the injury on my thigh and prod at it, checking to see how much it hurts. While a boy I barely know treated my flesh like a smorgasbord, my father went out. Probably taking out the first part of a loan to replace the one I just used my body to pay back.

It's a disease. It's not his fault.

It's the same rebuttal from my brain that I'm used to but this time it leaves a foul taste in my mouth. If it's his disease, why did I have to swallow the bitter medicine?

The tears threaten again but I sniff them back, a surge of anger burning off the last of them.

I go to bed, grateful to be done with the day.

CHAPTER EIGHT

LOCK

WHEN I WAKE, my mouth is wide open. My tongue is dry as paper, dry enough to make a clicking sound when I tap it. I push off the covers, then stumble into the bathroom and scull a glass of water, then another, my heart pounding in my chest and splinters from the light overhead stabbing my eyes.

It's only when I stumble back to bed that I realise it's missing a second occupant. A soft echo from earlier in the evening slips into my head, a girl sobbing. Nothing new there, but the tears being happy ones were a change. The utter gratitude something I've never experienced before.

Kari's been good for improving my tongue action, but she's never wept when I made her come.

I wouldn't mind experiencing it again—right now—but have no idea where George is hiding out.

There's a three second tussle where I fight myself over the urge to just tumble back into bed and try to sleep my impending hangover into submission, or go trawling through the house, discovering where the girl's hidden herself.

She can't have gone far. The remnants of her dress are on the floor, looking forlorn now I've sliced and diced it. And that after I told her she

could keep the stuff. Not the actions of a grateful host.

My shirt is missing. I stand in the middle of the room, staring at the door, rubbing my hand across my abdomen.

But it's not really a choice. I have to go after her. Even if I wasn't keen on trapping her in some room and banging her brains out against the wall, I need to make sure she isn't bumping into the wrong someone within these halls. My father would make short work of her, and I don't want to piece together the spoils after he's had a turn.

From experience, there won't be a lot left.

The thought makes me wince, and another immediately chases it—*harden up*. My mind helpfully channels my father's voice for full effect. It's like a mental slap.

I retrieve my trousers from the hamper and step into them, then peer out the door at the dark, silent house as I try to work out where she would have gone. The kitchen seems like the best bet.

Keeping my ear cocked for any sound, I head downstairs, cutting through the dining room to reach the kitchen. No one there.

Where else?

She liked all the art shit on the walls. It could be she's taking an extended tour while everyone's asleep.

I enter the study, relaxing when I see the fire. "Hey," I call out, so she'll know it's someone friendly.

Except the person who responds is Patrick, who turns his chair, showing the wide grin that means he's been stirring the pot again.

"Are you looking for someone?"

My head throbs so hard all I want to do is throw back a measure of scotch and wait for it to retreat. "You seen George about?"

"Sure. Took her along to Creighton's so he could have a few hours of playtime. If you hurry, there might still be enough left for you to have another turn."

I'm halfway out of the room, fists clenched and inner monster raging, when I hear the note of humour underneath the words. Sure enough, when I turn back, Patrick's smirk has become even more insufferable.

"Have you seen her, really?"

"Yeah. She came in here all upset, wanting to leave. Since she was naked apart from a thin shirt and a pair of heels, I did the gentlemanly thing

and drove her home.” He waits a second, eyes pinned to mine with delight. “She was very, very appreciative.”

I’m halfway back to my room before I can draw in a full breath. I hate this fucking house and the people in it. The worst of whom might be my father, but my cousin comes a close second. So close, it’s like he’s trying to overtake the leader.

Back in my bedroom, I sip at another glass of water, tossing a few painkillers down my throat though it’ll need something a lot stronger than that to ward off trouble.

I slump onto the bed, staring miserably into the darkness as I imagine how much better it would have been if I’d woken and George was still here. How I could have slung my arm around her waist and dragged her closer. Nibbling at her neck, thrusting into her, waiting for the choked sounds of gratitude as I proved to her that last night wasn’t a fluke. That I could make her body sing whatever tune she needs whenever I want.

WHEN I WAKE FOR REAL, I’m running late. Too late for breakfast, even if my stomach was keen on the idea, which it certainly isn’t.

A shower does little to clear my head. Nor does the sight of Patrick’s smiling face when he joins me in the kitchen, scarfing down half the pot of coffee I made for myself.

“Need a lift?” he asks with enough cheer that I worry for the first time he wasn’t joking when he said George expressed her gratitude.

The man’s got little else to be happy about. Since my arrival on the scene, his irritation at dropping a place in the line of succession has been clear to see.

Between his dark wavy hair, firm jaw, ever-present stubble, and piercing blue eyes, I understand he’s attractive to women. He’s scrawnier than me but put him in a suit and the ladies all swoon. And the men.

I’m sure he’s lying. Almost sure. The niggle of doubt is enough to make my hangover symptoms worse.

“No,” I reply without bothering to elaborate on how I need my car and wouldn’t be seen dead in his.

“Sure? You’re probably still drunk from last night.”

“I am and I’m not.”

“It’s no trouble.”

I spin away from the dining room, already knowing that if I engage any longer, I’ll just get led down some rabbit hole with nothing good waiting at the other end.

Even clipping the speed limit, I’m running late for my first lesson. It’s English so I don’t have to pay much attention. Anton produces any of my required essays for the class, so I’m just here to coast and make sure the teacher doesn’t have any gripes about attendance. I think I actually fall asleep at one point, startling awake in a manner that would earn another kid a smatter of laughter but which for me, no one would dare.

Kari catches up with me between first and second period, escorting me from English to Chemistry, even though she’s not in either class.

“Need something?” I ask as we approach the lab room. “Or did you sort yourself out the same way I did?”

“By bottom feeding? No. Strange that.”

“That’s not the part of her I was eating, but if that’s what you’re into, I’m sure you can find someone to oblige.”

Her jawline hardens, eyes turning strangely flat. “My father wasn’t impressed by your display.”

“Really? Strange. He had all night to tell me that himself but decided to do it through the medium of his daughter.”

“Don’t do that,” she snaps. “You’re lucky I’m even speaking to you right now.”

“Doesn’t feel particularly lucky.”

She flashes a full glare at me for a second before remembering expressions cause lines and reverting to her typical emotional bankruptcy. “Aren’t you even going to apologise?”

“For filling in when my date inconveniently cancelled? No. Are you going to apologise for standing me up at the last minute?”

“Don’t be stupid. You deserved it.”

I let a smile spread my lips far wider than usual. “Yeah. I deserved a date who doesn’t spend every minute of the evening social climbing or inserting herself into other people’s good graces. George was a revelation.”

“You say that like it’s a bad thing to want others to think well of me. Why don’t you try being pleasant yourself for a change and see how it feels?”

“Seems like a lot of effort with little reward.”

The teacher walks by us, sending me a frown when I don't move into the classroom.

“Gotta go.”

She spits out a sarcastic laugh. “Because your schoolwork means so much to you.”

This morning it does. I have a surprise assignment for another kid in class and don't want to miss the opportunity, but she doesn't need to know that.

I put a finger to my temple in a miniature salute. “If you want to apologise and grovel your way back into my affections, you know where to find me.”

I walk away from her, not bothering to turn and check that her mouth is hanging open in fury at my lack of apology. What does she expect? If we were allowed free rein to date whoever we like, Kari would come well down the list.

She's beautiful. Cultured. Polished. Completely free from the burden of human emotion.

I can't imagine her coming apart in my arms like George did last night. Even during an orgasm, Kari's more concerned about how she looks than how she feels. Everything's staged.

Fair enough. I don't imagine it's easy for a girl to be raised in our fathers' world, but it's no fun for me, either.

My dad's warning echoes in my mind. I need to make up with her, make sure she lets Soren know I'm back to toeing the line.

But a day of fun at her expense surely isn't too much to ask. She's the one who started this mess, after all.

I push all thought of Kari out of my mind as I take my seat in class beside Calvin, one of the school's more studious geeks. Given the competition, that's saying something.

“Need a favour.”

His eyes cut across to me, staring for a long moment, then he shrugs. “Long as you're paying.”

“Of course.”

I take out the small plastic bag with one pill remaining. It didn't poison George but I'm still curious about what's in it. Her reaction to me forcing

her to take it means she didn't bring it along with her to guarantee a good time.

The moment my thoughts became less clouded by alcohol, I realised it was unlikely she brought the pills along with her at all. Tandi would have mentioned something, even in a quiet aside, if she discovered it while dressing her.

That means she got them from someone inside the house. If a staff member's handing out drugs at the mansion, I want to know who and I want to know exactly what.

Depending upon those answers, I might ask more important questions like how much and what else can you source because I'm also in search of a break and the usual avenues are hard to navigate when your dad owns the means and methods of supply for half the city.

It doesn't help that he's teetotal. For *everything*.

No wonder the bastard's so mean. He never gets a break from himself, and I can vouch for how horrendous it is to be stuck in his company.

"Soon as you can," I finish with, after giving Calvin his instructions.

While I'm slaying tasks, I text through to Alastair, a friend of mine who's good at sourcing things that are hard to find. I give him the brief description that George gave me of her mother's engagement ring and wedding band, along with the photo I took of her dad for my records.

It's probably stupid, but I like the idea of replacing them and handing the jewellery back to her. She won't ever have to know they were gone, though sparing her father his rightful wad of guilt pains me.

Even before deciding she could be a last-minute fill-in for my date, the sight of that empty box tugged at a sympathetic nerve that, if asked, I would have sworn was long dead. To make her whole, give her a piece of her mother back, feels like a good use of my time.

Especially, if she's grateful.

I bet a grateful George is even more amenable to being touched than an indebted one. I bet a grateful George would be happy to, as my dad said, *be discreet*.

The jewellery will be a pain to find if it can even be done, but Alastair is my guy because he doesn't share those concerns with his customers. He gives me a thumbs up and a cash emoji, leaving me free to go about the rest of my day.

If only everyone in my life was that easy to manage.

After second period, there's a fifteen-minute break between our next classes. Not enough time to run back to my room and grab a nap, though that's what I want most in the world.

I sit outside the maths block, crunching on a couple more paracetamol while a few guys chatter about the winter ball coming up next month.

Last year, it had been a much bigger deal. There'd been some elaborate invitations, the results filmed and uploaded. Mostly by the askee but with one memorable declinature, it'd been uploaded by a parade of gleeful observers instead.

This year, the faculty has specifically requested we not do that. Part of me wants to kick up against the order, but most of me is relieved.

For the previous invite, I paid for some kid to write a poem and set up Kari's locker to look all fancy. Rose petals, champagne, gold letters on the invitation. She'd jumped up and down, all excited, like I had any choice but to ask her. But back then, we were still playing the game. Pretending that a relationship was exactly what we wanted.

If I asked her tomorrow, I have no idea of the response I'd get.

Ask her today and I might as well wipe the egg straight on my face.

I stare into the middle distance, too tired to bother focusing. A girl walks past, shoulders hunched over her phone like your typical nerd. My eyes glance over her, then return with a snap.

It's George.

The fuck?

I glance down, head pounding so badly my vision wavers. When I look up again, she's disappearing into the maths block and I get up to follow her inside, mind spinning, trying to think of a reason she'd be here.

She lives in Linwood for Christ's sake. There's no way she goes to this school. She must be here for me, and I don't know why.

The school is laid out in blocks, designated by subject, although some classes get shoved into whatever space will hold them, not finding any natural fit. The central buildings—administration, mathematics, science, English—are in stone; large bricks carved into shape rather than moulded. They're the original school, the date stone proudly displaying the year 1892.

The newer buildings—the gymnasium, arts and humanities, languages, student housing—are steel, concrete, and glass, broken up by wood panelling to stop it looking quite so prison-lite.

At the rear of the school are large playing fields, netball courts, a running track, and a grass tennis court that's unusable for a good third of the year. At the entrance, near where I'm sitting, is the carpark, providing another layer between the buildings and the six-foot-high security gate that runs parallel to the road, and a large, landscaped quad with clusters of seating for students to have their lunch or just lurk, catching up with the gossip of the day.

I follow her at a distance through the double pneumatic doors, blinking in the dark corridor. Inside the hallways, the only lighting comes from weak overhead fluorescents and the slit windows in the recessed cloakrooms, two of which are spaced inside each block. The floor is covered with panels of light grey linoleum to reflect and amplify the internal light, but it's not enough.

Inside these old buildings, it's always overcast, no matter how sunny the day.

Even after my eyes adjust for a few seconds, I can't see her. A few other students are milling about in the long halls, but they're lower years, all wearing uniform.

I have enough time to wonder if I conjured her up via wishful thinking, then movement snags my eye, dark blonde hairs poking out from the nearest cloakroom. Our eyes meet and hers open wide, then her entire head ducks back out of sight.

Too late.

"Caught you," I say, sprinting close enough that I can grab her wrist, tugging her forward. She falls into me, using her other hand to catch herself, landing squarely in the middle of my chest.

Her eyes stare up at me, bigger and greener in person than in my hungover memory. Her hair retains the shine from the stylists, though it looks three shades darker now it's pulled back in a plain supermarket elastic.

Ratty jeans and an overlong hoodie swallow up George's petite body. Despite the baggy covering, my mind helpfully supplies the details of what's hiding underneath.

She wears a light scarf and I know it's hiding the marks I left on her throat. I wonder where else she bears the bruises from last night. If the marks from my teeth are still visible on her breasts, her belly, her thigh.

If my cum is still dripping out from inside her.

I shake my head, snapping back to business. “What’re you doing here?”

“Um...” She snatches her hand away and I back her against the corridor wall, hand pressing her shoulder to pin her in place. George’s eyes want to be anywhere but looking into mine, darting to examine the ceiling, the hanging coats, the short benches, the passing students, the panelled floor. “Waiting for class?”

“Right. ‘Cause you go to Kingswood.”

My voice is sarcastic, but she nods, and it gives me pause. For someone who came into the school to visit me, she’s not exactly eager. Every cell in her body strains away from mine.

Some of that’s because I’m hulking over her, using my size to intimidate her the way I’ve been trained. I fall back half a step, releasing her shoulder. There’s a strange tick in my throat when she massages it and I make a mental note to be more careful. She’s so tiny, I don’t want to hurt her by accident.

Her answer is a whisper so soft I can barely hear it. “Yeah, I go here. Is that a p-problem?”

“The girl whose father can’t pay his gambling debts goes to the most expensive private school in the city?”

“I’m a day student.”

And sure, that chops the bill down some but there’s no way it makes it affordable. Half of too fucking expensive is still more than anyone in her situation can pay.

I take another step back, scouring her expressions and body language, trying to work out her game. There must be something. No one would show up and look this miserable by choice.

Patrick is my guess. He drove her home. I wonder if he set her up to have some fun at my expense. I hope not. It’ll damage her a lot more than it will either of us.

“What do you want?”

“I...?” She swallows and frowns up at me. Without her heels, she’s a full foot shorter. The disparity makes me feel like a giant. “I don’t know what you mean.”

“Why did you turn up today?”

If it’s an attempt to drive a wedge between me and Kari, good luck. We’re already standing so far apart that you could throw a thousand-year-old kauri tree trunk between us and never touch the sides.

Maybe it's to piss off Dad. Never in the best mood, he hadn't appreciated my date last night. I imagine his face if I bought her home again and have to bite my lips to hide the smile.

It would go down like a cup of cold sick. A delicious treat from my viewpoint but he'd make me pay.

Properly, too. Not like last night's ten minutes of yelling and posturing before he dismissed me from his sight like I'm a two-year-old child.

George stares regretfully at the floor, lower lip pouting so it looks fatter than her top lip even though the reverse is true.

I remember the sensation of it between my teeth, the way it swelled afterwards like she'd been stung. The skin so thin, I could taste the blood flowing beneath the surface.

Reaching out, I hold her chin and rub my thumb over her lower lip until she pulls away, ducking her head down again to stare at the floor.

"George," I say in my softest voice. "Why are you here?"

"I told you." She folds her arms tightly over her chest. "This is my school, too."

Cameron Wallis, from my English class, chooses that moment to waltz by.

"Hey," I call out to him, flicking two fingers to gesture him closer. "You recognise this girl?"

His gaze flicks from me to George then back to me again, and he gives a tentative nod. "Yeah. Georgina, isn't it? She's in my history class."

"*This* girl?"

He nods again, the hesitation more evident this time. Convincing me far more easily that he's right.

Which brings up some new questions. Such as if she's not paying who is?

"How the fuck can you afford—?" I break off as the pieces fit together. "You got the golden ticket." The nickname for the singular scholarship the school awards each year.

She whispers, "Yes," as though my statement was a question.

Cameron looks nervous, switching his weight from one foot to the other. "You two know each other?"

"That'll be all." I wave him away, not breaking my concentration on George for a second. He leaves immediately, footsteps pounding as he runs along the hall. "Why have I never seen you here before?"

She gives a cute little snort, tossing her head back so her hair falls away from her eyes. "Because you don't pay any attention to the plebs?"

My smile pays a visit again. "Sounds about right. You been going here long?"

"Three months give or take." She shuffles her feet. "We were up in Auckland before that."

"Under what name?"

Her hand flutters up to rub at her forehead as she clenches her shoulders in what barely counts as a shrug. "Does it matter?"

"Only if you're trying to kill my father."

"Ah." She scrunches her nose. "Where do I join the queue for that?"

"I wouldn't bother. It already stretches around the block."

She changes position, putting her hands on the wall behind her butt and leaning her upper body slightly forward. Enough for me to have a clear view down her hoodie to see her bra.

I look because why else would she be flashing me? But when she follows my gaze, she straightens, cutting off the view.

Not wanting to be pegged for a perve, I wave at her clothing.

The worn jeans aren't that way because of a carefully thought-out design. They're ripped, material thinning at the knees in a way that sends my mind to crawl in the gutter. Her top isn't much better, the lettering cracked and faded from a thousand washes until I struggle to read the logo.

"Is this what all the plebs wear these days or is it a special occasion?"

"Oh, sorry." She shrugs her shoulders, gaze creeping the length of my body. Like I give a shit what she thinks about my clothes, but it's cute to watch her watching me, eyes drinking their fill. "Left my ruby encrusted ball gown in my other corvette."

"Yeah, I get that." I lean closer to her, resting my right forearm on the wall above her head, plucking at her strings of her top with my left hand, tightening the hood. "It's a pain when you forget which car you drove."

"Or where you parked it," she says, rolling her eyes. "Is it at my country mansion or my inner-city apartment?"

"A brain box like you should be able to figure it out."

She flashes a brighter smile. "Is that what I am?"

"Shit, yeah. I barely scrape through the classes even with help and here you are, winning scholarships."

“The first guy to win passed it up.” She gives a bashful shrug. “I was a last-minute replacement.”

“Right, I didn’t realise. Obviously, placing second in the country is just your average, run-of-the-mill achievement. Lucky you’ve still got your looks, then.”

“Well, I don’t like to toot my own horn.” She tilts her head, glancing up at me from the side, fluttering her lashes, the scant light in the cloakroom fading out any imperfections so she looks like a tempting ingenue.

“Toot anything you like,” I tease her, pushing away from the wall to pump my biceps, enjoying the hunger in her gaze a second before she glances at an approaching pupil. Her eyes widen and she abruptly straightens, folding her arms over her chest.

“Lock?” Kari stands a few metres away, flanking me. Her voice is somehow both shrill and deathly low. “Would you like to introduce us?”

Be discreet.

How the fuck can I be discreet when she goes to the same school?

With growing reluctance, I understand I’ll need to back away. At least until I think it through. My father’s track record means my life is quite literally on the line.

“No.” I step back, aware of my surroundings again. Aware of my place. To George, I say, “Maybe stay out of my orbit from now on, yeah?”

I suppose it shouldn’t hurt that she eagerly agrees and slips a few steps to the side, looking to me for permission, then turning and walking swiftly along the hall when I nod.

With her instinctive nose for trouble, Kari sends me a scolding glare that suggests she’ll deal with me later, then hightails it after George.

I briefly consider going after them to forestall any nastiness, but don’t. Kari might gnash her teeth and issue a few threats, but she’s not a real danger to George. Not unless I tell her she can be. Bless the patriarchy.

It shouldn’t hurt that the girl can’t wait to get away from me. As she succinctly pointed out, she’s a pleb. Not worthy of drawing my attention.

It shouldn’t hurt.

CHAPTER NINE

GEORGE

MY BODY IS a tangle of mixed signals as I escape along the corridor. This morning, trying to force down a few bites of stale bread and call it breakfast, I thought if I bumped into Lachlan, I'd scream for help. I'd fight to get away. I'd turn and run for the nearest teacher.

Instead, I ducked inside, failed miserably at hiding in the cloakroom, and practically guaranteed the confrontation would happen when we were alone.

A failure of such epic proportions, I deserve a special merit badge.

Then—and I hate to admit this even to myself—I flirted. I smiled. I *bantered*. Not much and awkward as hell the whole time but I put in the effort. All my fear falling away in my bizarre attempt to attract him.

Like instead of wishing I never had to see him again, I wanted him to ask me out.

I need my head examined. The bite mark on my thigh itches and I rub it without thinking.

While standing in front of him, all my fear went away. The moment I leave, it floods back, twice as strong.

“Wait up,” Kari calls out from behind me.

That sounds like a terrible idea.

My stride immediately lengthens, but I soon reverse that decision and obey. Kingswood isn't large enough to avoid her for long and I'm already trembling from the unexpected encounter with Lachlan. To have his girlfriend chase me around the school grounds isn't ideal. My nerves are shattered enough without a stalker sending my internal drama alert system into overdrive.

I pull up after walking outside through the double doors, holding the left one open so she can walk straight through. "Yeah?"

She doesn't speak, instead using the opportunity to give me a thorough once-over.

"Would you like a picture instead?" I ask in a voice made ten times snarkier through my still-mounting anxiety.

"Thanks to Lock, I've got all the photos of you I'll ever need."

Kari tilts her head as her words stab a shard of pure anxiety through my centre. *Photos? What photos?* At what point of the evening had he decided to take photos? My brain fizzles like an early morning Berocca.

"You know who I am, right?"

I nod, scratching at my thigh, my mind more occupied with the thought of what Lachlan might have captured on camera than it is about stroking his girlfriend's ego. Still, when my gesture doesn't appear to satisfy her, I say, "Yes."

"And who is that?"

The bell for end-of-break goes and I turn toward my next class, but Kari reaches out, pinching the sleeve of my hoodie between her fingers to hold me back. I sigh and turn back to her. "You're Kari Abercrombie. Your dad works with Creighton McManus."

She calmly stares at me, perfect from head to toe. Her hair is casually styled, the long dark curls falling artfully over her right shoulder, pulled across from the left side.

I could spend thousands on clothing and never get it to look as simplistically elegant as hers. From the polished two-tone shoes with their mid-height heel to the cashmere scarf looped around her neck, there's nothing out of place.

Standing next to her with my three hours sleep, dollar store makeup, and my hair scraped back into a ponytail because I just couldn't this morning—*really* just couldn't—I must look like a different species. A thoroughbred mare standing next to a wart encrusted toad.

No wonder she and Lachlan are a thing. I bet he'd never dare to leave a bite mark on her toned body.

My head snaps down and I close my eyes, breathing in through my nose and trying to hold it. Desperate to abort my panic attack before it arrives.

I don't know whether to poke and prod at the fragile memories, to see if they bring up more than they have already, or leave them alone, safer with blankness than I might be with whatever images it could scrape together.

"And...?"

The sharp note that enters Kari's voice tells me what she wants me to say. "And you're going out with Lachlan McManus."

She steps closer to me, ignoring the students as they push past us, clumsy in their haste to get to class before second bell.

"I'm going out with Lachlan. That's right. And what did you do last night?"

I flirt briefly with telling her the truth. That I don't know. Not fully. That there's a big scary gap in my evening and I don't know if I ever want to fill it with the memory. Because what else is my forgetting but an attempt to protect myself? To stop myself from getting stuck in last night, stuck to the point I never move on. Never shake free of it.

The big scary blank space might be the only way I can go back to my normal life.

"If you have a problem with how your boyfriend treats you, maybe take it up with him. I don't owe you anything." I turn aside, my pulse racing so fast that I feel good. I feel *pumped*. I could run to the moon and back without needing to draw breath.

Then she grabs hold of my ponytail and twists me back around to face her. After being dragged from under the bed yesterday, my scalp already tingles with pain. Now it screams.

The milling students have disappeared, even the stragglers. Not that any of them would pitch in to help me and certainly not against Kari.

She uses the grip on my hair to manoeuvre me nearer, her eyes so close to mine my personal space beacon jammers at top volume inside my head.

For the first time it occurs to me that this unsettling girl, the one who stood up Lachlan on a whim, could present a larger danger to me than the rest of the McManus men put together.

"You knew I'm with Lachlan, but you still went out with him, didn't you? Who does that?"

Someone who doesn't have an option. What the hell else is she thinking? That I wanted to go? I pull her fingers off my hair and shove myself back, out of her clutches.

"I know how it happened," she says in a quieter voice. "You just happened to be near when Lock decided he needed a date, so he grabbed hold of you. I understand what he's like."

Does she? The daggers of blame in her eyes tell me another thing entirely, but I react to her words. "I didn't have a choice."

Her answer is low and vicious, face pushing close to mine, so her breath puffs against my face. "You had a choice. You could do what Lock told you or turn him down and take the consequences." The harsh glint in her eye captures my attention, mesmerising. "Next time, take the consequences. Understand me?"

I nod. The concept is straightforward. The application might prove a little more troublesome.

"This is your one free pass. If anything like this happens again, I'll come after you." Her enormous eyes blink, changing colour briefly in the sunlight before returning to their unsettling grey. "Whatever threat Lock issues, you'll get double from me if you accept."

I believe the traditional version is simpler.

Damned if I do. Damned if I don't.

THE MOMENT CLASS lets out for lunch, I scurry to hide in my favourite spot behind the gymnasium. There's a bench back there, situated under the large fans connected to the air-conditioning unit for the enormous pavilion.

It's loud, sometimes steamy, and smells like someone should think about changing the water because each breath probably contains a generous helping of Legionnaires' disease.

The chief attraction for me is that those adverse effects mean no one else ever sits there. Except, as I round the corner, a boy is already occupying the bench seat.

My shoulders tense, expecting trouble, then relax as I recognise him from the day before. The person who finally deigned to speak to me

(voluntarily, class doesn't count) and whose presence made me smile on the way home. Before I got to the door. Before I saw the drops of blood.

I nod to him as I walk closer. He's seated right in the middle of the bench so whichever side I choose, I'll be close to him.

"Hey," he calls out, shielding his face from the sun. As summer secedes to autumn, the lowering angle causes blindness even though the rays are growing weaker. "Glad to see you again. I worried that after saying hi yesterday, you'd never come back."

I laugh nervously and take a seat to his right. It's the side nearest to the fan but it's also closest to the school if I need to jump and run. Not that this boy looks the slightest bit menacing.

The moment I'm seated, I don't know what to say, so I take out my packed lunch. A sandwich, my drink bottle, an apple, a twin pack of biscuits. The same lunch I've packed for me and my father for years, except he gets double everything except the drink.

"Saw you had a fun time last night," the boy says, wagging his phone as though that's meant to mean something. "Your pictures are all over the socials."

My throat clutches mid-bite and I stare at him in horror, packing away the rest of my lunch as my appetite flees the scene. "What p-pictures?"

The bruise on my thigh leaps into my mind first, followed by the strange marks on my neck, currently covered with a thin scarf that has me thanking the stars that it's cold enough to go unremarked upon.

"Tell me your name and I'll show you."

His mouth curls in a teasing smile and my anxiety dissipates. The boy's face looks ruddy cheeked and freckled, like he stepped off a farm this morning. His light brown hair is cut short at the back, but his fringe is long enough to fall over one eye, adding a level of tousled attractiveness that he doesn't seem fully aware of.

Yesterday, I'd been looking forward to seeing him today. Before the disastrous arrival home to find my plans for the night had abruptly changed.

Now, I recall exactly why as his brown eyes turn as warm as hot cocoa. The rest of him looks equally good to curl up with on chilly nights.

"I'm George."

He holds out a hand and I shake it, my fingers instantly lost in his huge grip. "I'm Keanen. Scoot over and I'll show you."

I'm already close but I obediently shuffle half an inch along the bench until I feel the heat of his thigh against mine, even through the thickness of my jeans. He curls an arm around my waist, not really touching, just to hold the phone steady with both hands so I can easily see the screen.

Lachlan's account.

Keanen clicks on the top image and swipes across the full gallery. The last of my anxiety slips away as I see they're perfectly tame. Me in the nice frock and Lachlan in his suit. An innocent collection of selfies. The most scandalous thing is the neckline of the dress, and even that's demure, thanks to my flatter than flat chest.

Your tits are the perfect size for my hand.

I jerk, knocking against Keanen's arm and he twists his neck to look at me. "You okay?"

Nobody has ever called my tits perfect before. My last boyfriend had made a disappointed sigh every time I unclasped my padded bra, making my cleavage disappear.

I nod in response to Keanen's question, not trusting my voice and he continues through the parade of pictures, reversing back to the beginning each time he gets to the end.

Then, halfway through the next cycle, his screen freezes, a refresh circle spins slowly, and he's returned to his feed.

"Weird." He clicks into Lachlan's account again, but the photo array is gone. "Guess his other girlfriend found them, huh?"

I roll my eyes at his friendly laughter. "I'm not his girlfriend."

"Other woman?"

"I filled in for a night because he didn't want to be embarrassed in front of his family," I explain, then immediately think that perhaps I should keep my lips buttoned. Creighton's family events probably aren't something he wants discussed outside the house. I don't want to betray a secret accidentally just because I'm a socially awkward babbler.

Keanen holds my eye as he asks, "So, you're not together?"

I shake my head.

"Do you have a boyfriend?"

My mind flicks back to the closest person who qualifies. The ex that I didn't break up with because I was too chicken. The one reason I was glad to run with my dad, leaving everything familiar behind.

The bite mark itches again, like Lachlan couldn't stand me to think of another boy and reclaimed my focus. I'm tickled by the idea that even his bruises want to be the centre of attention.

He assaulted you. Don't smile when you think of him.

My expression falters and there's enough time to see a flash of disappointment in Keanen's eyes before I answer, "No. There's no one like that." I hesitate a second, then add, "I only moved here a few months ago and haven't really made any friends."

He withdraws his arm, checking a few things on his phone before sliding it back into his pocket.

I think he's about to leave, so blurt, "What about you? Why're you hiding out the back of the gym this week?"

He gives a casual shrug, then nudges me with his elbow. "You're not the only one finding it tough to make friends in this place. I swear, the entire student body seems to have known one another since primary."

"Yeah." I join in with his chuckle, a knot in my chest loosening with relief. He gets it. I thought my mind was playing tricks on me, but this boy sees it too. The way everyone in Kingswood seems to belong, except me.

Except *us*.

"Hey, this isn't a come-on or anything, but did you see the notices around school about the dance?"

"The winter formal?" There are so many, it looks like the place was hit by a gang of flyposters overnight. I wrinkle my nose as I give a rueful smile. "Yeah, I might have seen something about it."

"You want to go?" His posture tightens as he asks and I tip my face forward as I try to think of the right answer. "It's okay if you don't. You don't have to worry about saying no."

"No, it's not that..." My mind is a jumble of dates and rosters and minimum wage. "I'd like to go but my job—"

"Sure. No problem."

"I'm trying to convince my boss to give me extra hours, so I don't—"

Keanen holds up a hand. "It's okay. You don't need to explain. We'd only be going as friends, anyway, right?"

And it's that declaration that tips me in the opposite direction to where I was heading. A friend is far more attractive than getting an extra shift at work. In the grand scheme of things, it's probably far more important to my mental health, too.

The last three months have been so lonely.

“No, you’re right. It’ll be more fun to go together. Of course, I’ll go with you.”

“Yeah?” His eyes light up and he shifts posture, angling farther towards me. “Fantastic. It’s a friend date.”

THE LUNCHTIME CHAT banishes the unpleasant remnants from that morning—the hassles lost under the pleasant buzz of our fledgling friendship. The threats from Kari, dismissed. Bumping into Lachlan, forgotten.

A warm Keanen hangover spills into the rest of my day. After school, I go home, even though my shift starts so early there really isn’t time. But my father didn’t show his face this morning and I want to see him, make sure he’s okay.

I also want to know he’s talked to his sponsor. If he hasn’t, I’ll be ringing him. Whatever else happens, there’s no way I’m paying a debt for my father, ever again. I wouldn’t, even without Kari’s threat.

The journey is wasted. He’s not there.

It fits the pattern I’ve seen before. Embarrassed by his behaviour and the consequences, he’ll spend more time away from home. Even if he has the best intentions, and I know he does, temptation will surround him.

Most of the time, he catches himself before he falls too far, wrestling his demons into temporary submission to become the father I cherish.

I could wait here for him, lose my meagre income in the effort to catch him when he pops home—to change, to shower, to grab a power nap—and reassure him he doesn’t need to avoid me; I’d rather have him here.

But the job was hard enough to find once, twice might push my luck. And if he doesn’t show at all, it’ll be for nothing.

I’m too tired to think any further than that. Too tired to worry about him out in the world, pissing off the wrong people, maybe earning himself more than threats, more than a beating this time.

Since I’m home, I change into my grubbiest outfit for the upcoming six-hour shift at the restaurant. There’s a gap in my wardrobe and I stare at it for a long time before I remember what’s missing.

The clothing I wore yesterday. I changed in the department store but can't remember what happened to them after that.

A pity, the pair of jeans was my best and although the blouse had a small tear in the side seam, it was easily covered. I add getting replacements onto a mental list that never seems to grow shorter, no matter how many items I tick off, and leave the house ten minutes after entering.

My eyes automatically check the top step as I pass but it's clean now. The rain of the night before must have washed the blood away.

I'm four hours into my shift before I get a break. Unlike half the kitchen, I don't smoke but still duck into the alleyway out the back, avoiding the stench circle around the rubbish skips to lean against the fence and breathe in gulps of the fresh night air.

Out here it's cold, already single digits and probably heading lower overnight. Compared to the heat of the kitchen, it's a gift. After a few minutes, I'll probably change my mind, but for right now it's heavenly.

A door from the back end of the pub opposite opens, a man shouldering it while he carries two large rubbish bags, one in each hand. He kicks a wedge in to hold the door, then walks across to our skip. Given my employment, I should probably call him out on the territory breach, but I'd rather mind my business and use my break to get an actual break.

Still, he probably deserves it when the universe teaches him a lesson by making the wedge slip, sending it skidding out the side as the pneumatic hinge on the door drags it closed.

"Damn it," the unfortunate yells, then notices me for the first time. I pretend a sudden interest in the cracked concrete underfoot, though I monitor the impromptu soap opera from under my lashes.

He stands with his hands on his hips, staring at the shut door with a grumpy expression. Given the state of his uniform, even dirtier than mine, going through the front door won't earn him any favours from management. He tugs at the handle on the off chance, kicking the door when it stays resolutely shut.

With a quick spin of his heel, he heads straight towards me, stopping two metres distant. "Got a phone I could borrow?"

"Yeah." I walk it over to him, deciding I can afford the increased threat level more easily than I can afford to replace my phone if I toss it and he fumbles the catch.

“Cheers.” He taps in the number from memory, then exchanges a short set of instructions with the person answering. “Here you go,” he says, handing the phone back to me. “Thanks.” He offers a crooked smile, then saunters towards the door, arriving just as it opens.

The man inside makes an elaborate show of holding the door open and waving the worker inside, then glances across to me and I freeze.

It’s Patrick.

I hold my breath and duck my head low, checking from my peripheral vision to see what he’s doing. I hope he’s heading back inside when he turns but he’s just kicking the wedge into place. It skids a little then holds, probably intimidated into it. I remember his teasing in the library. The abrupt change in personality when he recognised my distress counts in his favour, but it hasn’t entirely wiped out the earlier impression.

He tests the door, then heads straight towards me. I want to duck inside, get back to the job that I couldn’t wait to escape a few minutes earlier.

I also don’t want to do anything so embarrassing as to scuttle away like a scared child, even if that’s what I feel like.

“George?”

With a sigh, I raise my eyes to his and nod. “Hey, there.”

“You work around here or are you just a girl who likes to hang out in dark alleys?”

“A dark alley crammed with rotting food,” I retort, sweeping my arm to encompass the rubbish skip. “You’re pasting over the best features.”

He laughs along with me, but his eyes never leave my face. They’re like mobile scanners, running their infrared lasers over me, searching for information.

I nod my head back towards the building he came from. “Do you work at the bar?”

He pulls a face. “Hardly. I own it so according to every other staff member I barely do a thing and certainly nothing they couldn’t do a thousand times better.”

“Sounds about right. I may just be a humble dish washer, but I’m fairly sure I could run my place, too.”

“I’ll have to remember that if I ever need to hire a replacement.”

I burst out laughing. “Double my salary and I’ll take over right now.”

“Such a kind offer but I think I’ve got a few years left in me, yet.” He spins on his heels, checking the open door is still open. When he faces me

again, his expression is far more sober. “Do you want to talk about last night?”

My face must give him the answer before I’ve decided what it is because he gives a soft laugh. “That bad, is it?”

“It’s not...” I cup my elbows, leaning back against the fence just so I can feel the reassuring solidity. “There’s a lot I can’t remember,” I admit, shamefacedly.

“You weren’t drinking.”

“No.”

Something sparks in my memory. *Take the pill.* I blink fast, frowning into the darkness. Is that a clue to why my recollections are toast? It’s a pity Lachlan deleted the images because they might have helped spark more.

You don’t want to know more.

“Look,” Patrick shifts his weight, appearing unsure of himself for the first time. Considering his family, it could be the first time ever. “I just wanted to say I know my joke was in poor taste.”

I have no response. He might call it a joke, but it didn’t hit that way, not for me.

“McManus men just aren’t into sharing. It’s a complete and utter lie.”

The light tone wriggles past my defences to tickle my funny bone. “Oh, that’s the punchline, is it? That anyone would think one of your family members could share a woman? Next time signpost it a bit more clearly, will you?”

“Well, it was in poor taste...”

“And at entirely the wrong time...”

“What can I say?” He spreads his hands wide. “I’m not a comedian.”

“Louder for the ones in back.” The laughter is such a relief that even once it stops, I’m left with an absurdly large grin on my face.

“I will say, though,” Patrick drawls, stepping into my personal space with such surety that I’m dominated by the slight change in posture. “If Lock is ever in the mood for sharing”—he drops his head so the next line whispers straight into my ear—“feel free to give me a call.” He lifts the corner of my fringe, just enough to reveal my startled eyes.

Then he strolls away, whistling.

A chill trickles down my spine, collides with the heat pulsing between my legs, and everything down south gets a bit suspect. I hustle back into the

restaurant kitchen, my mind so dazed that I wonder if it's a routine side effect of spending time with any of the McManus men.

Inside, my phone beeps with a new message. It's a photograph of me flashing a smile a mile wide and Lachlan with his arm thrown around my shoulder, wearing an expression close to adoration as he stares at me.

I can remember the weight of his arm, heavier because the alcohol consumption ruined his balance, and he was already off kilter from raising his arm to snap the image.

"Kari made me take these down, but this is my favourite."

It's a wonderful photo. I zoom in closer on our faces, amazed how carefree I appear just hours after I came home to find my dad bleeding. The trauma of that moment pushed aside by the excitement of the clothes, the makeover, the fast car, the fancy art.

We look like a joyful couple, not a care in the world.

I don't understand the point of him sending it to me. Is it a warning? A reminder?

It could be just what he says it is; a snap he's sharing because he likes it. Out of the choices available that seems the least likely option.

Perhaps it's just to point out he knows my number. The text equivalent of 'I know where you live,' a thought that reminds me he knows my address, too. My thumb slowly brushes over his face on the screen, astonished at how perfect he is. I can't remember noticing last night, there were a thousand other things to look at.

Look at how pretty you are.

I click the phone off, shoving it in my pocket so hard it strains the seams, heat flushing my cheeks until they must be crimson. Whatever the point, whatever happened last night, it's over.

Time to get back to the real world.

CHAPTER TEN

LOCK

TEN DAYS LATER, my eyes follow George as she scuttles past, determined to get out of my line of sight before any repercussions follow. Such an obedient girl, it makes my prick stir.

She meets up with a guy, another student new to the school this year. He tried out for the rugby team, but coach abruptly abandoned it. Not because he wasn't good but because there was some messy incident at his last school.

Messy enough to land him here. Locked up tight with all the other rich kids whose parents want somebody to monitor them. Anybody, just so long as the task doesn't fall to them.

They're friends. So what?

He puts a hand on the small of her back as they turn the corner and my vision clouds with red. That's taking a fucking liberty for a friend.

My hands curl into fists, staring at the spot where they disappeared from view for far too long, gory images dancing in my brain.

"Lock?" Kari slaps my leg. "I asked for the soda."

I grab it from the seat beside me and pass it over, trying to force my attention back where it should be. After our brief hiatus, Kari and I are back together. Who knew a few posts could inspire such a level of devotion?

In the days since, she hasn't left me alone. I can see her claws lengthening whenever George appears in view—thankfully something she does so infrequently that she must be doing her best to stay out of our way.

For my part, I sling my arm over her like Kari's a precious possession. Enough for anyone to see that we're a couple. That's all it is. A performance for other people to see.

I don't mind the posturing. I'm even hopeful enough of it makes it through to my father for him to keep off my back at our next scheduled visit. Not that there are any of those clouds looming on the horizon.

Behind the scenes, Kari made a few other overtures. Something about a day surgery repair that can make her appear intact, even if she's not.

The whole thing makes me grateful not to be female while also giving me the ick so bad, I've turned aside all her private advances. Even when she offered to blow me again on the regular.

I don't want her well-practised hands touching me, her mouth just going through the motions to get it done, get it over with.

None of that is what I desire.

I crave genuine interaction. A girl who touches me with spontaneity, crushes the bones in my hand to paste she holds on that tightly, who makes me feel like I'm the only person tethering her to the world.

To placate her, I told Kari it doesn't matter. I'm happy to wait. Whatever blah blah blah she needed to hear out of my mouth before she backed off, content that even if I wasn't getting it with her, I'm also not getting it elsewhere.

Like my celibacy is some weird prize.

"Here," Alastair says, slipping a box into my hand. "I've sent you the invoice."

The rings. I'd forgotten. "They're the right ones?"

He pulls out his phone and touches it against mine, sending through a video. I play the footage, nodding. It shows George's dad at the counter, waiting while the attendant weighs the jewellery before taking it out the back for the resident expert to assess the gemstone.

The whole transaction takes less than three minutes.

I open his email and send Alastair the payment. The jewellery is worth less than his time but hopefully it'll put a smile on George's face to get them back.

A message arrives while I stare at the screen. This one from Menzies.

“MC debt is still outstanding. Can you authorise payment?”

It takes a second to remember. The party. The background check. Menzies had found an outstanding debt that a gang wanted George held as collateral for. I said I’d wipe it.

Usually, that would mean the entire thing got sorted without me needing to take any further action.

I click further into the message, frowning as I see he wants me to fund it from my private account. My dad’s sitting on tens of millions in his day-to-day account, but he wants *me* to pay it.

What the fuck?

I sign off on the message, rubbing my eyebrow when it twitches, a sign of too much caffeine and too little sleep.

The money comes from my father either way, no matter what account it comes from. For him to make me authorise the payment is just a way to yank on my chain.

I start to add up the total for my one night with George but shake my head. That’s how my father calculates everything in the world, like people are part of a profit-and-loss statement instead of human beings.

Still, a new debt paid. With the rings arriving into my hand the same day, it feels like kismet. Why else would the universe gift me a carrot and stick in tandem if it didn’t want me to take advantage of the opportunity?

Now my shock that she attends the same school has worn off, my mind sets to work, trying to coax out the possibilities. Her closeness is a blade that cuts both ways. So many more opportunities to be found out, sure, but also more opportunities to be together.

I could give her a key to my room, leave her to sneak in there during the afternoon, and be able to spend the entire night without raising any alarm bells.

When Kari goes on one of her weekend getaways, I could use George from Friday to Sunday, and nobody would ever need to know.

“Jesus, Lock,” Kari says, clapping a hand over her eyes and peeking between them at my burgeoning erection. “Put that away. There are children about.”

I adjust myself, then stand.

The school secretary gave me a copy of George’s schedule. I know her next lesson after lunch is history, and that’s right next to mine in the Arts and Humanities block.

There's still ten minutes before class. I send her a text, telling her where to meet me. Telling her I need to talk to her about her dad's debt.

A tick shows me she's seen it. Dots appear, then disappear again. It doesn't matter. I kiss Kari goodbye, making an excuse about collecting course work that she probably interprets as me going off to enjoy a quick wank, then slope off towards the block, excitement stirring in my abdomen.

Or maybe lower.

The corridor is empty as I stride along it, heading for the cloakroom situated midway between the two classrooms. The recessed space has lockers lining two of the walls with a low bench taking up the third.

I check my phone and there's still no message but the moment a frown of doubt appears, I see George cautiously push open the end door and my forehead relaxes.

Her expression is guarded as she walks towards me. I twist the jewellery box in my pocket then withdraw my hand, pushing away from the wall as George comes closer.

"What's the problem?" she asks, stopping a metre short.

"There's no problem. I just wanted to have a chat."

"Does Kari know you're here?"

Her face pinches as she asks, and I wonder what my so-called girlfriend has been saying to her behind my back.

"Sure," I say to ease her mind. "Listen, I really enjoyed the other night with you." I move closer, boxing her in so when she steps backwards it takes her farther into the cloakroom, trapping her in the corner.

I reach out to shift her fringe away from her face and she jerks back, hard, cracking her head on the wall behind her.

My hand freezes in mid-air when I see her eyes. They're wide. Frightened. She stares with her arms raised to block me rather than cupping her skull where she just hit it, even though the injury must hurt.

Something's wrong.

She seemed afraid last time, too, but I thought it was because I dragged her out of hiding and shoved her against the wall, deliberately intimidating. Now, I'm barely touching her.

Doubt unfurls in my chest, and I grab hold of it, twist it, wring its neck, and stomp it into the ground.

I don't second guess myself. I don't overthink things. I reach out for what I want, and I take it.

But the girl I want stares at me like she can see straight through the act. Can see my state house upbringing. The poverty shining through the cracks in my bright new status.

Like the wealth of the past eighteen months has rolled away, leaving me exposed.

I shake my head and the spike of doubt goes with it. I follow through on my earlier motion, watching her more closely than before, seeing the tremor run through her body, stilling when I touch her.

“There’s another debt your father owes,” I say, reaching for my most persuasive tool first. Wanting to guarantee her answer. “I thought you might want to get free of that one, too.”

“I don’t...” She shakes her head, staring down at the floor while struggling for the words to finish her thought. “No. It was...” Her body shudders as she swallows, then she juts her chin out, determined to finish. “It was one night. That’s what you said.”

“Sure, but this is a different debt. You can’t think I’ll clear everything —”

“What d-debt?” Her face is pinched, pale except for slashes of colour at the top of her cheekbones. The contrast so deep it looks like she smeared streaks of crimson warpaint over the skin.

“It’s to a gang up north. They said—”

But her head whips back and forth. “No. You said one night, and I’ve done that. You can’t come back to me weeks later and change the rules. That’s not fair.”

“Not fair.” I chuckle low in my throat and reach out to brush her hair again, knowing she’ll flinch, waiting for it, enjoying it this time because I’m back in control. “But it’s fair that I should pay and pay and pay but get nothing more in return?”

For each time I use the word pay, the muscles in her neck tighten. The same trigger she had when I tried to buy her a purse.

No surprises there. A kid whose sole parent would rather borrow from a gang than go home and spend time with his daughter can’t be a great financial role model. No wonder she wants to be an accountant, take control of all the money.

It’s a trigger I can use if I angle it right.

My neck creaks from looking down at her. I grab her under the arms and lift her onto the short bench, making us level. The startled gasp triggers a

memory of the sounds she made as I played with her.

She might want this to be over but the longer I'm close to her, the more I want her. The need eats away at my brain.

"I can't..." she ducks her head forward, but it's not the escape she hoped for. My eyes are right there, searching for hers. The height difference eroding more than just a crick in my neck. "No. The debt from up north was before the one my dad owes your family. When you said you'd wipe my father's debt, it was already p-part of the package."

"Oh, was it?" I laugh, genuinely amused at her logic. It's sound. Persuasive, even.

Except this isn't a negotiation. This is me telling her what she'll do. The only reason I notice the boundary she sets is for the pleasure I take stepping straight over it. "Pity you didn't mention that on the night. If you had, I might take notice."

I put one hand on the curve of her waist, pushing so it pins her against the wall. The other cups her shoulder before running down her back, grabbing her arse and squeezing.

"What's the matter?" I ask as my fingertips send joyful sensations running along my nerves. "You enjoyed yourself." With her bench advantage, I have to stand fully upright to whisper into her ear, "Don't worry. This is just between us. No one else has to know."

"No. It wasn't part of the—"

"Do you know what it means when a gang takes you as collateral?" I let go of her arse and reach up, my thumb circling her nipple, which instantly hardens. "Ever been through that before?"

"N-no, I—" She breaks off, swallowing hard, her face twisting. Her eyes lower, then rise again to meet mine. "You won't turn me over to them, will you?"

There's so little breath behind her voice that I read the last few words off her lips. She's adorable. Her neat white teeth bite on her lower lip, sucking it into her mouth.

She doesn't need to know I would kill before I let one of those fucking brutes near her. I'd take a crowbar to the knees of anyone who so much as thought about putting a mark on her soft, supple skin.

That treat belongs solely to me.

"Not if you do as I ask."

She nods, blinking so rapidly I can't get a fix on her eyes. "You hurt me."

I use my thumb to smooth the frown away from her eyebrows, cupping her cheek in my hand. "Only a little. Given the ending, you didn't seem to mind."

She shakes her head. "You coerced me and it's not okay. I'm not... I won't do that again." Her nostrils pull together. "I still have a mark on my thigh."

"And do you still remember what it felt like to come on my fingers? Still remember how it felt to come on my cock?"

Her eyes dart to meet mine again, puzzled, her lips parting. There's no sign of recognition in her gaze, just growing frustration.

I close my eyes, having to clamp my lips to stop from groaning.

The pill.

It's the fucking pill.

It must have fucked about with her memory.

Calvin confirmed it was a fast-acting sedative with a few other goodies thrown in, probably to extend the supply. Pretty much what George had told me it was.

I've even worked out which maid gave it to her, but I haven't confronted the girl yet. She's indentured to my father, proceeds of a gang takedown a few years back, before I was on the scene. Just another horrendous cog in my dad's household that doesn't bear thinking about.

At least, I can't bear it. Nobody else seems to mind.

Her life's so shit right now, she needs to be handled with care. A wrong move and that twenty-year sentence before she works her way to freedom might stretch out like an impassable divide.

But now, I'm annoyed. Worse than annoyed, something closer to bereft.

The thought of reconnecting with George was like a piece of joy I had tucked in my pocket, a future treat, ready to explore in depth later.

Now it's been stolen from me. As far as she's concerned, it never existed.

The memory of her grateful tears has quickly become a firm favourite. It cheapens it if she doesn't have the same image locked in her subconscious. Like it's something I invented. Just as false as everything else in my new life.

"You can't coerce—"

The word is like fingernails on a blackboard. She really has no idea. I cut her off with a snap. "It's not coercion. It's a trade."

A man clears his throat behind me. I don't turn, instead watching George as she checks out the teacher standing nearby.

"Ah, Mr McManus? Could you please step away from the girl?"

"No." My eyes fix on George's until her gaze returns to me. "I don't think I will."

Another clearing of the throat.

I smile, the fingers of my left hand tightening on her hip. "Sounds like you have quite the cough there. You should fetch some hot water from the teacher's lounge."

"Lachlan. I really must insist—"

"Do you know how much money my father contributes to this school annually?"

"That's hardly the—"

"Can you imagine explaining to the head that he won't make those donations any longer because he doesn't appreciate how his only son and heir is treated."

George's eyes switch from the teacher to me and back again. She sends a last pleading look in his direction, then he shuffles his feet. "Well, please make sure you both get to class on time. The bell will—"

I flap my hand in his direction, still not turning. I don't need to look at him to register his footsteps heading away.

Meanwhile, George's gaze drops. I bend my knees to catch it, but she looks to the side, then closes her eyes altogether to avoid me.

It's like she's snuffing out the only light I had in my darkness, leaving me cold and grieving its lost glow.

I take my hands away from her and step back, tilting my head. Her large upper lip snags my attention again as she nervously bites at the corner. "Get down," I order her, and she jumps off the bench, using one hand to steady herself against the wall. "Now on your knees."

"No, I'm not going to—"

"They'll restrain you. That's how they start. Put you into stress poses until your joints scream with pain."

Her gaze locks to mine again, shaking her head while her eyes say they believe every word.

“They won’t feed you, won’t give you water. Your body breaks down, and it won’t take long before you’re begging. That’s when they’ll start in on phase two.”

I should stop. I want to stop. The images pulsing in my head need to be locked away, tamped down, buried so they never again see the light of day.

A deeper part of me wants to sit back and see how far they get if I let them escape, propelled by my words. My mouth doesn’t care that part of me is begging my lips to stay locked together, trapping the obscenities inside my head where they belong.

“They’ll rape you,” I tell her and her body sags against mine, betraying her fear, her weakness. “So many men and so many times you won’t be able to tell them apart. Just one long constant fuck until you’re raw and bleeding and once you can’t stand it any longer, they’ll just start in a new hole, repeating the process until they’re done. And the next day? The day after they finished fucking your cunt and your mouth and your arse into entirely new shapes? They’ll start over again from the beginning. Do you know what a ring gag is?”

Her lips tremble, eyes so wide, gleaming with unshed tears, that I can see her imagination churning out a slideshow of images to accompany my words. Remorse tugs my hand, making my fingers twitch. But I clench it into a fist, crushing it the same way George crushed my treasured memory.

As the pause lengthens, she slowly nods, taking as long to understand I expect an answer as she does to give it.

“That’s what my dad likes to use when a girl cries too much or screams too loudly. He’ll fit one of those to keep her mouth wide open and give the men free rein. Can you imagine?”

George shakes her head, struggling to turn away from me but I hold her in place. Given her small stature, it’s hardly a strain.

“Cock after cock in your mouth all day long, choking you with cum until you’re so full of it you can barely swallow. The men who do it, they’re not good people, George. They won’t see your pleading eyes and think about how you’re an innocent just caught in her father’s mess. All they’ll see is a hole they can stick their dick in and fuck until they get relief. And when they zip themselves up, half of them will walk to the end of the queue to wait for their turn again.

“You think I’m joking or exaggerating but I’ve seen it. By the end, there’s nothing left in those girls’ eyes that’s even close to human. You’ll be

a piece of meat to be used and abused until you're not even good for that any longer. You know what happens when you get to that point? When they can't wring another cent worth of income out of your battered body?"

She doesn't respond, eyes bulging in terror. But that's okay. I pause to be polite, to give the full horror space enough to dig into her brain and stay there, like a cruel parent might speak at length about the grotesque monster lurking under their child's bed so they don't misbehave.

"Someone will come along and snap your delicate little neck. They'll toss you onto the rubbish pile and tip you into a hole to become landfill.

"Even if you got a grave, no one would cry over you. You have to be a person to inspire that level of emotion and you'll be no more human than a rotten side of beef."

I hear other students turning up for class, gathering, watching, staring as George turns from a classmate into a nervous wreck, her dignity shredding in real time.

Listening is bad. To live it is so much worse that I doubt she has the capacity to even imagine it.

I don't have to use my imagination. Thanks to Daddy Dearest, if I want to see it, all I have to do is close my eyes.

The moment I do, the wretched woman he made me watch appears in her full-blown horror. My mind plasters George's face atop hers and horror surges inside me until I choke, struggling to swallow back the dread, the revulsion, the disgust.

Forget the memory loss, after my current outburst, she won't be able to look at me again without seeing the filth that's now part of me. The traits that horrify the boy I was yet disappoint my dad because he wants that persona to take over, take more, to take all of me.

And if she runs away screaming from the monster I'm turning into?

Well, she's better off out of it.

That's the best reason to keep going now. To horrify her so deeply that I crush any prospect of a repeat performance under my heel and grind it into the dust.

So, I grip her chin in my steel fingers, dragging her into position so my face fills her vision, and I can see my snarl, Creighton's snarl, reflected in her eyes. "When I offer to pay your debts, you thank me. And when I tell you to get on your knees, you do it, and you don't ask questions."

George shakes, a soft tremor that runs through every muscle in her body. If I keep going, she'll turn into a quivering mess.

I keep going. My father's son after all. His chill fingers wrapping further around my heart.

"The only way they'll stop is if someone pays the money you owe them but since your father's already opened a new tab with us"—she jerks back at that, though it can hardly be news to her, not after what he's done already—"I'll hazard a guess he won't be able to do that."

I lean closer to her, trying to see every micro-expression, take my satisfaction in every slight change in her features, drinking them in like fine wine. My voice becomes so soft, nobody but George can hear me. "Even if he had the money, you don't seem to be his highest priority."

The flinch at those words is delicious enough for me to chase another. I want her to hate me, to fear me. To push me away and run in the other direction before her sweetness gets sucked into the void of my world.

"After all, I'm not the one who got into debt, then skipped out on what I owed. I'm not the one who let those men know I had a daughter. I didn't tell them your name or where you live or your age or what you look like.

"What I'm offering you is a kindness. If you want to say anything, you can express your gratitude for me saving you from a fate worse than death."

When she gives a strangled gasp, I rest my hand on her shoulder and lightly press, guiding her onto her knees as easily as a vet would manoeuvre a dog.

The moment she's in place, I squat, getting level. The tears glistening in her eyes make them look huge. She's so vulnerable right now, I could crack her open with one well-aimed blow.

My whisper is so quiet even the nearest students won't be able to decipher a word. "When I offer you an escape route, take it. I won't be patient enough to explain why, next time."

"Lock?" Kari asks in a voice so hesitant I barely recognise it as hers.

Jesus wept. All I want is a few minutes of alone time and the cloakroom's turned into grand central station.

She won't accept the same bullshit treatment as the teacher. I stand, removing my hands from George's body with palpable regret, and face her. "Yes, my darling?"

Her lips twist at the mockery but I move to her side and press a kiss to her cheek, looping my arm around her waist as I stare back at George who

hasn't moved a muscle. Her eyes appear vacant. Despite the gathering students, no one goes near her. None of them want to suffer her fate.

Kari rests her hand atop mine. "What's going on?"

"Just a work thing."

"Mm-hm?" She turns back to stare daggers at George. "As long as it's not sex work."

"Of course, not. Shouldn't you be halfway across the school by now?"

As though reminded of its job by the conversation, the second bell goes. Kari kisses me again, then waves her fingers mockingly at George before heading away.

A swarm of other students buzz into the corridor, ready for class. I barely register them. My attention still focused on my target.

One last game and we can go back to the normalcy of our usual worlds, never overlapping, never colliding. One last torment since she won't give me her pleasure, not the way I want, and I need something for my trouble.

George is compliant. After hearing my lecture, she'll do anything I ask. I can push her in any direction.

"Clean my shoes." I walk the filthy sneakers closer to her, touching the rubbery tip of one to the underside of her chin.

She gives the faintest frown, struggling to understand.

It's only polite for me to fill her in.

"With your tongue."

CHAPTER ELEVEN

GEORGE

MY MOUTH DRIES as I stare at Lachlan, waiting for the punchline, the joke, the take-back. His eyes are relentless. They stare into mine as he looks down at me, hands resting lightly on his hips. There's no trace of doubt on his face. No suggestion that I won't capitulate.

I gulp, running my tongue around the inside of my mouth, trying to find enough saliva to swallow. There's still time for him to walk back his request. The other kids stand around, eyes half-tuned to the action, eager expressions on some, disgust on others.

A blonde girl standing at the corner of the cloakroom sends me a glance stuffed full of pity.

That's the one that breaks me. The one that tells me this situation won't resolve the way I want it to.

"It's okay, George," Lachlan says in his mellifluous voice, as rich and sickening as treacle. "Take as much time as you need. I'm not going anywhere."

"A job worth doing is worth doing right," another male voice softly mocks, raising a ring of laughter.

I try to shift my weight so my knees aren't crunching against the hard floor. When I move to the side, Lachlan rests a hand on my head. "Running

away isn't an option."

Tears build up behind my eyes. *I like it when girls cry.* I sniff them back, tilting my head so they run back into their ducts rather than down my face.

"Do you want an instructional speech walking you through the process?"

His voice is openly mocking and the clump of students still hovering, standing there though class has started, chuckle along with him, eager to be on his side of the joke.

A memory floats within grasp, echoing out of my mouth before I'm fully aware I'm going to say it. "I thought you weren't a fucking teacher."

His fingers dig into my scalp, then at my sharp inhalation, he relaxes them.

The memory unlocks another, me spitting on him, knowing the moment after that I'd done something unforgivably wrong. And another, him lying on his back, eyes twinkling with curiosity, unbuttoning his shirt and trousers, and telling me to touch anything I wanted.

A buffet of gorgeous man to choose from.

Warmth spreads through me at the same time the shock hits; the snippet doesn't fit with the others. Not the threat to make me cry or the bite marks or the rumble of his deepening voice when he told me not to say a word.

In shock, my mind floods with the sensations of his finger inside me, his tongue rubbing at my sensitive flesh, then his mouth opening wider, pressing against me, rhythmically sucking until every nerve ending in my pussy sang.

The well of gratitude that poured out of me. To find out there wasn't something wrong with me like my last boyfriend had hinted. It was just a case of finding the right person, of him knowing how to do the right things at the right time.

A deluge of memories hit me, released from their mind-prison. My brain scrambles, trying to stay focused on what's happening right now.

The eyes of our fellow students are heavy as they stare. Their expectant faces follow my every move, adding to the pressure to perform, to do what Lachlan wants, to debase myself in front of them.

I shrink away, bowing my head, shoulders curling over my chest. Yet still their gazes increase in weight until I'm smothering.

My eyes dart in all directions, seeking a way out, but there's no escape. I'm so on display, I might as well be naked; that's what it feels like. A

dream where I turn up to class but realise halfway through the lesson, I forgot my clothes.

The embarrassment sets my skin on fire, burning red across my cheeks, my neck, my chest. My throat clutches as I try to swallow, my mouth dried by the fiery flame of self-loathing.

How can I let him do this to me?

But that's a foolish question for a foolish girl. Even without the appalling lesson in how little his family business values women, I would still obey. What other choice do I have?

The teacher who tried to intervene ended up walking away, despite knowing full well his absence left me vulnerable to Lachlan's depravity.

If a full-grown adult who oozes authority succumbs, there's no hope for me.

No one else is coming.

No one will help.

I bend my head, passively avoiding his glare, but he snaps, "Eyes on me."

My mouth retorts, "I can't do both," not bothering to check-in beforehand with my brain.

He gives a surprised laugh. "Then just do the best you can. Put your hands behind your back."

They've been resting on my knees and clasping them behind my back instead makes me feel unbelievably exposed. Every second I'm in this, it grows worse. Better to get it over with. Better to comply.

I twist my head to the side, catching his gaze from my peripheral vision as I extend my tongue. It hits against the side of his sneaker, recoiling at the strange rubber taste, and I close my eyes.

His hand fists my hair. "Keep your eyes on me, I said."

They bolt open. I move my head, licking along the canvas of his shoe, shuddering as my tongue runs over a bump of *something*. I don't want to know what. I don't want to play at guessing.

"That's my good little pet," Lachlan says in a voice so heavy with lust that it stirs something inside me, sending a thrill of excitement out to join the sagging horror of the moment. "Keep going."

I draw back so I can start at the toe of his shoe again, flattening my tongue to press against more of the surface, my neck screaming as I keep my head angled enough for me to see him from my peripheral vision.

He nods in approval, and I'm dizzy.

My heart hammers from the embarrassment, from the watchful eyes. Most of all it hammers from being this near to Lachlan. To hear in his voice how much this turns him on. The thickening vocal cords, the deepening timbre.

The knowledge works into that wriggle of excitement and turns it into a rhythmic pulse of pleasure. I turn my head and lick along the inside edge of his sneaker. The sole has stiffened through wear. It smells like the Para Rubber store that my parents took me to as a kid. I'd inhaled the scent as they shopped for a paddling pool strong enough to last through the rambunctious summer but cheap enough for their budget.

Lachlan shakes the foot I'm working on, pulling it out of reach. "Now the other one."

I obediently move to the right side, starting again. My thighs squeeze together as I hear students murmuring to each other. My cheeks flame as I realise some will film me with their phones, ready to turn me into the latest internet sensation, even if it's only of interest within these school walls.

The long slow strokes of my tongue become less of a punishment and more like worship. His perfect form stretches above me like a god, directing me to do his bidding. Like any good supplicant, I obey.

"That's enough."

I sit back on my heels, looking up at him for my next instruction. Lachlan cups my cheek. "Open your mouth. Show me how well you've done."

Some students break away, shuffling into their classes with teachers too well trained to mumble about tardiness. As the crowd thins, he moves closer, his thighs bumping against my chin.

My mouth opens wide, tongue out, showing him whatever he needs to see. He strokes my hair, gently then with increasing pressure, finally twisting my ponytail and tilting my head back as far as it will go.

"Keep it open," he scolds me as my lips press together.

My jaw is stiff, like it's getting a workout. My head buzzes too much to hold any further shame.

He spits into my open mouth. The wad lands near the back of my tongue, bubbly and warm. A shiver of exquisite revulsion twists through me as my mouth waters in response.

Lachlan's voice is now impossibly deep. "Swallow it, then open and show me."

I obey, and he spits again. It's too soon after the last time and I have to pause for a few seconds, fighting my throat before it relaxes and I can swallow the second gift, automatically opening wide for whatever he wants to give me.

The grip on my hair loosens. Lachlan crouches in front of me again, level, his thick fingers holding my jaw so I can't squirm away. "And what's the lesson you learned today?"

It bubbles up from my memory. "No. Fucking. Spitting."

His eyes crease with recognition but he shakes his head.

"That you c-can do whatever you like with no repercussions?"

He wrinkles his nose, shaking his head again while his warm breath skates across my lips, raising the tiny hairs on the sides of my cheeks. "That's one hundred percent true, but it's not the lesson."

My stomach knots as I try to oblige. Try to tell him what he wants to hear.

I want this to be over. I want my strange reactions to him to disappear. I want to go to my history class and be bored like I planned before his text lit up my phone.

My knees hurt. I want my stomach to stop squirming, my thighs to stop twitching, my clit to stop throbbing with its bizarre need.

You shouldn't want him, but even if you do, you can't have him. He's already taken.

Something Kari believes but Lachlan seems to need more proof of to convince him.

And it clicks. "That I should be grateful. When you offer me an escape route, I should take it."

"Such a smart girl," he whispers, and I hear Patrick in my mind, *you're a smart cookie, then?* If he was here, I could point to everything that just happened as a reason that's a firm no.

"I'm sorry," I mumble as a tear works its way free, not even sure what out of the whole mess I'm apologising for. I move my arm to wipe it away, then pause, glancing at Lachlan to see if he wants to catch it like he did on the night of his father's party. He does, wiping it away on my cheek with the ball of his thumb rather than licking it.

We're in company, after all. No need for embarrassing displays.

“Come on,” he abruptly says, standing and tugging me upright.

My right knee crunches again on the tiles as I scramble around, finding my feet. I rub it with my palm, my fingers wandering next to the healing bite mark, then dancing up to touch my throat where the bruises have already faded.

“Is that...?” I falter, licking my lips and smoothing down the front of my shirt, adjusting my hair, pulling at the waistband of my skirt. “Is that all?”

Lachlan tilts his head to the side, staring at my sweaty hair, my unkempt second-hand clothing, my mouth still rank with whatever he trod in over the past couple of weeks.

He stares and his eyes dance as they flick over me, like a filthy impoverished degraded girl was exactly what he most wanted to see.

“That’s all,” he says so softly only I can hear it. “Run along, back to your normal life.”

He clutches the back of my neck one last time, his expression briefly altering, awash in sadness so deep it looks like despair. A second later, a smiling mask shutters down and he releases me, heading off to his art lesson, whistling.

The remaining students bugger off to their classes and after a minute to collect myself, I do the same.

THE REST of the day drags like some low-budget horror film. I can’t concentrate enough to lose myself in the lessons, usually my simplest refuge. My brain is full of recollections; some from today but many more flood in to fill the gaps in the night I’d half-forgotten.

Every time someone speaks, another lightbulb goes off, another synapse fires to illuminate a pathway to the poorly stored memories.

By the time school ends for the day, I feel like I’ve relived every second of the party and its aftermath a dozen times over. The small talk, the meal, the anger in Lachlan and Creighton as they faced off over the dinner table.

I remember my finger hovering over the call button on his phone, the knife pressing against my body. The fear. My rapid heartbeat. The scolding, the feeling as he shoved his fingers into my mouth and his cock into my

cunt and the final ecstasy as I came while he still thrust inside me, and it seemed I'd crush his hand into a pulp I squeezed it that hard.

I relive the shame, the fear, the gratitude, repeating the highlights on a show reel again and again. The relief at having access to them again is immense.

All the memories are better than my current reality, having to grapple with the name calling and pulled faces from the other students.

There can't have been more than fifteen pupils milling around us in the cloakroom. Yet after the two remaining periods, each an hour long, the entire school seems aware of what happened. People are sharing surreptitious videos, re-cutting them to add their jocular commentary.

Bad news certainly travels faster than other types of gossip. As I run for the bus, all I can do is pray it dissipates just as quickly. I don't hold out much hope.

My shift at work is short, clearing up the last from the lunch crowds before another worker slots in for the evening service. Two hours. Not enough time to get bored.

Enough time to flick through my new treasure trove of memories, though. Flick through them and feel embarrassed.

As if it wasn't bad enough to recall that I'd broken down crying when he made me come for the second time, the thought that he'd trailed a knife over my body, had inserted it *inside me*, and my only reaction was to grow wetter spurs an aggressive bout of self-hatred.

If he hadn't noticed, I might be okay, but he had his face all up in my business. He saw, he knows.

Lachlan must have been so confused by my behaviour afterwards. The picture he forwarded to me was a sweet gesture after all, a nice memento of a shared memory. Except I just blanked him when he sent it. As the thought takes hold, I grip the edge of the sink hard and screw up my eyes, trying to force it back out of centre stage.

Patrick thinks he's a rapist.

My eyes snap open again at that. I'd denied it of course. I'd even gone to the trouble of pointing out everything was consensual.

He hadn't believed me. I'm such a terrible liar, I can't blame him.

My face floods with so much colour I can feel it pulsing in my cheeks. I can't think of a way to correct his impression without causing irreparable harm to my psyche. He probably wouldn't believe me at any rate.

Best-case scenario, I never see the man again.

But it's Lachlan's cousin. He probably sees him every time he goes home. He doesn't deserve to have someone in his close family thinking of him that way.

My skin gets so hot that suddenly, everything itches. It's like I'm breaking out in a late case of embarrassment hives, but my arms remain clear.

As I stand back from the commercial dishwasher—one time getting my face burned from the steam taught me to keep well clear—my jaw clicks. I press my fingertips into the temporomandibular joint and that makes me think of the ring gag.

I want to believe it was a horror story made up on the spot to frighten me. Surely it must be. Nobody could actually do something that horrendous to another person.

But when I replay the speech in my head, I see the truth lurking in Lachlan's expression. He wasn't just talking about some idle threat someone had told him third hand, his eyes were scarred with the reminders of what he must have witnessed.

I can't believe I ate at the same table as his father. The man had been scary but this? This is a thousand times worse than anything I could have imagined.

My head aches so badly, I swallow a few paracetamol from the work first-aid kit. When I replace it on the shelf, I'm so close to end of shift that the day manager waves me off rather than putting me back to work for the last five minutes.

I trudge away from the restaurant, heading for my bus stop, a thousand miserable thoughts clogging up my head.

I need a better job. Something to keep my attention focused. Replaying the day in my mind's eye while I clear, clean, carry, and stack dishes can't be healthy. Most of the stuff is bad enough the first time through, it doesn't need a repeat.

Once this final year at school is done, I'll find something better. University hours are more conducive to part-time work. Lectures can be recorded. Attendance isn't set in stone.

You should apologise.

The idea jerks my chin up and I stare along the street, frowning. Apologise to the boy who humiliated me in front of the school? Sure. Right.

Good one, brain. With you on the case, a girl doesn't need enemies.

Despite my initial recoil, the idea spreads out a few roots, digging ever deeper into the soil.

Lachlan's actions have saved me from so much torment. He wiped the debt to Creighton and spared my father, spared me, whatever horrors he had planned for us that first night. The picture of his companion skitters across my brain like a grotesque spider. I don't want to think of what that man might have done to me once beating my father got him nowhere.

And today, paying out for the gang who wanted me held. Even if the reality isn't as horrifying as the picture he painted, it must land somewhere along that same scale. Thinking of the ways a teenage girl might earn back their lost funds makes me shudder, my stomach convulsing with dread.

I'm a girl who thought bumping into Patrick in a dimly lit room was terrifying; anything worse is too devastating to consider.

Lachlan saved me from all of that and how did I say thank you?

By rejecting his advances, spurning his offer, and throwing his generosity back in his face. No wonder he humiliated me in front of everyone; I humiliated him first.

I like to think I'm a better person than that but today I wasn't. He did something incredibly generous, and I came at him from a place of pain and fear.

What makes it worse is that I know how it feels to do something momentous for somebody else and not earn so much as a thank you. My father's continuing silence as he tries his best to avoid me at home is a constant source of pain.

Yet I did the same thing to Lachlan.

No wonder he'd looked so puzzled when I jerked away from him. So confused and so *hurt*.

The bus stop on my side of the road will take me home. The one opposite will take me back past Kingswood College. Back to where Lachlan will be in his room.

It's probably a silly idea. I don't know his room number. I've never been in the boarders' residence so I'm not even sure if there'll be someone I can ask.

Worse, if Kari catches me there, she'll think I'm ignoring her warning. I don't know what she would do to me but, judging from the cold glitter in her eyes every time she looks my way, it'll be distinctly unpleasant.

He cleared at least forty k of Dad's debt. Maybe more.

It's so much money, I can't really grasp it.

I sigh as I let my head hang forward. I'm tired. Lately, I haven't been sleeping more than a few hours at a time. When I do finally drop into a doze, the alarm blares me awake almost immediately.

I also haven't had a proper discussion with my dad. He's avoided me and I've let him. I haven't phoned his sponsor, haven't tackled him to make sure he gets help. It's felt hard enough to keep myself alive, let alone worry about someone else, but from what Lachlan said today, he's still lost in his addiction.

If that's true, in a few weeks' time none of this will matter. We'll be on the move again, trying our best to outrun trouble, though we both know the trouble is hard baked inside one of us.

The lights at the corner nearest me change. I see the bus coming towards me, the route number glowing from its overhead display.

With a sudden burst of energy, I sprint across the road, reaching the shelter opposite just as the original bus trundles past. When I check the timetable on my phone, I see my new driver is another ten minutes away.

Ten minutes to regret my decision. Sounds about right.

I sit in the shelter and stare along the road as the dusk deepens into full night. A girl cursed to follow through on even the stupidest of her ideas.

CHAPTER TWELVE

LOCK

I THINK Kari's never going to leave my room. She drones on and on about the dance and the arrangements, talking about organising another fitted dress like I've forgotten what happened to the last one I wasted money on.

Well, not wasted. Slicing it off George was a treat well worth the price tag. But wasted on Kari since she never wore the bloody thing.

I know what she's doing. She's here to check-in and make sure whatever happened with George is over and done with. Check that the humiliation I ladled out today wasn't some strange kind of foreplay.

A pity that it wasn't.

If I ever get my room back to myself tonight, I intend to take a trip down that particular memory lane and see how much mileage I can get from George's supplication.

Not the way I broke her down, that left me feeling ill afterwards, not a reaction my father would be happy to know about. Not when he's spent so much time and effort turning my emotions to dull granite.

I might have started with a slight twist to my character, a liking—especially with sexual proclivities—for things that others find borderline, the subtle dance between the twin ecstasies of pleasure and pain.

Exposure to my father has deepened that, let it flow into a thousand other parts of my psyche. Even as I flinch in horror from many features of his world, of his business, others align with my natural inclinations.

Of all the changes I've undergone in the past eighteen months, that's the one that terrifies me the most. That's he's not unravelling me, changing me, but simply bringing out the parts of me that were always there. The rotten core my mother's love shielded from the world for my first sixteen years.

Bad to the bone.

Right now, when I spend too much time with him, I revert to posturing, trying to placate his need to see his reflection staring back when he looks at me. The longer it goes on, the more it feels like the ill-fitting duties and expectations I started with are transforming into something made-to-measure. A second skin.

My mother is no help. She loved the monster long before he decided to marry her. I wish I knew what she sees in him but that might be worse. That might mould me into his image even more.

Finally, Kari gives me a goodbye kiss on the cheek—why? No one's watching—and leaves me alone with my thoughts. They immediately travel back to George, to the melancholy of knowing the attraction is one-sided. My unrequited lust.

I picture her on her knees, mouth wide open, waiting. Eyes steady on mine as I spit into her mouth, taking it without protest, barely a flinch before swallowing on command.

Fuck me, she was glorious.

If we'd had the room to ourselves, I would have done so much more. I lie back on the bed, unbuttoning my jeans, picturing how her eyes would grow wide, how drool would spill down her chin as she took me inside her mouth, gagging as I hit against the back of her throat, choking on my cock, desperate to please me.

There's a knock on my door.

Goddamn it. Eighteen months of chumming around with Kari mightn't have cemented a loving relationship but it sure fed her information on how to push every one of my buttons.

I wrench the door open, an ample stock of curse words loaded and ready to go, then freeze, confused.

George stands in the hallway, hand raised to repeat her knock.

"What're you doing here?" I bark, startled into rudeness.

But really. What the fuck is she doing here? I drove her away. I made her kneel and gave her a taste of the worst I have to offer. A thread of hope unwinds off the spool and I'm almost scared to tug it in case it snaps.

"Oh, sorry. I..." She shakes her head. "I came to... thank you?"

The raised inflection at the end of her sentence fills me with warmth. Like some force brought her here, and she's helpless to explain it, so is fumbling for any reason that could make sense.

I don't care. I'm on board with whatever reasons she has to tell herself. I showed her the bogeyman I keep inside, told her to run, and instead she headed straight back to me.

My pocket of joy found her way back to me.

I check the corridor's empty, then lean against the doorframe, one arm raised to press against the top of the jamb, the other hanging loose by my side. A goofy smile hits and I twist my mouth, hiding it. "What are you thanking me for? Unlocking a new kink?"

She rubs the back of her neck and glances back the way she came as though already wishing she was walking away. "I never thanked you for paying what we owed and I... It all came as a shock, that I didn't really stop to think about it from your side—"

George breaks off, rubbing at her eyebrow, her gaze flicking up to meet mine, then darting to the comparative safety of the floor.

"Try breathing," I say with a chuckle. Communication doesn't appear to be her strong suit. "Then just say what you want to say."

George nods and takes a visible breath. "Thank you for paying his debt. It was incredibly generous and something we had no ability to do for ourselves." She lets out a long exhalation when she comes to a halt, wringing her hands.

I don't give a shit why she's standing on my doorstep or what she has to say.

She came back to me.

I grab the front of her blouse and haul her inside, slamming the door shut and flicking the lock so she can't leave too easily. I spin her around, walking her to the single bed that takes up half my room, it's that small.

Her expression turns from faintly to strongly alarmed, especially when the backs of her knees hit the bed and momentum forces her to sit.

"Lie down," I tell her, expecting compliance. This is why she's come here. It must be, wanting me to make her body sing again.

“Oh, no. I really...” She cups her elbows. “I only have a few minutes, then my bus will—”

“I’ll drive you home.”

“That’s very k-kind. Very. But I...”

She tries to get to her feet, and I push her back, a bit more firmly this time. “Or you can drive us. Don’t you want another spin in my car?”

George stops fighting for the moment as her face lights up, apparently taken with that idea. “Could I? Could we go for a drive right now?”

“No. Right now, we’re fucking. Later, you can drive me anywhere you feel like it.”

“But... You have a girlfriend.” George twists and somehow gets away from me, leaping to her feet and backing until her butt hits the door. “And I —”

“And you?” I interrupt when she falters. “What do you have, George?” The memory of the boy touching her back hits me like a lightning bolt. “Surely you haven’t shackled up with someone new in the past ten days?”

“Just... um... like on a friendly basis but I’m going to the dance with someone, and I guess that makes us...”

I smother the burst of jealous heat under a show of nonchalance: undoing my jeans, slipping out of them and my underwear in one practised motion, dragging my shirt over my head.

“Sounds like a really solid relationship you’ve got there,” I growl. “Does your someone have a name?”

“Hm.” She makes a strange humming sound as I advance on her, naked, and I slip my thumb against her windpipe to catch the last of the vibration, sending it into my muscle memory. “It’s Keanen.”

Keanen. My lips curl as I burn the name into my brain. “Never heard of her.”

“It’s a him.”

“Never heard of him.” I slip my hand under her skirt, my fingertips delving further, snagging on the elastic of her panties, and yanking them to her knees. “Don’t worry. I’ll mark you so he knows you’ve already been claimed. You won’t even have to tell him.” It will be my pleasure. I tap under her thigh. “Lift.”

She obeys, even as her face scrunches in concern. I whip her underwear from her leg, letting it puddle against her other foot, and hook my hand

under her thigh to keep it raised when she tries to lower it, leaving her wide open.

“This isn’t what—”

I kiss her to stop the sentence since it isn’t heading in the right direction. Her mouth opens, soft and welcoming compared to the harshness of my touch. I reach between her legs, finding her wet and waiting, spread her lips, and enter her in one smooth stroke, the force lifting her onto her toes.

She gasps against my mouth, and I tease her tongue with mine as I rest inside her, letting her get used to the invasion. Her muscles jump, clenching and releasing around my girth even though I’m not moving.

When I release her mouth, biting the side of her neck as I promised, George whimpers. “Wait. I didn’t come here to have sex with you!”

I laugh into the crook of her shoulder. “Um, hate to break it to you but you maybe left that a bit late.”

Her head tips forward and she grasps my shoulders, caught between pulling me closer and pushing me away. I withdraw a little and thrust forward again, making her moan. In a low voice, I ask, “Do you want me to stop?”

I’m not about to, but it’s polite to make the offer.

From her gasp as I drive into her again, the answer is no, anyway. I press harder against her, lifting her legs so they wrap around my back, using the door as a support.

Her hair is still tied back, and I need to feel it. With a flick of my hand, I pull the elastic free and plunge my fingers into the length, delving into the thickness, then tugging, just enough to make her gasp again.

She bends her head, resting her forehead against my chest. The sight of her tiny form curling around my body makes me feel gargantuan, indestructible. When I pull her head back to gain access to her throat again, I can feel the vibrations of my thrusts echoing across her body.

“You take me so well, little G-G-George,” I murmur, bracing my hand against the wall as I thrust into her so deeply that the head of my cock must be close to bumping against her spine. “It’s like you were made for me.”

And just like that, I’m so close that I have to stop, running my hand farther under her thigh, cupping her arse, reaching around to slide my thumb around where we’re joined, then running higher.

Her foot against my lower back slips as I stroke the sensitive skin around her clit. She clutches a handful of my hair, tugging it in time with

the tiny rhythmic strokes.

Then I move my thumb away and she groans, pushing her heel harder against me in protest. My hand drops from the wall to palm her tit, flicking against the nipple, then pinching it, listening to her vocals to determine how hard she can take it.

When I thrust into her again, I go slower, but immediately skate back to the edge. Her tight cunt squeezes me until I can't stand to hold back again.

George whimpers as I cradle her head to my chest, pumping into her while my orgasm grips me so hard, I feel faint.

The moment I'm spent, regret hits me.

I wanted to coax the same reactions out of her as last time. To make her cry with how good it was, prove the first time wasn't a fluke. Instead, I've left her hanging. Coming on a hair trigger like I'm a virgin who's never touched a girl before.

She pushes to be let down before I've recovered, half slipping as gravity takes its chance while I'm distracted. The moment her feet hit the floor, she stumbles past me, making her way into the bathroom and shutting the door.

I stagger the one and a half steps until I can slump onto the bed and press my hands over my eyes, giving a soft laugh. This isn't the evening I had planned. I pull some tissues from the holder on my bedside table and wipe myself clean, throwing them in the wastebasket before I tug on grey sweatpants, not bothering with a shirt.

There's no movement from the bathroom for long enough that I sit up, tilting my head for any noise. I don't know how long George has been in there already, but I count off another two minutes before rousing enough to rap my knuckles on the door. "You okay in there?"

"Just a second."

The note of forced cheer takes some of the shine off my contentment. When George shuffles out, her eyes are red, and her breath hitches twice before settling into its usual pattern.

"You don't have to hide in the bathroom if you want to cry."

She ignores me for the time it takes to pick her underwear off the floor and tug them on again, smoothing her skirt back into place. I lean off the edge of the bed and snag her hand, pulling her closer, but she shakes me off violently enough I get the message.

"We can't ever do that again."

“Why not?” I stand and force a hug onto her. She resists for a moment, then buries her face in my shoulder. Close enough, I can whisper into her ear, “I know you didn’t finish. Let me help you finish.” But she makes a strangled noise and pushes at me until I let her go. “You enjoyed it, didn’t you? It sounded like you enjoyed it.”

“That’s not the point,” she says, stamping her foot.

“It’s sex.” Amusement warms my voice. “Unless you’re trying to get knocked up, enjoyment *is* the point.”

“I am not having sex with s-someone who has a g-girlfriend. That’s not how I want to behave.”

The relief is immediate. Is that all?

“You understand Kari and I aren’t really together, right? Not like that. It’s just an arranged thing between our families.” The mark on her neck shines brightly red and I rub it with my thumb, easing away the sharp edges. “We can do whatever we like as long as no one finds out about it. You’re the only one I want.”

“Great. So now, I’m not only pissing off your girlfriend, but I’m also straight onto your dad’s shit list if you break up? No, thanks. I prefer my head right where it is.”

“We’re not...” I trail off.

The words won’t reassure her. How the hell did I pick someone who only colours inside the lines?

“Nobody’s breaking up with anybody. Nobody’s hurting anyone. Nobody’s dad is taking revenge on you, okay?” Her breathing speeds up until I say, “Maybe just calm down?” whereupon it rockets into the stratosphere.

“I can’t calm down. I don’t understand what happened. I didn’t mean any of this.”

She looks dazed and I can sympathise. Seeing her standing in the doorway was like being hit by a truck.

“You can’t... You can’t j-just p-p-p-p...” Her face twists with anger that she can’t express herself. I’ve heard her stutter before, made fun of it the first night, but I didn’t realise she *really* stuttered. I thought it was just an excess of emotion, a trickle of fear.

Watching her face contort with a strong tic I grasp it’s more serious than that. It’s torturous to watch her struggle.

I sling my arm around her shoulder, curling her in close, pressing kisses against her hair. Her right hand is against my biceps, spasming so her fingers bend backwards, and I take it between my palms, rubbing until the muscles relax. “It’s okay, you don’t have to get the words out right this minute. We’ve got all night.”

But she pushes against me. “I’m not staying. You can’t just p-put your dick in me without asking.”

The statement is bad enough. The implication lying underneath it is worse, sparking my anger until I feel cold. “I asked you to lift your leg while I was pulling down your underwear. What did you think was happening?”

“Everything moved so fast. I didn’t have time to think.”

All I want is for her to enjoy me the same way I do her. I don’t understand why she’s finding it so complicated.

I move closer to her, and she shifts back a step. I repeat the movement until she’s flat against the wall, eyes cast down, hands raised to fend me off. “You’re the one who came to me. I didn’t force you to do anything.”

When she finally glances up at me from the floor, she looks exhausted. Deep circles are ground underneath her bloodshot eyes. She must have splashed water onto her face in the bathroom because tendrils of hair cling to her cheeks like pale seaweed.

I feel a strong rush of anger towards her father. Doesn’t he care about her at all? After what she did for him, why isn’t he looking after her better?

“You h-have a girlfriend.”

I push the thought of Kari away with a flick of my fingers. “Asked and answered. What does it matter to you? Do you think if Kari disappears, we’ll trot up the aisle tomorrow?”

“No.”

“Then why does it matter?”

She cups her elbows and I notice how badly she’s shaking. It looks like she’s talking herself out of being here the same way she talked herself into coming and I hate to see her do it.

I take her into my arms again, but she struggles to get free. “Let me go.”

“Why? It’s just a hug.”

Her mouth twists. “Because I can’t *think* when you’re s-s-standing close. You’re messing with my head.”

The answer upsets her but inside, I'm overjoyed. The sentiment echoes my reaction to her. "Why do you need to think? It just gets in the way."

George takes a few calming breaths, closing her eyes while counting out her exhalations, then opening them to stare at me. "Kari told me if I went out with you again, she'd hurt me. Does that sound like someone who thinks you're a fake boyfriend?"

My dad's words echo in my head: laying out the plan for me to be married then head overseas for six months of training.

Another reminder I'm in no mood for. My frustration jumps a notch. It's April already. The school year ends mid-December. If George doesn't want to fool around when I have an arranged girlfriend, she's going to fucking freak when I have an arranged wife.

I need to pin her down now.

"It sounds like someone who needs a reminder. I'll take care of it."

But George shuffles towards the door. "No. *I'm* taking care of it. This is never happening again. I don't need to be some boy's side piece."

Some boy.

Some boy.

The words create such a cognitive dissonance in my head that it feels like it's splitting apart. I'm worth a million times more than this girl. I have money, connections, power. I'm the son of the most feared man in the country.

I'm not like my half-brother. There wasn't a silver spoon in my mouth from birth. I didn't waltz into this life by accident. I paid my dues on entry, something my nightmares set at a price far higher than I thought I was paying at the time.

How dare she come back to me just to force me to watch her walk away again? This girl who, for reasons beyond my comprehension, I genuinely *like*.

I can make her take it back. Right now. Make her do whatever I want. Lick my shoes from here to eternity, lick the *floor* if I feel like it. Make her fuck me until she can't stand.

All I need to do is tell her the debt to the Auckland gang might be paid but the new debt that created with me is not. If words don't do the trick, a visit to her father to illustrate the validity of the demand would soon ensure compliance.

I can *make* her.

But my body is repelled by the thought. Beforehand, I wouldn't mind the idea of forcing a girl, but the reason George stuck in my head is that she liked me touching her.

When she flinched away from me earlier today, it felt like a physical blow.

I don't want her to glare at me while she's in my company. Not like she is now, eyes so hot, they could toast me like a marshmallow. Glowering at me like I did something far worse than leave her hanging after I fucked her against the wall.

I want her crying, falling apart in my arms. I want her cunt dripping, begging me to insert my fingers, my cock, my knife, anything so long as I make her come like none of her useless boyfriends before now have been able to.

"Okay." I move away from her, grabbing my t-shirt and keys from the table. It's an effort, but I keep my features steady, smothering the flames of bitterness before they can burn out of control. "It's your loss."

Patience is a virtue, but that doesn't mean I'm above practising it from time to time.

It will be fun to watch her sway, to watch her falter, to watch her eyes grow weak with longing until she's begging me to let her in like a rescue puppy desperate to go to a forever home.

I can do it. I know I can.

We've barely spent time together, but I already know a half dozen levers I can use on her. Punishments, rewards.

I'll start softly. Show her how much I respect her boundaries, so she doesn't feel the need to set new, higher, harsher ones.

"Come on," I say in my most agreeable tone. "You missed your bus, so I'll drive you home."

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

GEORGE

THE ELEVEN-MINUTES from Kingswood College to my house in Linwood is the longest drive of my life. I keep my hands together in my lap, picking at my nail beds until they bleed.

My head is a mess, my stomach not far behind. Every part of me is shaky, as bad as the caffeine jitters but without the energetic side effects.

I can't believe I put my foot down.

A distant part of my brain has turned into a cheering section, leading a rousing chorus of, 'You go, girl.' The rest of me is a pulsating mess of mixed signals. My wet panties bunched, soaked through with the mingled traces of his cum and mine.

He thinks he left me unsatisfied. He has no idea of the strength of the orgasm that hit on his first thrust inside me. The orgasm that had been building, building, building from the moment he forced me to my knees and made me obey.

Just like the one I plan to have when he leaves, tucked alone in my room with my fingers and my vibrant pulse of memories.

That's the safest way to enjoy him. The only safe way.

"Sorry," Lachlan says as he pulls to the curb and my hand tenses on the handle, ready to push it open the minute it stops. "I wasn't thinking. I

should have let you drive.”

I want him so much, but I won’t play second fiddle. Not again. I’ve been this girl before.

When it started with Jack, I didn’t mind the sneaking around, the hiding, the secrets. It was all so exciting; I didn’t stop to question where it might lead. I didn’t comprehend how much joy it would rip away until it got so bad, I would’ve crawled over broken glass to leave.

I’d take public humiliation any day over being made to hide, to steal moments when they aren’t given willingly. Private shame is so much worse. Like an invasive fungus, it flourishes in the dark.

I didn’t like it when I was with Jack. I won’t enjoy it with Lachlan. And that’s without adding in who he is, who his father is, who his *girlfriend’s* father is.

He smiles and I pause, heart thumping, half-hoping he’ll come up with a different solution than my ultimatum gave him.

Instead, he looks at me expectantly, waiting for me to get out of his car.

“Don’t worry,” he says when I don’t move. “Nothing like what happened today will happen again. I promise.” He gives me a long, slow smile that takes so long to develop, my lungs almost run out of air before it’s done. “We’ll just stay out of each other’s way.”

It’s what I asked for. Why does it feel so shitty to have my request granted?

He angles his face away, offering me a gorgeous quarter profile that makes the inside of my head all crunchy.

What are you doing? When the most powerful boy in school wants to fuck you on the regular, you let him.

I fumble for the doorhandle, my foot hitting the curb at the wrong angle so my leg twists, but I still put weight on it, more interested in removing myself from the situation than I care about the pain.

When I shut the door, I edge towards the window, meaning to utter another limp platitude but Lachlan’s gone in a squeal of tyres before I can say anything. I stare after him, blinking when he turns the corner, out of sight.

The minute I head inside, it’s immediately obvious that Dad isn’t there. He’s left my dinner on a plate in the fridge, ready to microwave. Chicken fried rice with extra vegetables, one of the three dishes he circulates.

I put together our lunches in return, setting them ready to grab and go in the morning. Then I sit and eat by myself, staring blankly at the wall, my mind resetting after the catalogue of disasters that peppered my day.

It strays to Lachlan. I can't work him out. Oscillating between cruel and kind until I have whiplash. The few interactions I've had with him feature so strongly in my recollections that it seems impossible I've known him such a short time.

His face is so clear in my mind I could draw him from memory. Draw the strange smile and the sad light he has in his eyes when he thinks no one is watching.

Which I shouldn't be thinking about at all. If there's a girl out there who could wipe away that sadness, it's not me. He's still going out with someone else and I'm not a cheat.

Except when you let him fuck you against the wall.

Oh, yes. Except for that.

As I clean my dishes, my thoughts turn to Dad. I'd like to think he's doing an extra shift at work just like the scrawled note on the bench says. Logic points me towards a different scenario.

I've put it off for almost a fortnight, but I know I shouldn't put it off any longer. Dad needs help and I don't know how to provide it.

I call his sponsor, biting my cheek until Spencer answers the phone on the fourth ring with a cheery, "Hello."

When I introduce myself, there's a long pause and I worry about another way to explain who I am because he obviously hasn't made the connection. Then his voice comes back on the line, apologetic.

"How can I help you, George?"

"Dad's out g-g-g... Dad needs your help."

Another pause, then I can hear the background noise diminish. Good. He's gone somewhere quiet so we can talk, and he can help me. I close my eyes in relief. An emotion that's short-lived.

"If your father needs help, he should make this call himself."

"He's not..." A tear runs down my cheek and I angrily wipe it away. "He's not in any fit s-state to do that right now. He needs to get back into treatment."

There's a low sigh. "I can't help you, George. I'm only his sponsor if he's in the program and you wouldn't be calling if he was."

“No, but...” I frown and pick at the edge of the table, my short thumbnail scoring the varnish we’d painstakingly applied to the wood. “There must be some way to get him back in there. An intervention, maybe?”

“If that’s what you want to do, the website has resources for families on how to organise them safely.”

I already know that. I’ve already read every resource provided a dozen times over. But I’m the only family Dad has down here. I can’t do it by myself and apart from Spencer, any friends my father has made are probably the wrong ones.

An intervention of one carries no impact. If it did, his troubles would have been sorted long ago.

I’m not above begging. “Please, Spencer. I c-can’t do this alone. H-he’s...” I have to suck in a deep breath, fighting to continue speaking. “What’s the point of being his sponsor if you won’t help him when he’s at his lowest?”

“Your father has to want to change before I can help him make those changes. I’m sorry, hun, but there’s nothing I can do.” He exhales, his tone becoming lower and softer. “I’m not able to be around him when he’s gambling. It threatens my abstinence. I know it’s not what you want to hear, but it’s true.”

“But what am I meant to d-do?” My voice is so desperate, it’s turned shrill, and I wince at the sound of it. “You don’t know what sort of p-people he’s b-borrowing—”

“Believe me,” he interrupts. “I know what sort of people.” He audibly swallows. “Are you safe? Do you need me to find emergency housing for —”

“I need you to help my father stop. That’s what I need!”

There’s silence, then a long slow sigh that sounds like a deflating balloon. Losing air the same way I’m losing my hope.

“I’m sorry. I can’t.”

The line disconnects and I choke on a sob, putting the phone upside down on the table because what I really want to do is throw it and I can’t afford a replacement. Even working every hour I can, there’s not enough money. Not at minimum wage and I don’t have any skills to earn higher.

The gulf of years between now and when I’ve graduated university, degree in hand, has never seemed as long. Even then, it’ll take time to work

my way up the salary ladder.

And if you let him, Dad will still spend every cent you earn.

My hands turn to fists as I struggle to breathe, to keep the panic at bay.

I'm at home. I'm safe. There's food in my stomach, electricity to keep the lights on, a roof over my head. So many things to be grateful for. Why dwell on the things I can't change?

AT SCHOOL THE NEXT MORNING, even keeping my head down doesn't stop the worst of the bullies from catcalling me in the hallways, sniggering in the classrooms, loudly telling their friends that a new cut of my now infamous video is available online.

I shrink in my seat, wishing invisibility was a thing. My shoulders draw so far up around my ears my neck ceases to exist.

So much for spending the first three months of the school year wishing my fellow students would notice me, say something to me, acknowledge my existence. Returning to that state of unseen and unremarked would be a godsend.

The moment the bell goes for lunch, I scurry away from the hoards of would-be teasers and retreat to the safety of my bench of undesirables. It's empty and I try to ignore the disappointment that wells inside me.

"Hey," Keanen calls in greeting long after I've given up on him. He slides onto the bench seat next to me, grinning. "If it isn't Miss Popular."

"Miss Notorious is the word I think you're searching for."

"Mm. Well, if Bradley ever gets around to selling posters like he's claiming, will you autograph mine?"

The thought of someone printing out large reproductions of my most embarrassing moment isn't a thrill. A sigh escapes my lips, and I struggle to find a light response to match his friendly tone.

Apparently reading my discomfort, Keanen offers a shoulder pat. "Sorry. I'm not really sure what to say to you, so I'm making a mess of it. I can just stop talking if you prefer."

I shake my head. "Can you help me think up some other nasty gossip to circulate so everyone forgets about me?"

“Sure. I heard Khai gives a handy to the referee before every match and that’s why he gets awarded so many penalty kicks in a season.”

My eyes light up. “Scandalous.” It’s also fair play to punch up and as captain of the rugby team, Khai can certainly take the hit.

For the rest of the break, we trade ever more ridiculous gossip, made more fun by it being one hundred percent untrue. It’s also unlikely to spread, given that even if we both weren’t already pariahs, Lachlan’s stunt yesterday would certainly cement me in the role.

Nobody’s going to take me seriously ever again.

With Keanen’s kind laughter to buoy me, the thought doesn’t hit as hard as it would have this morning.

I say goodbye and am halfway to class when three male students stop in front of me, blocking my way. When I try to move aside, they match me, step for step, letting me know it’s deliberate.

“Can I help you?”

The snarky question is absolutely the wrong thing to say. The largest of the three and self-appointed ringleader is Carrod Melchi. The moment I finish speaking, he sniggers and slides his foot forward. “Got some shoes that need cleaning. Heard you could help with that.”

Oh, ha-bloody-ha-ha. I roll my eyes and try to flank them again, but they’re nimbler on their feet. “Can you let me past? I’ll be late for class.”

“You can pass once you’re finished. Get to work.” When I don’t obey, he grabs the front of my blouse with one hand to pull me close, planting the other on my shoulders to force me to my knees. I punch at his hand, my pulse increasing every second I fail to get free.

“Let g-g-go of m-me,” I shout, my speech devolving into a tic almost immediately. It’s always worse when I’m stressed or sleep deprived and the past fortnight has provided ample fodder for that exact situation.

“Oh, does p-p-p-poor G-G-G-George w-w-w-want us to s-s-stop?” Carrod lets go of my blouse, giving me a light slap before holding my chin steady in a relentless pincer grip. “I told you what to do. Now get on with it.”

The two students either side echo his efforts, making snide remarks, mocking my stutter, my hair, my dress sense. A mild annoyance that turns more serious with each jibe.

While I frantically try to pull out of his grasp, new students drift over to watch, forming a semi-circle of voyeurs to my increasing distress. A

flashback to yesterday but at least then Lachlan was in control. With him in charge, I never felt afraid. Not like I do now with a hungry mob forming in front of me.

Then I see him, walking over. I turn my head away, not wanting another witness to my latest humiliation. With how we left things last night, I don't know if he's coming over to watch or to join in.

"Want another turn, Lock?" Carrod calls out, manhandling me until I'm facing Lachlan. "I'm sure she'd l-l-l-love it."

Lachlan's fist connects so hard with Carrod's mouth that his head snaps around ninety degrees. After the second blow to his jaw, my unlikely defender grabs the boy's head and smashes it against the brick wall of the science block.

I nearly fall as Carrod drops to his knees, the hand that had been pressing on my shoulder now clutching at my neck for support. I shove away from him, gasping for air as I retreat a few steps, relief replacing fear.

After a minute, the boy clambers to his feet, panting loudly. It's a mistake made obvious when Lachlan bunches the front of his shirt and jabs him three times in the face, the punches so quick they barely count as separate blows.

When he releases his hold, the boy slumps to his hands and knees again, making a hoarse sound that I don't understand until I see the marks from where a punch hit him squarely in the throat.

"Why are you teasing her for a stutter?" Lachlan asks in such an ominous tone that I shiver. Even though he isn't looking at me. Even though the threat is directed at my would-be attacker. "She doesn't make jokes about your micro penis."

There are a few titters, pupils moving away now the balance of power has shifted. They're still looking, still recording, but are no longer as invested in the outcome. Not now everyone knows how it ends.

Even his two mates have split, melting into the sparsening crowd.

"Don't you think she's owed an apology?" Lachlan asks.

When Carrod doesn't reply, still not fully tracking the change in circumstance, he earns another punch in the head. The savage efficiency that Lachlan uses to dispense his punishment sends a thrill of butterflies flapping in my stomach, turning me weak.

I've never had someone defend me before. I'm not sure what to do with the surfeit of emotion.

“If you are going to target someone for an impediment, maybe next time don’t pick one of my closest friends, hm?”

The designation is as much of a surprise to me as it is to him.

Lachlan delivers a final kick, catching Carrod under the chin and somersaulting him onto his back. Crimson spatter rains from his mouth as a cough rips from his lungs. In that position, he must be inhaling more blood than air.

I shouldn’t take joy in other’s pain but experience a savage rush of pleasure at his destruction.

“You okay?” Lachlan cups my head to draw me closer, searching my face when I don’t immediately answer.

Still battling with my mouth, I nod, relaxing into his touch. He presses a kiss to my forehead. The gesture might be as sexless as a distant uncle, but its tenderness is startling. He releases me, walking over to where Kari waits for him, putting a companionable arm around her waist as they move away in tandem.

The pupils left nearby mark out a large circle around me and Carrod, who’s still struggling; to breathe, to move, to right himself.

I’m shaking. My limbs don’t want to obey me but as I force them to step away, they regain control.

When I walk into English two minutes after the second bell, the teacher doesn’t berate me for my tardiness. A girl near the window pulls out a seat, an obvious invitation. I drop into it, and she welcomes me with a smile.

“I can’t believe you’re friends with Lock,” she says, her expression becoming perplexed the longer she looks at me. “Have you known him long?”

Mr Wilkins sends a frown our way, but the girl doesn’t seem fazed by his displeasure.

I shrug, not wanting to draw any further ire from the man who determines the grades I need to stay enrolled.

“You’re good friends, yeah?”

As I glance around the class, I see a few other pupils openly staring, trying to reshuffle the school hierarchy, fitting me into a new structure and adjusting their responses in real time.

I turn back to face the front, not wanting to attract any more attention than I’ve already had today, but the girl tugs at my sleeve, still wanting an

answer. I chuckle at the idea I know any more than she does, then shrug again. “Sure, I guess.”

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CHAPTER FOURTEEN

LOCK

LATE THE NEXT AFTERNOON, I stand at the student services desk, staring daggers at the unfortunate man on duty. I expected my request to be a simple one to fulfil, but he's just thrown a curveball at me.

"Are you really suggesting there's no empty rooms in the entire school?" I ask in a flagrant show of disbelief. "There must be something."

It's not just me being an irritant, either. Students drop like flies in this place, leaving every term.

At least one goes because of money troubles, usually when their parents have underestimated how expensive their divorce will be. Then there are the academic failures. If you don't meet the rigorous internal assessment standards required for two terms running, you're out and it doesn't matter how much money your parents have.

"What about Will's room? He only just left."

"We run a waitlist," the hapless man explains. "There's always at least a dozen students ready to take a place when someone leaves for whatever reason."

"Let me see."

He starts to protest, then shakes his head and swivels the monitor around to face me. Not that the names mean anything, but it seems unlikely

someone would mock up the list on the off-chance I turned up with this exact request.

Since I'm here, I lean over and grab his keyboard, typing in a search for George in the student database. She's there under the surname Lytton, the same one she tried on Menzies without success.

I pass the keyboard back. "This girl's top of the list now, understand? The first room that comes up for grabs, I want her in it."

The lack of housing puts an extra step in my plan but by the time I reach my car, I'm already planning a workaround.

Last night, I'd had trouble sleeping after George's impromptu visit. Not just because her sole condition also happens to be the one request I'm unable to fulfil.

I kept seeing the tiredness in her eyes, the weariness dragging at her slight frame. Her deadbeat father isn't taking care of her.

I can torment her. That's fine. For anyone else to do the same is unthinkable.

She needs to be free of his clutches. More than anything else, getting her out from under his selfishness, his addiction, his utter lack of capable parenting, is a priority.

I don't want her to beg me just because he broke her. Doing that once was lovely, a memory to treasure. To do it twice is just sick.

Out of the school grounds, I head for Patrick's club, my teeth already gritted because I need to ask him a favour. They clench even harder when I walk into my cousin's office to find him getting blown underneath his desk.

Not that there's anything unusual in that. Outside of opening hours, possibly inside them, he runs a free-use policy with his employees—male and female alike.

I'm not sure of the parameters or why anybody working there would think of it as an advantage, but it certainly isn't doing his staff retention any harm.

I retreat to the safety of the bar and grab a drink there, the glowering bartender accepting my ID with such reluctance it makes me wonder what tales Patrick has been spreading.

Since it's an hour until opening, the two dozen circular tables are empty. Even when they're full of patrons, the real money isn't made out here or in the booths along the side, though the cash going through the till forms a nice cushion to add a few zeroes to the tally occasionally.

Most of the money is made in the rooms out back. Set aside for private drinking, private gambling, private indulgences of any flavour. They come with a host or hostess or both if that's preferred.

I loathe being in this place but an unfortunate side effect of belonging to my family is that family is the only avenue I can turn to for help. Everywhere else, I risk my inquiries being used against us.

The idea hadn't worried me back when I had a choice. Now the decision is made, it's a constant irritant. Especially because the usual avenue when I need help outside my immediate team is Patrick.

A man who doesn't like to give away anything without getting more in return.

"Marley about?" I ask him, moving to his office after the stacked brunette woman slips out, wiping her thumb over the corner of her mouth as she flashes her headlights. A few weeks ago, I might have been tempted. Now, I barely notice. "I've got a job for him."

"And you've already got men at your disposal," Patrick says, hooking up one eyebrow as he reclines in his chair, putting his feet on the desk. "Why can't you use them?"

"The only person who fits the bill is already known to the target."

He keeps staring at me rather than answering until I give an exasperated sigh. "I just want someone to shadow a guy. Make sure if his wallet ever needs topping up, he's there with the readies."

"You know how loan sharking works, right? They get so desperate striking out at every other avenue they'd crawl over broken glass to borrow, even at our exorbitant rates."

I roll my eyes. "Yeah, I get the general idea."

"Yet you want to waste my men's time by following around one potential client? What's the expected loan worth?"

"Since when have you been so chatty?"

Patrick smirks. "The last time I let things slide, someone popped out of the family crest woodwork to take my place."

"Well, you should've looked more competent in the role, then Dad wouldn't have needed to unleash the replacement."

I glare but Patrick is completely unfazed, giving a lazy shrug. "Marley's laid up for a few weeks with another assignment. If you're looking for a collector, try Adnan. He's trained and ready."

"He's fifty kilos soaking wet."

But Patrick isn't in the mood for negotiating. "Take him or ask Creighton. I'm not part of your crew."

"Fine."

"You want a drink?"

He's already pulled out a drawer with a decanter and glasses at the ready. From the appearance, it's a bottle of aged red whiskey from an Otago cellar. Fifty years, minimum.

With reluctance, I shake my head.

"Your little friend's working next door," Patrick says, eyes fixing on me like a terminator's beam. "Would that have anything to do with the exacting requirements for your latest gig?"

I frown, my mind flicking through the dozen different candidates who know both of us. "Henderson?"

He snorts with laughter, shaking his head. "I believe the name she finally landed on is George but perhaps you know her as something else."

I freeze, staring hard at my cousin as though intense scrutiny would ever make a family member crack. "She works where?"

He nods to the right, and I trace out the businesses around here in my head, landing on a Pacific Fusion restaurant that caused a sensation when it opened, then faded into irrelevance within a matter of weeks. "As a server?"

"You'd have to ask her. She's hardly likely to blurt state secrets to me."

She said something back on that first day. Washing dishes or working on deliveries, maybe. I can't remember. It's lost in the swirl of anger from Kari's cancellation.

Then another part of Patrick's answer worries at me. "Why wouldn't she talk to you? What did you do?"

"I didn't do anything except be nice to her. If you're wanting a reason, I'd suggest it has a lot more to do with who I'm related to than anything else. The poor girl looked like she was about to faint when you introduced her to Creighton."

It's a solid enough answer but I don't like it. The proximity of her workplace rubs me the wrong way. I definitely don't like the thought of her being anywhere near Patrick, at all, ever.

Plus, we're miles from her home and that's miles from school. She must spend hours every day on buses to get between the three places.

A new task arrives on my to-do list, followed shortly after by another. George lit up every time we got near a piece of art. Since the girl's smart enough to earn a scholarship, she'll be an excellent candidate to take over my art history finals project.

It's not due until the end of the year, but I don't mind paying above the going rate to secure her right now.

I'll give it a few days' grace before proposing the offer so she doesn't become suspicious, then it'll be another pressure point to use on her.

The moment I'm out the door, I angle towards the restaurant. A few well-crafted minutes put an immediate end to George's employment, with a graphic description of the consequences if she ever learns who prompted the dismissal.

By the time I'm out of there, I have a message on my phone from Adnan, looking for directions. A few quick pointers get him out of my hair for now, and I arrange a meeting to catch him up on the rest.

I get behind the wheel of my car and stop, closing my eyes, checking off against an internal list to see where I'm placed. If schoolwork were as simple as planning George's manipulation, I'd sail through every class.

This shit's easy.

I only have one last stop on today's list. Home.

"Lock," my mother squeals in surprise as she always does, no matter that I texted her from the turnoff to ensure Dad was still absent, dealing with whatever horrendous business affairs he's chosen to tackle today. "Pamela's got a slice of that cake you adore."

I start to tell her I'm not stopping, then change my mind when I see Kari seated at the kitchen table, pretending to read a magazine. "Hey," I greet her, frowning. "You're a long way from home."

"Dimi dropped me off," she says, getting up to kiss me on the cheek like we haven't seen each other for weeks, instead of saying goodbye earlier in the afternoon. "He's meant to collect me and drop me back at Kingswood, but he seems to have forgotten."

Dimitri's her elder brother and heir to the Abercrombie dynasty. He's okay in small doses but I'm not looking forward to when Soren dies, and I have to deal with him on a more day-to-day basis.

The man has a sense of entitlement that puts my fledgling efforts to shame.

“You can take her back, though, can’t you Lockie? Or you’re welcome to spend the night here,” my mother says, turning back to Kari with a warm smile. “Both of you.”

Even the thought makes me shudder. “Sure. I’ll give you a lift.”

I sit opposite and take a few bites from the lemon poppyseed cake that is actually my mother’s favourite, not mine. Something she shows by demolishing three slices.

The first moment I can slip away, I do, hustling upstairs to check in every bedroom until I track down our errant maid, Amanda. She’s dusting in one of our guest rooms, the windows wide open to air out the revolting stench left by whoever stayed overnight.

She hums along to a song on the radio, a sure sign if any more were needed that Dad isn’t expected home. He can’t stand music playing in the house unless he’s the one playing it. We all creep around in stony silence most of the time.

“You missed a bit,” I say, shutting the door behind me and leaning against it to dissuade her leaving. “Want me to show you where?”

Her eyes take up half her face as she pauses, then they drop to the floor. The same subservience I’d love if it were George in front of me annoys me with her. Amanda’s in her early twenties. Taken during a fight with a rival organisation and kept on as a kindness since she didn’t know enough to make her dangerous.

Still, she must have at least one contact more than we know about. Otherwise, she wouldn’t be able to smuggle drugs into what should be the safest house in all of Canterbury.

“Look at me when I’m talking to you,” I snap, and her gaze immediately flicks back up to meet mine.

“Yes, sir. Please show me—”

“You gave drugs to my girlfriend.”

Her eyes eat up some more facial acreage until they’re so wide her other features are in danger of being eclipsed. “Kari must be mistaken,” she says, frowning as she contradicts me. Never a good idea within these walls.

Not that I care, I’m too shocked by how easily the word girlfriend slipped out of my mouth. George isn’t but if she was, this would be the most dangerous place to say that aloud.

Luckily, the maid doesn’t care about semantics.

“Not Kari. I’m talking about a few weeks ago at the party. You gave some pills to George, and she had no idea what they were. Care to enlighten me?”

In a second, she’s turned white.

“Don’t do that,” I snap as though it’s something within her control. “Just tell me what they were.”

“A... friend of mine makes them. They’re nothing dangerous,” she hurries to add. “Just something to help me relax.”

No need to ask her why she needs them. Nerves are something all of Dad’s employees suffer with. “How many can you get on short notice?”

“For tomorrow?”

“Right now would be better.”

She grimaces and shifts her weight onto one foot, rubbing the back of her ankle with the other. “A hundred?”

“That works for me. Cash okay?”

Amanda nods, leaving to fetch them from her quarters. I move back to my room to get the money. At some point, I’ll need to trace this back further, work out her contact and evaluate whether that poses any threat to my family, but for now all I want is the drugs. A few for me, the bulk for another student.

Not that he’ll realise they’re in his possession. If everything goes to plan, he’ll work that out about the same time as the school security team does.

Once I have them in hand, I re-join Kari and Mum in the kitchen and wait until she’s ready to leave.

I try to keep up with her chatter during the drive but lose interest before we hit the main highway. Not that it stops her talking. Kari’s more than equipped to perform to an audience of one.

Once we’re back at Kingswood, I give her a token kiss and we go our separate ways.

I’ve barely closed the door to my room when there’s a knock, and I open it again to see a vaguely familiar boy standing outside. “Yes?”

“Hey, I’m Keanen.” He rubs the back of his neck, glancing along the corridor. “I’m friends with George.”

“Right.” I’ve seen them about and she mentioned he was taking her to the dance, but I didn’t expect him to wander along to my room and challenge me.

If that is what he's doing. "What d'you want?"

"Just checking that you're cool with—" Keanen breaks off when he makes eye contact with me. My face is apparently broadcasting a lot more than just my confusion. "We arranged to go to the dance together, but that was before..."

Good god. Finish a sentence, why don't you?

"Are you asking me if it's okay to take a girl who you're already going to the dance with, to the dance?"

He nods, suddenly gushing, "Just checking I'm not stepping on any toes."

Stepping on toes isn't what I'm worried about. I don't usually rate guys for their attractiveness but I'm aware he has a country boy swagger thing going on that I suppose George might find attractive.

"She said a *friend* was taking her," I say in my most casual I-don't-want-to-tear-the-face-off-you-but-I-will-if-you-make-me kind of way. "Why would I mind? Were you planning on hurting her?"

His eyes bulge. "No! Why would you—?" He gathers himself, licking his lips nervously. "No. Nothing like that."

"You eat lunch with George, yeah?"

His nod is so cautious, his head barely moves.

"Bring her along to our table tomorrow. It'd be nice to get to know more of her friends." I frown as I try to remember where I've heard his name apart from out of George's mouth. "You tried out for the team, didn't you?"

Keanen is so eager to get gone, his foot is already a step down the hallway when he turns back to me. "Yeah, not really. Coach went through the motions, but the positions were already filled."

"You any good?"

He nods yes before the idea of humility occurs to him and he tries to walk it back. "I'm okay."

"There's a training game tomorrow night that's at an awkward time." Like every other practice and most of the competition games. I took a spot to help fit in when I first shifted into Kingswood, but those days are long behind me. "Feel like subbing in for me?"

His expression turns eager, and he nods. "Sure." Then he frowns. "But won't coach have to approve—"

This time I'm the one cutting him off. "Coach'll be fine with it. Trust me."

I shoo him away and close the door, frowning. George might think he's a friend, but the dude didn't come to my room because he's interested in making sure his gal pal can still be his platonic date to the ball.

He's into her.

If this was a fair competition, I wouldn't be worried. There's nothing Keanen brings to the table that I can't outdo. But with my relationship with Kari already stuck in her craw, he could look like a next-best alternative.

Keep your friends close and your enemies closer.

Keanen's about to find he can't make a move in this school without me or one of my friends there to guide and support him. Just so long as those moves are in the opposite direction to George.

She thinks he's a friend and in the friend zone he better stay.

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CHAPTER FIFTEEN

GEORGE

“I’M FIRED?” I stare at Sione, my boss. Or rather, the man who used to be my boss if I understood the gist of what he just told me, and I really hope I didn’t.

It’s hard enough to earn money. How I’ll earn it without my bargain-basement employment is something I really don’t want to think about.

“You’re not fired,” he reassures me, and my heartbeat settles. “It’s just that I can’t give you any hours. Not for the foreseeable future. I thought it easiest to let you know so you don’t wait around hoping.” He sucks air through his teeth during a lengthy pause, then shamefacedly admits, “I just don’t have the payroll budget I thought I did.”

I mean, I know the restaurant isn’t the most popular venue in town but it’s crazy to think they’ll manage with one team member less.

“You know I’ll give you a glowing reference,” he adds, still giving me that embarrassed smile. “If there were any other way...”

He trails off but I nod, more than capable of filling in the blanks.

Sione caught me at my locker, about to tie on my apron for a four-hour shift. Four hours of work I’d been dreading until confronted by the reality that there wouldn’t be any more hours, not for me. Now, I kind of miss it already.

“That’s okay,” I say because that’s what I’m meant to do, isn’t it? Pretend that it’s water off a duck’s back so Sione doesn’t have to add guilt to whatever other burdens he’s carrying. “I was actually thinking of trying to get another role closer to home, so this’ll probably work out well.”

It’s not a lie exactly. I’d spend every day looking for a better job if I thought the gambit might play out in my favour. The reason I’m still here, six weeks down the line, begging for more hours is because it’s not.

Still, the expression of relief on Sione’s face is better than his upset. And at least he’s nice about the whole thing. He could have just strung me along—my casual contract doesn’t allow any bargaining room from my end.

“I’ll pay you out for today,” he continues now, ushering me towards the rear exit. “It wouldn’t be fair for you to come all this way for nothing.”

That at least is something I can be grateful for. As I’m ejected out the back door, I try to take comfort from it.

A stance that lasts the two seconds until the exit door closes, then disappears as exhaustion tugs me into a bout of tears.

Half of it’s self-pity and the rest...? Well, it’s just been a while since I had a good cry and all the while there’s been a plethora of things to cry about.

However silly I feel, having a breakdown next to the stinking rubbish in the skip, it’s a release that’s well overdue. Endorphins scamper around, cheering me up even as my sobs grow worse.

“If you’re going to cry every time we meet, I’ll get a complex,” Patrick calls out. He must have been smoking around the corner because the rich scent of pipe tobacco clings to him as he wanders nearer.

I try to issue a smart-aleck quip in reply but can’t get the words out. The tears that were remedial a second ago suddenly become embarrassing. I can’t wipe them from my face fast enough.

“Do you want a hug?”

I stare at him in bemusement. Half the time when I think of Patrick, which I do far more often than our limited acquaintance warrants, he scares the bejesus out of me. The other half, I’m confused.

It’s the latter that comes to the fore as he doesn’t wait for an answer before enveloping me in a warm embrace, surprisingly comforting. “Is the rotting garbage getting you down?”

I recover and wipe my tears away, fishing a half-full pack of tissues from my pocket and blowing my nose. "It's the lack of employment. I just got fired."

"How bad an employee do you have to be to get fired from the worst job in the kitchen?"

"Dropping every second plate type of bad." I manage a watery smile. "But apparently, it's nothing personal. The restaurant is just going through a downswing."

He snorts in amusement. "It's not called a swing unless you expect it to improve at some point." He waves a hand at the building. "That place has gone through three tenants in the last five years. It's like a black hole of commercial real estate. No one can make it turn a profit."

"Really? And you picked the spot directly next to it with that glowing resume?"

Patrick's smile spreads so wide and welcoming that it could make the hardest heart flutter. "I like a challenge. My business model also doesn't rely on foot traffic, so there's that. Come on."

Before I know what's happening, he grabs hold of my wrist, tugging me towards the propped-open exit door.

"Wait! Where are we going?"

"Unless I've mistaken things, you're in desperate need of a low-paying low-skilled job and I have a ton of those available." He drags me past a startled-looking man in whites and a woman with so much cleavage she could split the difference with me and still be a D cup. Patrick stops in a unisex changing room, which seems a startlingly bad idea to me. "There're the uniforms," he says, waving a hand at an open shelf stacked with clothing. "Take your pick and try them on for size."

"You're giving me a job?"

"Trial run. Casual contract." He moves to the door, whistles, and gestures to a man standing just out of my visual field. "This is Glen. Tell him your schedule and how many hours each week you want to work, and he'll tailor a roster. You're over eighteen, yeah?"

My brain whirls from the offer, so I take a few seconds to catch up. "Yeah. Is that important?"

He looks past me to Glen. "Start her in the front, serving. You've waitressed before, right?"

I nod, still dazed.

Patrick seems to realise it, pulling a corset top and shorts in black and a white apron from the stacks and thrusting them at me. “Put these on and meet us out front. I’ll grab your relevant details and we’ll start you straight away.”

“O-okay.” I swallow hard, unsure if they’re expecting me to change while they’re still in the room, but Glen gives me a friendly nod before leaving, Patrick close on his heels.

The speed of everything takes me by surprise, but I soon rally. The shorts come to mid-thigh, not long but also not arse-grab territory. The top zips up despite the appearance of ribbons, and is a snug fit, shoving the front of my chest in such extreme directions that it gives me a cleavage.

“Knock, knock,” a female voice calls out as I’m tying on the apron. “You decent?”

“Yeah, come in,” I say, pulling the door open to a brunette with a wide smile and a messy updo that contains at least three pens.

“I’m Verity. You worked tables before?”

“In a café. I’ve not worked at a bar.”

“Same thing,” she confidently asserts, leading me into the main area. “Most patrons order at the counter but we offer tableside service for those who prefer it. You’ll be carrying drinks back and forth and chipping in behind the bar when Faisel”—she nods at the bartender who’s still setting up—“needs a hand.”

“Where is everybody?” I ask since all the tables are empty despite it having gone five.

Verity chuckles. “We open from seven till two for the main area. Out back, it’s at the client’s discretion.”

My frown increases as I try to calculate how that fits into my school schedule. Much as I’d love to work all the hours I can every night, the last bus runs at eleven fifteen, getting me home just before midnight. That’s a maximum of four hours and I’m already tired getting home well before that. I can’t imagine how I’ll feel in a few weeks if I keep to that punishing schedule.

“If you’re not a night owl, don’t worry,” she continues, reading my expression. “The back rooms are hired out from noon each day on the weekends, occasionally during the week, and they need service, too.”

For the few hours before opening, Verity continues to show me around the place, taking me through drink orders and making sure I know at least a

few dozen of the more popular cocktails.

“Just grab one of us if you have any bother,” she offers a few minutes before the doors open for the night. “Everyone’s here to help.”

The friendly atmosphere is a refreshing change. People at the restaurant might have been pleasant but when you’re overworked, it’s hard to keep a smile on your face or carve out the few minutes needed for a catch-up.

That doesn’t appear to be a problem here. Even when the place has been open for a few hours, there are more staff than customers. An imbalance even more noticeable when Patrick and Verity pull me away from the front to take me on a tour around the back.

“Lock mentioned your dad has a gambling problem,” he says without a trace of embarrassment. By bluntly addressing the issue, I find it far easier to respond than I might otherwise have done.

“Yes, he does.”

“If you want to steer clear of rooms being hired for private gaming, just let Glen know. There’s usually a wide enough spread of staff available that no one needs to be anywhere they’re uncomfortable.”

“Oh, I don’t have a problem with it,” I say, then bite my lip. To be honest, I’ve never really thought about it.

“Let him know,” Patrick repeats. “It’s okay if things change around, too. Just keep him updated.”

“I’m sure he has a lot more important things to organise than a gambling-free roster.”

That makes him laugh. “It’s literally his job. If you’re not nit-picking about hours and tolerance levels, you’ll leave the poor man with nothing to do.”

“And the devil finds work for idle hands,” Verity intones with ominous glee. “Not saying that we sometimes make things up just to see how he handles it.”

“See?” Patrick raises his eyebrow as though her teasing words were court-worthy proof. “Compared to this lot, you’re no trouble.”

He stays with me in a room where there’s a roulette table and a handful of bidders. The slender operator glances over at me, doing a double take and frowning at Patrick who shrugs.

“What’s that about?” I ask, growing bolder as everyone seems perfectly happy to be open about everything. “Have I stumbled into the middle of some secret language?”

“Hardly secret.” He points to the croupier, a man in his mid-twenties who must spend at least half of the hours he isn’t working lifting weights at the gym. “Miles just expressed alarm at your age, and I assured him you weren’t part of any clandestine agreement.”

Patrick tilts his head, another smile playing at the edge of his mouth. “He should know by now that I let people get at least five years’ experience in adulthood before I suggest some of our more advanced employment clauses.”

After the bluntness earlier, his sudden dance around the topic becomes even more suspicious. “What clauses?”

He nudges me in the ribs. “Never you mind. Come back to me with that question when you’re twenty-three and I’ll give you a graphic demonstration. Until then, it’s none of your concern.”

“Why five years?”

He bursts into laughter. “Because any sooner and you can’t be sure the adult part of adulthood really stuck.”

I shake my head as the entire conversation flies right over it. I decide since Patrick told me not to be concerned, I won’t be. If that proves to be a mistake, I’ll know better in the future.

“There’s a private bar in the corner,” he continues now, then drops his voice low. “If you really don’t mind gambling, these rooms come with far less chance of rowdy customers. If anyone tries to cop a feel, we’ll kick them out, but it’s easier all round to keep clear.”

“Sounds good.” I smooth my apron, growing more unsure of myself the better the workplace appears. All these options make my head spin, and the overstaffing is something so opposite to every other place I’ve worked, I’m anxious for no reason. “Would you like me to stay here now?”

“Did Faisel give you a reference guide?”

“For the mixology?” When Patrick nods. “Yeah.”

“Then why don’t we leave it there for the day? If you’re really keen to keep working, you can review the material from home. Glen will email your schedule.”

“Do I take the uniform?”

Verity shakes her head. “Follow me and I’ll show you the hamper. Just put your uniform in there at the end of shift or if someone spills a drink on you. We send it off to a commercial laundry and the shelf is kept stocked.”

When we're safely inside the staff room, I whisper, "Doesn't it bother you that men can come in here while you're changing?"

"No, but I'm sleeping with half of them so there's that." She must see my eyes widen because she chuckles and wrinkles her nose. "You'll get used to it. Most of us are hooking up in some ways, as long as it doesn't impede our work."

I belatedly realise that everyone on the staff here is exceptionally attractive and my stomach bottoms out. "Is that s-something everyone does?"

"It's not part of your employment contract if that's what you're asking." She winks at me. "Definitely just a perk."

My cheeks, always tell-tales, flush bright crimson.

"Don't worry. No one's expecting you to do anything." She chews the inside of her cheek. "Patrick's already made it very clear you are a hands-off staff member. He'd happily kill anyone who went against his word."

Her voice is light and airy, so at odds with the threat of murder that I take a while to decipher that's what she actually said.

"Does he kill many people?"

"Not in the club, he doesn't. You're good from here?"

I nod and thank her, quickly changing and slipping out the back before my mind can be blown any further. The bus ride home is long enough that the entire evening takes on a dreamlike quality.

Did I really get fired? And hired? Do other workplaces have staff ready to jump each other's bones the moment they get a five-minute break?

My phone beeps with an email when I'm walking home from my stop, and I pause at the side of the footpath to scan the text. An employment contract. Unless I've made some kind of rookie error, my hourly wages just tripled.

A smile blossoms on my face, a lightness lifting my mood as I continue on towards home.

Dad isn't in and my smile falters a little. When my phone buzzes, set to vibrate, I think it'll be him, feeding me one from his endless list of excuses.

Instead, it's a text from Lachlan. "*Your dad's asked to extend credit at one of our clubs. Do you want me to say no?*"

I gulp for air as I read and reread the text, making sure it says what I think it does. After Spencer's easy dismissal of my plea for help, I'd lost my momentum, unable to think of another way forward, but this...? This is an

answer to my prayers. “Yes,” I immediately text back, then clarify, “*I mean yes, say no to him.*”

He sends me a thumbs-up emoji. A few minutes later, he’s back. “*Should I ban him? No gambling and no loans?*”

I stare at the words, hardly daring to believe it.

There’ll be other clubs, other sharks on the hunt for prey, but it’ll take time for Dad to find them. Time during which he might come back to his senses. Another chance for him to straighten up and fly right.

“*Yes!*”

I wait for a second, heart thumping so forcefully I see the pulse in my eyes, then he responds, “*Done.*”

The interaction is so simple I can’t fully comprehend it. That the course of my dad’s addiction could be so fundamentally altered so quickly steals the air from my lungs.

“*Thank you.*” I chase the message with a load of happy face and heart emojis, smiling through my tears of relief.

A saviour stepped in to help and the weight taken off my mind makes me feel unbelievably good. A sensation so alien, it’s like I’m not even the same person.

Lachlan waved his magic wand and made everything all right. Not forever, maybe not even for long, but a respite from my worst thoughts is welcome even if it doesn’t last.

Once again, I owe him for something I could never have handled alone.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

GEORGE

A FORTNIGHT LATER, my life has changed so drastically that I barely recognise myself.

Lachlan insists that Keanen and I join his group for lunch every day. A blessing that becomes even more helpful when Keanen wrangles a place on the rugby team and afterwards disappears each day for practice.

If not for Lachlan publicly extending the hand of friendship, I would have spent every break alone. As it stands, I miss my friend, but I'm spoiled for choice of whom to talk to.

Fair-weather friends maybe, but that's better than no friends at all. It's nice to have people to chat with, people who—despite or maybe because of their wealth—don't judge me.

Tucked away in his small group, Lachlan is a revelation. He's quick, always ready with a quip or a barbed retort but also just as ready to toss in a laugh track when the mood grows too dire.

He might relegate all his class assignments to other students for completion but the more I grow to know him, the more I realise it's not because he couldn't do them himself. He's smarter than he seems to realise, and his interpersonal skills are incredible.

Introvert that I am, I could happily watch him charm his way through the entire school roll.

I would blush fire truck red if that same level of charm was turned on me but that's not an issue. After making me welcome the first day, he doesn't pay much attention, sticking with the looser group within a group of boys rather than the girls.

After an awkward start, even Kari is welcoming. For days, I hide my nerves around her, expecting the promised retribution to fall on my head at any moment. I don't know if she suspects the reason or just assumes I'm shy, but I don't sense that I'm a problem for her.

If she can forgive me for publicly 'dating' her boyfriend (even though I wasn't, not from my perspective) then I can forgive her threats. The strained smiles and stiff lines of our forced small talk soon turn into easy banter.

There's a sharp edge to her teasing sometimes but the more time that elapses from the night I spent with Lachlan—the first one, not the time she doesn't know about—the friendlier she becomes.

One day in our shared Economics class, we deface the online version of the textbook with increasingly hilarious captions until I'm in absolute hysterics and she isn't far behind.

The teacher finds it less amusing but since I'm now in Lachlan's weird protective circle, she doesn't voice that opinion aloud.

After so long spent being an outcast, fitting into a group, even awkwardly, is a relief. I'm more like the girl I was a year ago. Before we fled Auckland. Before Jack.

Work is also a pleasure.

At Patrick's suggestion, I spend most of my hours in the private rooms, even building a friendly rapport with some of the regular customers. Especially a yacht building client who likes to occupy his time at the club by paying more attention to chatter than he pays to his cards.

His clientele alone would make a tabloid journalist rabid. The stories he tells about them are pure entertainment.

I also discover to my delight that the tip jars dotted around the place are heavily utilised and split evenly at the end of each shift. Despite not being a tip-friendly country, the patrons don't seem to realise that. So many of them have overseas accents I shouldn't be surprised but I still am.

When the extra line appears on my deposit statement, sometimes several times larger than my actual pay, I give a squeal of excitement.

My world is completely different. So much better it's like someone flicked a random button on the television remote and the screen turned to colour instead of the black and white it's been for so long.

Despite my longer hours, I even see Dad more often. He's no longer taking pains to avoid me, and I hope he's accepting help again. I attribute the noticeable change to Lachlan's interference and pray it'll be years before his addiction again spirals out of control.

On Thursday lunchtime, I'm sitting near Greta—the girl who first paid attention to me after Lachlan punched Carrod out—and her best friend Issy, when talk turns to the upcoming dance.

"I thought my dress was sorted," Greta says with a heavy sigh. "Then I discovered I need an extra inch in the hips that can't be let out of the seams, and now I don't know what to do. There's the bridesmaid dress I wore to my cousin's wedding that still fits but it's chartreuse because she's an evil witch who didn't want to be outshone on the day."

Her expression is so over-the-top morose I have to bite back a smile. "Sounds good to me," I say, then to cheer her up add, "Mine came from an op shop and took three washes to get all the stains out, so you'll be better dressed than at least one person."

She wrinkles her nose, laughing, then Kari grabs her arm. "You should come along with me tonight. Lock's arranged for a private fitting at a department store, just a second..." She fiddles on her phone, then brings up a photo. "These are a few of the ones she's selected for me to try on, but you're welcome to come along and grab something so long as I get first pick."

"Really?" Greta leans over the screen, squealing with excitement as she scrolls through the display. "Aren't these couture?"

"Of course," Kari says in her poshest voice before giggling. "The woman who runs the department—Tandi—can fit anything to anybody, and it only takes her a few minutes to do adjustments, an hour tops."

Greta duly gushes, and shows them to Issy over her shoulder, who asks, "How much are they?"

Kari scrolls across to the price tag, tilting the screen so we can all see it, and I laugh, thinking it's a joke, then turn it into a whistle of admiration when I understand it's not.

Lachlan had told me the price tag for my outfit that first night. I'd mentally assigned the bulk of it to the jewellery but now I see half was

allocated to the dress instead. My inner temperature nudges up a degree thinking how he sliced it off me.

“D’you want to come along?” Kari asks me and I take a moment to recover from the intensity of the memory.

When I do, I shake my head. “Bit rich for my blood. Besides, I told you, I’m sorted.”

“Yeah, but you could wear the dress you have to something else.” She must read something in my expression because she tries another angle. “If you’re not buying, you can model them for us. Tandi puts out nibbles and a bottomless champagne glass. Doesn’t that sound fun?” She looks around the group for support and they echo her enthusiasm.

It sounds enjoyable, and I do have the night off. Playing dress up is something I almost never get to do and having been through the ringer with Tandi once already, it’ll be far more fun to see her pinched lips and quick needle judging someone else.

“Yeah, thanks. It sounds fun.” I glance at Lachlan who stares blankly at the ground, his gorgeous eyes unfocused. That pinch of sadness I see in him sometimes is in full effect, tugging at my sympathies though I don’t know the cause.

I remember his gaze sliding across to spy on me while a fluster of assistants raced to get me ready in time for his deadline. By the time I realised he was looking, I’d been stark naked, too distracted to be vulnerable.

The climbing heat in my cheeks isn’t just the flush of embarrassment, but I pretend it is. That’s easier than admitting to anything deeper, less tangible.

With something to look forward to, my afternoon lessons slow to a crawl. The heat in the classroom and the monotony of the teacher’s voice combine to make slow yawns my new preferred method of breathing.

I take the bus home then face the weird prospect of trying to find the right clothing to go clothes shopping in. It’s only when I absolutely must leave for the bus into town that I finally grab a peasant blouse and wide leg jeans from my limited stash, throwing a side-knitted cardigan over top to keep me warm, a move I bitterly regret when I have to sprint to catch the bus.

Greta waits outside the store, relieved when I arrive so she has someone to chat to until the others get there, not that they keep us waiting long.

Five minutes later, we head inside and Tandi greets us, acting as hostess. She goes around the room, making sure we each have a drink of our choosing and a variety of snacks to munch on, before querying our preferred styles and showing each of us the dresses she thinks will fit those best.

“Ooh, try this one,” Kari says, taking a pale pink dress from a hanger and shoving it in my direction. As I spy the zeroes on the price tag, I’m scared to touch it, let alone manhandle it that way.

“That is a lovely selection,” the sales lady agrees, waving me towards an empty changing room. “We also have that in pale green, which might be better suited to your complexion.”

“Don’t worry about that,” Kari says with a wave of dismissal. “She’s trying it on for me.”

Perhaps angling for another sale, Tandi makes sure the alternative colour option also reaches my changing room. I model the pink for Kari, who’s already got another three selected by the time I walk out to show her the first.

From then on, I’m kept busy, trying on garment after garment. Some of them make me look fantastic, others make me look like a powder puff after excessive use.

I’m fine with flouncing in front of the other girls but hustling into and out of the garments has me run ragged. As I catch my breath, staring at myself in the mirror after the dozenth change in twenty minutes, I reluctantly decide I’ll never make it as a model on the runways of Paris.

A pity because I love the clothes. Love the differing textures and the exquisite attention to detail in the beading and embroidery, the delicate hand stitching where a machine would be too rough.

I can imagine falling asleep tonight with my head in clouds of chiffon, taffeta, silk, velvet, tulle, and thick brocade.

Things slow as the group selects their favourites and a small army of seamstresses make the changes necessary to get the elaborate dresses to fit.

Finally, it’s just me and the pale green dress alone in the changing room. With a shrug, I decide to try it on, too, even though I’m not taking it and I’m certainly not paying.

Tandi is right. The moment I pull on the dress in the ‘seafoam’ colour, it takes my breath away. The bodice is in rough silk, pulled tight at the back with long ribbons in a slightly darker shade than the main dress. The skirts

are in a lighter, floatier fabric. See-through but with so many layers it becomes opaque except for brief glimpses as I move.

I thrust my leg out and twist to the side, sucking in my cheeks for dramatic effect. It looks so damn good I can't resist slipping through the curtains and strutting along the mirror-lined catwalk, doing a twirl for my amusement.

"See?" Tandi calls out, leaning against the wall and looking like she's in desperate need of a cigarette break. "Told you it would look fantastic."

She winks at me like we're equals, and there's a rush of kinship. The other girls are being measured and fitted and sewn into their dresses like any halfway decent lady of the manor, while here I am, sneaking in a secret moment playing dress-up while their attention is distracted.

It's not even something they're doing per se, just a difference between their upbringing and mine. We're here, at a crossroads, briefly cohabitating, but soon I'll move on one way with my life while they head in another direction.

In the meantime, I should take advantage of every chance I get.

Tandi moves behind me, staring over my shoulder at my reflection, making a few adjustments to the ribbons so they narrow my waist and flare my hips, creating curves out of nowhere.

I'm staring, entranced, when Kari walks out of the sewing studio wearing a dark blue form-fitting dress encrusted with so many sequins, she could be a real-life mermaid bursting from the waves.

"You look fantastic," I say, meaning every word. "You're going to be best-dressed at the ball, absolutely."

She preens, picking up a fan from a nearby table and fluttering her eyelids as she half-hides behind it. "You think? Lock said whatever I pick, he's getting his tie in the same colour, so we match."

I swallow down the wad of envy, scolding myself about choices coming home to roost. "That's wonderful. I can't imagine anyone else taking the title."

Tandi hovers, fiddling with our garments, poking and prodding and tightening and adjusting until she seems happy with the result. "These are both excellent choices. I'm sure your partners will be thrilled." She frowns at the mirror, then at me. "Unless you're..."

When she waves her hands suggestively at the pair of us, Kari laughs and takes my arm, playing into the implied partnership. "Oh, yes."

“I couldn’t ask for a more picture-perfect date,” I declare, sliding my arm around Kari’s waist. “Who needs men?”

Tandi glances towards the entrance as the bell over the door goes, then does a double take. “Mr McManus.”

I spin around to see Lachlan lounging in a chair. His eyes drift across Kari, eyebrows raising in appreciation, then his attention fixes on me... and he scowls.

I turn back to the mirror, worried, but the dress looks fine. I twirl, glancing at the second mirror to check the back. In the reflection, I see Lachlan tilt forward, eyes still glued to me, then shake his head before burying his face in his hands.

My stomach knots and I bite on the inside of my cheek. Of course, he’s scowling. I don’t belong here, parading around in these garments I could never afford. It’s ridiculous.

Once a crier always a crier but I’m sick of shedding tears. I head for the changing room to get away from his judgement.

“You’re not taking it?” Tandi asks, and I turn back but her gaze is fixed on Lachlan, not me.

Embarrassed, I shake my head. “Sorry, I was just modelling for the others. I already have a dress for the dance.” When Tandi barely acknowledges me before her eyes return to Lachlan, I stride to the changing rooms.

With the curtain pulled, I look at myself again, wondering what Lachlan found so upsetting. My neck itches and I scratch at it, viciously, digging in my nails. Distraught for no good reason.

My hands are clumsy as I struggle to undo the fastenings that I had no trouble with earlier. Even worse, they’re sweaty, and the material is natural silk. It’ll stain.

I pause, closing my eyes, flexing my fingers, gathering myself before I try again.

The dress comes off easily the second time around and, as I pull on my jeans, my breathing steadies. It’s okay. I’m not cut out for the global elite, but I don’t need to be.

My stint with this echelon only lasts until the school year ends.

When I step out, I hang the dress on the discards rack and go to help Greta adjust her now-fitted dress. There are half a dozen spaghetti straps

crisscrossing over the back—a great look when they’re in position, messy as hell otherwise.

Once fixed, she gives a satisfied sigh, smoothing her hand over the curves of her belly. The deep rose suits her complexion to a T.

“You’re not shopping any longer?” Lachlan asks from behind, making me jump. I thought he was still on the far side of the store.

“Not me. I tried on some things for fun but it’s a bit rich for my blood.”

His lips curl into a teasing smile. “Keanen isn’t good enough to dress up for?”

“Keanen?” Greta blurts. “Newly crowned God of the rugby field, Keanen?”

Not a way I’ve heard him referred to before. “Yeah, I guess.”

My hesitation must catch Issy’s ear because she glances over. The scrutiny makes me nervous, and I shake my head, clasp my elbows.

It has been a while since Keanen asked me. Maybe I should have checked in with him before assuming we were still going together.

I hedge, “Perhaps not? He asked me a month ago.”

“You better lock that down, girl,” Greta says with a laugh. “There’s a queue out the door to jump on that ride.”

“Oh, no. We were just going as friends,” I assure her. “But he asked when we were...” I trail off, unsure how to word it.

“Outcasts?” Lachlan asks, his eyes dancing with amusement. “Back when you flew so far under the radar nobody knew you existed?”

I mock punch him, turning back to Greta whose smile seems frozen in place, I’m unsure why.

Kari changes her mind a few times over the length of her gown, swapping out pair after pair of heels until she lands on the right ones. She takes so long, the other girls go back to browsing, even though their outfits are now sorted.

It’s a relief to leave the store. Even more of a relief to head for the bus stop. Once I finally reach home for the night, I immediately scurry to my room, wanting the comfort of the familiar surroundings.

Half an hour later, there’s a knock at the front door, and I rush to open it, thinking Dad’s forgotten his key. Lachlan stands outside, carrying a dress bag on a hanger.

“Here,” he says, thrusting it at me in an uncharacteristically clumsy gesture. “You looked...” he trails off, frowning at the floor. “Keanen asked

me if he could still take you to the dance after we... after I *teased* you in the cloakroom. He didn't want to step on any toes."

He looks on the verge of breaking down and I don't understand. Lachlan's always so sure of himself. Always confident that no matter what he'll come out the other side okay.

Now his expression is distraught. There's a reddish tinge to the delicate skin around his eyes. If I saw that on myself, it would be because I've been crying.

But Lachlan is the strongest person I know. He doesn't *cry*.

"I just... I told him it was fine. He... he really likes you, but he's held back because he knows that..."

My pulse beats so hard in my ears that I can't hear anything but the faltering words of the boy standing in front of me.

He shakes his head, nodding at the dress that's now in my hand. The one he has no business buying me, even if we were going to the dance together. The dress that is far too freaking expensive for anyone to justify the purchase.

"You looked beautiful. I couldn't take my eyes off you."

I reach out to touch him, take his hand, try to ease some of whatever burden it is he's struggling with but he evades me, sidestepping out of range.

"I tried," he says so softly I barely hear him. "I argued with my father about Kari but he wouldn't budge... and he's not a man who accepts the word no."

My throat swells, nose running as I fight back tears, watching Lachlan do the same. Watching a single tear trickle down his face.

"I didn't want you to think I didn't try... that I didn't think you were worth fighting for... I'm so sorry, George. I really wanted it to work out between us... but I can't go against him."

He turns, weaving slightly as he walks along the front path, heading away from me, heading for the safe retreat of his car.

There's a blur over my vision when I close the door. It feels like there's a hand around my throat, pulling ever tighter until I can barely swallow.

I lean my head against the wood, still clutching the dress that I don't even want.

All I want is to take back my ultimatum. To run after Lachlan and tell him I don't care if he's dating some other girl. I don't care if he has to get

engaged to her or marry her or have a bunch of little Lachlan clones with her for the sake of his family.

My answer should have been yes.

It's the answer my body has been singing all along.

At the start, I thought there was a reason to insist on him being free and clear. So soon after the mess of my last relationship, it was valid to think that agreeing to his request would only end in disaster.

But Lachlan's already in tears. I feel broken. If this was an exercise in self-protection, it's time to call it a rampant failure.

I thought I set a reasonable boundary, but all I built was a no-mans-land that, given the circumstance, neither of us can hope to cross unscathed.

LOCK

I wipe my face clean as I walk to the car, suppressing a smile as I pull into the road and see George in the rearview, standing, frozen in place on the front porch, staring after me as I drive away.

A few mournful glances at the dance tomorrow night, maybe a few minutes of stolen conversation, and she'll be putty in my hands.

I rub my eye as I wait at the lights, forgetting and grimacing as the lemon juice on my fingers steals into the corner, making it water enough for another tear to roll down my cheek.

The juice was a backup. It's been a hot minute since I last had a tear flow naturally, and George has quickly upgraded from a daydream to an obsession. I can't leave anything to chance.

I turn the corner and suddenly have to pull into the curb, cutting the engine, losing the lights, hiding in the darkness as actual tears threaten to flow. My chest seizes like I'm having a bloody heart attack.

What if it's not enough? What if she sees straight through these attempts? What if the only person I'm fooling is myself?

My confidence shreds.

Every time I think I know this girl—think I can forecast how she'll react—I end by proving myself wrong. Why would this time be any different?

Like her job. I got her fired and expected her to at least mention it during our shared lunches, had the perfect project ready-to-go when she did.

But she never said a peep. Never mentioned it once. When I had Greta casually bring up past firings, George contributed her most recent anecdote to our circle but also said she'd found a different job that same day.

That same *night*.

At our shared admiration for the feat, her cheeks coloured a little and she offered a coy shrug. "Miss Industrious, that's me."

As labels go, it's a good fit. A smart girl who's perfected the art of making do.

I rest my head on the steering wheel, eyes closed, struggling to draw oxygen into my lungs, an imbecile who can't even master breathing.

Images flash in my mind, like someone set off a strobe in there and all my nightmares got up to disco. I see my stepmother's cracked skull, her vacant eyes. See her son, my half-brother, sitting a few metres distant, his face bloody and bruised, but still alive.

Stunned. Hurt. Fearful. But still wearing an expression of assurance that everything would work out because that's how things always go when you're the eldest son and heir to Creighton McManus.

I know better.

I know that sometimes things don't work out the way you want them to, at all.

My stepmother's face morphs, turns into my mother. The horror of the image shakes me. My father might be a stone-cold automaton but his affection for Mum seems genuine, the only person capable of making him relax, making him smile. I also know, at any moment, the image could come true. He could turn as easily as you'd flick on a switch.

He might already have another family waiting in the wings. Who the fuck would know?

The only way to be safe is to kill him but I can't. He hamstring me so I only have snapshots of the business, a tiny percentage of what I need to know to take control. I thought this coming year that would change, but the threat of sending me overseas to a training camp puts a full stop on that ambition.

Without knowledge, without standing, his men won't rally behind me, they won't follow my vision.

As it stands, the moment my father is out of my life, someone else will seize power. Someone with a lot stronger backing than I currently have.

Beg or plead for my life, my mother's life, and it won't make a difference. Whoever took the reins would kill us immediately to stop disgruntled associates banding behind me, biding their time.

I'd end up the same shade of dead, just destroyed by another man's hand.

That's the reality of the world I joined.

Am I really going to invite George into this nightmare? If I truly cared for her, I should send her a thousand miles away. Never see her again.

And maybe I'm too selfish to do the right thing, even for the girl that I want to worship and adore, the one I see changing in front of me, blossoming with the application of a few new friends, growing stronger, knowing if anyone tries to tease her, hurt her, I have her back, would protect her the way nobody else in her life bothers to.

The girl whose early worry lines are reversing direction, easing away.

My girl.

I'm not even sure when the transition took place, but that's how I think of her. I've lost track of dozens of other lunchtime conversations since she joined our group. At first, my attention was focused on Keanen, watching him like a hawk, but once he'd gone, I turned that same attention on George.

Not directly, not all in-her-face, but listening to her when I'm meant to be talking with someone else. Noting the persuasive language she uses when she wants details, the support she offers without pause when someone appears fearful or hurt.

I hear the hesitation that means she hasn't spoken an idea to a real person before, the way her enunciation grows laxer when she's confident. The way she bites her nails when she's shy. The lock of hair that never quite catches in her elastic, so always falls over her face, ending tucked behind her nibble-worthy ear.

While I pretend to stare into space, I throw glances and take in quick snapshots until I have a family album of her expressions, her postures, her mannerisms stored up there.

I know her speech patterns, know the things guaranteed to make her laugh. Or roll her eyes. Or gasp. The dirty joke during which she'll clap a hand over her mouth in complete astonishment, loving every word.

Seems like my decision's made.

I start the car, leaning over to grab a packet of wet wipes to clean the lingering juice from my fingers.

Everything's set in motion. I'll let it play out and if it doesn't work, I can regroup. Think of another way to win George. Another thousand ways. Any way that works to get her where she belongs, where it feels she was always destined to be, by my side.

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CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

GEORGE

IT'S odd walking into the ballroom on Keanen's arm. We've barely spoken to each other in the past couple of weeks. Almost the moment we joined Lachlan's group of friends each lunchtime, he got on the team, and I've barely seen him. Occasional heys in the corridors, but that's about it.

Perhaps because of that, the ride here made me uncomfortably anxious. Our small talk was halting, neither one of us really knowing what to say. We bonded over being outcasts but that was just for a few weeks.

I don't really know him at all.

Thank God we're just here as friends because if I had to worry about where the evening was going, I might have opted to stay home.

"Want to get a commemorative picture?" he asks, already pulling me into the open booth. "Smile!"

I fake a grin, putting my head next to his, then the photographer says, "How about another one. Maybe a kiss?"

Keanen tries for my lips, and I turn my head, letting them land awkwardly on my cheek. The fumble makes my stomach clench way too hard, but I keep the false smile in place.

When I glance back towards the entrance, I see Lachlan staring at me, a sad smile on his face before he turns away.

The pinch of guilt in my midriff grows stronger.

Keanen slides a hand down my back as I walk slightly in front of him into the main ballroom. Instead of being a comfort, it makes my skin all skittery, like it's been touched by a spider. I try to concentrate on his words rather than his physicality—that's how we originally bonded, after all—but with the high volume of chatter over background music, I can barely hear him. It's a relief to get to our seats.

"Do you want to dance?"

I glance at the floor area set aside for it, to be expanded later, and shake my head. "Not just yet. Are there any teammates you should catch up with? I just want to sit and watch everyone walk in, dressed to the nines."

The people-watching aspect is rather incredible. Some girls who don't normally wear makeup or don't wear a lot, look completely different after their beauty shop makeovers. Others have hairstyles—successful or not—that alter the shapes of their faces until more than once, I misidentify someone, only to spot my error a few minutes down the track.

Keanen walks away, appearing happy to join his mates near the drinks counter. I press a hand to my abdomen, feeling the strange flutter as my stomach tries to unknot itself.

It's been that way ever since Lachlan came to my room last night, crying. The brief glimpse of him in the lobby rekindles the tension.

There've been times in the past when my ex had reduced me to tears. Although they're not happy memories, they also didn't feel as bad as this.

I made the wrong decision.

I don't know how to fix it.

My eyes have dropped to the table by the time Lachlan and Kari walk inside, but I know instantly they have. There's a hushed aura of respect from the other students, a feat that our principal would pay to command.

I take my time before glancing over. When I do, heat blossoms in my core, melting me from the inside out.

He's beautiful.

I've never thought to describe a boy that way, but Lachlan is breath taking. Beside him, Kari appears plain though toe-to-toe, she'd easily outshine most of the girls in the room.

This was such a bad idea.

A pulse of desire grips me, twisting through my centre until I'm squeezing my thighs, holding a hand to my cheek to hide my blush of

shame.

“Are you too hot?” Keanen asks, dropping into the seat beside me. He’s got a beer in one hand but puts it down to pour me water from the bottle on the table. “If you need to go outside, I’ve got the keys to a private patio where no one will bother us.”

“Wow,” I say, forcing a smile again and hoping it soon becomes genuine. I owe Keanen a better class of companionship than I’ve managed so far. “You’ve got connections.”

He taps the side of his nose and winks, the dusting of freckles making him look mischievous. “Stick with me, kid. I’ll hook you up with whatever you need.”

I smile at him but my gaze drifts further, back to where Lachlan is taking a seat, Kari at his side, beaming radiantly. They’re half a room away but I can’t keep my eyes off him. Not when he’s idly chatting with the table, greeting friends as they sail enroute to their own tables, or when he looks pensive, staring into space.

He glances over to catch me staring and crosses his eyes, making me laugh. Beside me, Keanen follows my attention and drains the rest of his beer. “You want to go visit?”

“Oh, we should—”

“Come on.” He takes my hand and places it on his bent arm, ever the gentleman. “We can probably swap the place cards round. Not everyone’s here yet.”

I should say no but Keanen’s staring at me with such a twinkle in his eye, it would be churlish to refuse him.

Yep. That’s the only reason I’m falling in with his dastardly plan.

A minute later, Anton and his date Rachel have drawn the short straw, their place cards relegated to the cheap seats while Kari animatedly chats with Keanen, and Lachlan and I sit quietly, trying not to glance at each other.

“You look fantastic,” he finally whispers, eyes travelling over me from head to toe, then doing it again just to make sure his original impression was correct.

“Isn’t that the dress from last night?” Kari asks, interrupting her gossip session mid-story, looking puzzled. “I thought you decided against buying it.”

I shrug, suddenly awkward. My eyes drop to the floor while my mind buggers off on holiday, not sending up any solutions at all.

"Tandi needed the commission," Lachlan explains looking disinterested. "If I don't keep up my end of the bargain, one day she might stop tolerating all of my shit."

Kari gives a low hum, and I don't really want to find out what that means. I turn to Keanen, but he seems even more upset than she is. "When I asked you if you needed a dress, you said you were sorted."

"She was," Lachlan answers. "I told her to keep the next one in reserve."

"You bought my date a dress?" Keanen sounds incredulous and I stare at the centrepiece of fake flowers and tealight candles, feeling shabby. A friend shouldn't be treated like I've treated him, but I got caught up. So happy for the tangible proof of Lachlan's affection that I didn't give my date his due consideration.

I should have shoved the dress back into Lachlan's arms when he gave it to me. Not felt the thrill of stepping into it, twirling in front of the mirror and pretending I was a superstar stepping out to the met gala or somewhere equally conspicuous.

"How much was it?" Keanen demands and I stare at him appalled.

"Please leave it," I mutter, pressing my hands to my stomach. "It's just a d-dress."

"She looked beautiful in it and would never buy it for herself," Lachlan says, sounding bored. "So, I stepped in to help. Don't you think your *friend* looks nice?"

"How about that dance?" I say, jumping to my feet and holding my hand out to Keanen. At first, I think he's going to reject as he rightfully should, then he shrugs, and grabs hold.

"Next time, you can sort out my outfit," he says to Lachlan with far more grace than I think I could manage. "This rental is exorbitant."

"I wouldn't know," Lachlan says in a bored voice. "My entire wardrobe is made-to-measure."

"Wow. This has to be the strangest dick swinging competition going," Kari says with a snort.

Her expression is more amused than concerned, even though it's her boyfriend causing trouble. I see for the first time that Lachlan's right. She

doesn't relate to him like a girlfriend at all. More like a casual owner who doesn't mind lending you their toy as long as you hand it back undamaged.

"Come on." She grabs my other hand. "Let's get out there and let these two sort it out alone."

Keanen doesn't take her up on the offer, so the three of us trek onto the dance floor. Kari immediately gets snagged by Issy, whose partner is slouching against the wall, looking like he's drunk half the bar already.

I dance with Keanen, then swap partners with Greta to wind up with Cameron, back to Keanen, over to Anton, over to Issy until we all become confused and end dancing as a group, welcoming the mindless beat over having to talk to anyone.

"I need a break," I whisper shout to my date who nods then is spun away by a girl whose name I don't know but who is notching up rugby team members like she wins a prize if she gets every signature. His expression indicates he might be talked into something this evening.

If so, he's welcome to it. One of us deserves some fun.

"Not trying to bust the joint by ordering fizzy water, are you?" Lachlan whispers from behind me as I queue for the bar. "Such a high maintenance woman."

"I'll have you know; I'm branching out."

"Hm?"

I look behind me, caught by his raised eyebrows and the quirky tilt of his mouth. My words dry up for a second, then I face forward again, shuffling ahead as the queue advances. "Nothing but hard liquor for me."

He taps my elbow. "Get a glass and follow me."

I leave the line and trail after him, snagging a glass from the end of the bar, not even thinking to question the instruction. In the deserted corridor, he waits until the door closes, then pulls a hip flask from his pocket.

"Oh, I see. Being your usual bad boy self."

He pours a centimetre of whiskey into a glass for himself, setting it on the floor, then reaches for mine. "This is a Glenfiddich '37. My dad got it at auction for just a hair over eighty grand."

I snatch the glass back from him just as he pours. Luckily, his reflexes are good and only a drop spills on the floor.

Lachlan gives me a crooked smile. "You do have to hold the glass under the flask to really get the benefit."

"I'm not drinking something worth that much!"

“What else is the point of it if not to be drunk? That’s literally its life purpose. Don’t you want the whiskey to be happy?”

He makes such a sad face that I burst out laughing, halfway to hysterics. “I’m sure the whiskey will be happy inside someone who can appreciate it more.”

Retrieving his glass from the floor, he tosses it back in one gulp. “Mm. Notes of alcohol and inebriation. Is that the appreciation you were talking about?”

I shake my head, clamping my lips together to stop another laugh. “Not exactly what I had in mind.”

“Who taught you, you weren’t worth it, George?”

His voice is light, like he’s still joking, but his eyes fix on me with more intensity than normal. I’m thrown off kilter and struggle to answer. “It’s... I haven’t tried drinking very often, that’s all. I won’t know the difference between that the cheapest brand at the liquor store.”

He gives a quick shrug, waving around the empty hallway. “Do you think someone’s sitting up in heaven, totting up your score?”

“No. I just... It would be wasted.”

“And why does that matter? It’s wasted on me, too.”

“I’m sure your father didn’t buy an expensive bottle so I could sneak a drink at the formal dance.”

“Why did he buy it, then?”

“To drink it himself?”

“He’s teetotal, so not that.” Lachlan tops up his glass and pushes it into my hand. “I don’t want any more. If you don’t drink it, I’ll just tip it out in the bathroom sink.”

I try to return it, but he lifts his arms to avoid me.

“Go on, George,” he urges as I shake my head, then he reaches over to push the glass up to my lips. “Show me you know you’re worth more than some musty whiskey in a bottle. A useless *thing* that rich men toss back and forth between themselves at auctions, instead of enjoying. Even if you don’t like it, that’s a better result than hiding it in a climate-controlled cellar to maintain its value.”

My heart is beating far too fast. The scent from the glass is strong, but it’s Lachlan’s smell that’s overpowering. The tangy notes of sweat mixing with the richer scent of his aftershave, something spicy, challenging, just like him.

The first sip, my tongue doesn't know what to do with itself. The alcohol content is cutting, and I have to open my mouth after swallowing to clear a pathway for clean air.

A moment later, the subtler tastes come through. My tongue still buzzes from the spirit, but it picks out different threads, leaving behind a slight darkness of oak, the lighter dance of citrus exhaled before it fully develops.

I take another mouthful, larger this time, letting it sit on my tongue for a second before swallowing. The bite of alcohol is more pronounced this time, but it also evaporates more quickly. My palette adjusts to the delivery system, clearing a pathway for the other aromas to take centre stage.

Lachlan feels in his pockets, then pulls out the same earrings and necklace I wore the first night. He takes off my fake bling and massages my earlobes before affixing the jewellery. His head bends so near mine as he fastens the necklace that the world shrinks to his soft breath teasing my ear.

"There. That's better."

His eyes search my face, dropping to the glass and emptying the last of the flask into it. "You look like you enjoy it a lot more than I did."

The same old rebuttals surge into my mouth but my lips act as gatekeepers, fencing them inside.

"Oh, hey." He takes the drink and sets it on a nearby table, thrusting a small box into my hand. I frown at it, the alcohol already giving my head a small buzz. "I keep forgetting to give these back to you."

My smile drops away.

It's the box for my mother's rings. The *empty* box.

I stare blankly at it, wondering if this is a trick to embarrass me somehow. Like he'll make me open it, hoping to see the expression of disappointment when I find it bare.

He doesn't seem cruel but judging by his father, he has the capacity to be exactly that.

Joke's on you. My heart already broke over this.

The box is still worth something to me, even if the precious items inside are long gone. I flip it open to get it over with, already anticipating Lachlan's low chuckle, but it doesn't come.

Instead, I stare at Mum's engagement ring and wedding band. I take out the latter, tilting it to see the inscription along the inner seam: her and dad's names. My nose tingles, tears springing out of nowhere.

You must have been wrong. They weren't missing. You were stressed. You don't remember what you saw.

Except I do. Even if I forgot what I saw, I'll always remember the agonising rush of betrayal that followed.

"I meant to give them back to you earlier, but things got a bit strange there."

"Thank you." The words are inadequate but when I try to think of something more to express my gratitude, I become tongue tied.

He chucks me under the chin, mouth twisting into a wicked grin. "Now head back inside to your date and look miserable again."

I made a mistake. That's all that thrums in my head. I made a mistake.

Lachlan doesn't know I saw the empty box, and he's not telling me now. The gesture isn't to win brownie points with me, he's just doing something nice because he can.

He's happy to let me go back to the table, back to another boy, when seeing me with Keanen must break him apart. The same way it does when I see him with Kari.

I thought avoiding him would do the trick. Put him out of bounds and get on with my life, but it hasn't worked. If anything, I dream about him twice as hard.

"How do I...?" I blink, desperate not to shed any tears because if I do, I'll never be able to stop them. "What would happen if I told you I regretted what I said?"

"I'd ask what on earth did you say because if you've been talking shit about me behind my back, you definitely deserve a spanking."

I try to smile, ease into the comfortable banter, but the edges of my heart are sharp, when I move, they poke into me. "I'm sorry. I don't care if you have a girlfriend. I mean... well, I care. Obviously. But I don't..."

My hand hurts and when I glance down, I see I'm crushing the ring box in my fist. I force my fingers to relax, blinking rapidly.

Lachlan puts a hand on my hair, the touch featherlight. "I already told you once how I feel, George. It's not going to change. If you want me, all you have to do is ask."

I clench my jaw, so torn that it hurts just to stand there. "And if I asked you, how would that w-work? Kari said—"

"Kari doesn't have to know. As long as word doesn't reach her father or mine, we're free to do whatever we want."

This is lunacy.

We're literally standing here, discussing how I can be hidden away, plausibly denied. I'm participating in my own eradication, yet I can't say no. Not again. Not when he's the only boy I ever think about, the only one to have a starring role in every late-night finger-licking-good fantasy.

"I want you."

The pressure of his hand against my hair increases, then he strokes half of it away from my face, tucking it behind my ear. "Show me."

I stare at him, mind turned to static. *Show him?*

Lachlan's eyes devour my expression, his contoured mouth curling slowly into the world's sexiest smile, sending warm pulses of pleasure throughout my bloodstream, making my fingertips tingle, aching to touch, to be touched.

He tips his head low to whisper, "Take off your panties and show me."

A rush of ecstatic embarrassment grips me as I bend down, eager to obey. I shuffle the multiple layers, reaching under the hems, bunching up the long floaty layers of the expensive dress, raising it to my calves, my knees, my thighs.

The excitement makes my skin feel electric, the hairs on my arms, the nape of my neck, standing on end. The potential embarrassment of discovery heats my core, mixing with my existing desire and amplifying it, taking it higher.

Moving leisurely, I hook my thumbs into the elastic waistband of my flimsy underwear and slowly, slowly draw them down, letting the skirts of my dress fall at the same speed to cover again what was uncovered.

I wriggle my hips, a little bit to help remove my knickers, a lot to make the whole thing seem more like a sexy dance and less like an embarrassing spectacle. Not that I think Lachlan minds either way, his eyes brim with appreciation.

When they're at my ankles, I daintily step out of them, one leg at a time, then neatly fold them before presenting them to him like a treasure.

"So obedient," he says, grinning as he plucks the gift from my hand. He sniffs them, a long inhalation that sets me on fire with shame and longing, then he stuffs them into his pocket. "Show me more."

Without thinking, I reach between my legs, drawing a finger along my lips, easily slipping inside because I'm dripping wet for him; have been from the moment our eyes met in the lobby.

I lift my hand and he takes over, sucking it into his mouth, eyes never breaking from mine, sucking it clean and I would fall to my knees right here, right now if he told me, I wouldn't hesitate. Some part of me wants him to. Wants him to order me and guide me and tell me what he needs me to do to make him experience the same pleasure I do. Like I will literally implode with tension if he can't help me release it.

He eases my finger from his mouth, rubbing it across his lips, then handing control of the limb back to me.

Another pair of students burst through the door, stumbling along the hall to reach the narrow alleyway outside. I expect Lachlan to move a step away, to avoid them reaching the right conclusion, but he doesn't. He notices them as much as he noticed me during my first three months at school.

"Meet me outside your house." He glances at his watch, raising his eyebrows. "I'll be stuck here until one at least, so make it two o'clock."

I nod. Helpless to do anything else. Helpless to look away from his beautiful face, his hypnotic eyes.

His hand cups my cheek briefly, thumb stroking with its rough pad, then he's gone, striding back into the main ballroom, not waiting to see if I follow.

For a moment, I can't. I put a hand on the wall for support as I try to catch my breath.

When I do finally make it back to our table, Keanen and Greta are thick as thieves, chatting away, his arm draped over her shoulder. He glances to me, eyes offering a challenge, but I shrug. If that's what they want, then I won't stand in their way.

The night continues, dragging now I have something to look forward to, the seconds taking hours to turn into minutes, then jumping ahead without warning, eating into the time left until we can leave.

We all go outside, taking advantage of Keanen's patio key. It's on the first floor, about six metres long and two metres deep. There are two heavy wooden picnic tables and foldup chairs propped against the outside wall.

Our party sprawls around the largest table, soon filling its surface with emptied bottles.

When I take a seat, I can feel the hard edge of the wood through my dress, the additional barrier gone, tucked away in Lachlan's pocket. The bareness, the naughtiness, sends a jolt of secret pleasure straight into my core. I press my thighs together, intensifying the sensation, heat gathering

between my legs, the wetness of my continuing arousal surely soaking through the layers of my dress.

My energy is taken up by not looking at Lachlan. I can feel the heat of his gaze even as my eyes are averted. I chew on my nails, biting them to the quick then nibbling on the calloused skin down the sides.

Keanen gets drunker and drunker until even Greta looks concerned. His words stumble into each other, dragging out the vowels and slurring the consonants until context is the only way I can decipher what he's saying.

On his next trip to the bar, I accompany him, wanting to convince him to divert to water, perhaps threatening the serving staff like Lachlan's mother did at her home.

"He'll never break up with Kari, you know," Keanen tells me as he abandons the attempt to walk in a straight line in favour of leaning against the wall. "My family's just as rich as his and I'll tell you this for free. Elites only ever marry their own kind."

He leans closer to me. I'm not in the mood for home truths or whatever else it is his addled brain has in store. I tug him upright and point him towards the bar, but instead of following my lead, he rests his hands on my shoulders then shoves me flat against the wall.

"Don't," I yelp, startled.

His mouth aims for mine and I try to turn aside again, like I did at the photo booth, but he grips my chin, holding me steady. I push against him, readying myself to yell, when his hand slips. I tear my chin away, but he grabs it again, off balance. Maybe intending just to pin me, he instead knocks my skull hard against the wall.

The moment he hears the crack, his face collapses. "Oh, god. I'm sorry."

I push him off me as hard as I can, my head eaten up with the stinging pain. It grows worse with each passing second, spreading and intensifying until my vision wobbles and my legs are strangely buoyant.

There's a decorative line of moulding running along the corridor walls, right at the worst possible height. Where it had been behind me, the plaster is now cracked, a sizeable chunk on the floor.

"Sorry," Keanen mutters again, face stricken. "I didn't mean anything by it."

He looks like he's about to dissolve into the easy tears of drunkenness, and I offer him a limp smile, the pain receding as my skull decides a better

result is to go completely numb.

I excuse myself to the bathroom, holding onto the basin for a long time, staring at my face until its white pallor fills again with colour. When I raise an exploratory hand to my skull, there's a lump stretching my scalp, a sharper pain at the side where it hit the raised decorative strip on the wall.

A few seconds more, and I'm ready to brave the corridor again. Keanen waits where I left him, gently swaying, face carved into an apology. "Please don't tell Lock," he whispers, and I can't blame him for looking concerned. After seeing him mete out justice once before, I'd be scared in his shoes.

But it was just a drunken accident and I like Keanen, even if we're growing progressively estranged.

I hook my arm through his elbow, immediately having to take some of his weight as he stumbles. "Don't worry. You stop talking about Lachlan marrying Kari and I won't tell him you mistook my head for an egg and tried to crack it open on the wall."

Together, we make it to the drinks counter. Keanen licks his lips as the person in front of us grabs their slopping-over-the-edge lager but dutifully collects a large carafe of water. It uses every bit of his concentration to get it back to the table intact and Greta looks relieved at the cargo as he slips back into the seat beside her, shooting a worried glance across the table at Lachlan, who is staring at a game involving bottle caps that Issy and Calvin have invented.

The numbness in my head eases, leaving me with a dull throbbing ache akin to a hangover without all the preceding fun.

Finally, we're on the home stretch. As the time edges past midnight, Keanen gets aggressive, kissing Greta while she struggles to push him away.

"Why don't you quit it?" I tell him, joining in her efforts to push him solidly back in his chair, so she can stand and move places. I try a glare to encapsulate the threat to tell Lachlan that he seemed so wary of earlier, but either my face doesn't broadcast at the right frequency or he's too blotto to understand.

Whatever the reason, when I try to take my seat again, he grabs my hand and yanks me across his lap.

I land awkwardly, the right side of my face slamming against the table edge, launching a wave of pain. My eye waters, already swelling, and I taste blood from where my bottom lip split from the force.

Keanen takes advantage of my dazed state to clutch me closer, his hand squeezing my tit as I try to break free.

“Get off me.” I struggle harder, lurching to the side and the back of my head knocks the underside of his chin, sending the pain level straight up to eleven.

I’m lost in a sea of agony.

Unable to focus. Unable to get free.

Issy, Greta, and Kari scramble to help as Lachlan shakes off his bored stupor. He leans over, grabs Keanen’s hand off my chest and slams it on the table.

With the help of a tug from Greta, I lurch off Keanan’s lap, turning just as Lachlan plunges the knife down, stabbing so brutally, it pins the boy’s hand in place. Holding it secure to the table, even when Lachlan lifts his hand away. “I think you’ll find the lady said no.”

There’s a horrified pause, then Issy screams, and the patio erupts into panic.

“Actually,” Lachlan says, gripping the knife handle again and yanking. “I’m gonna need that back.”

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

GEORGE

AT TWO IN THE MORNING, I stand outside my home, growing progressively colder. My father is sleeping inside, something I can tell because the windows rattle with each loud snore.

It's not the ambient atmosphere I'd wish for a clandestine date.

Half of me is convinced Lachlan won't come. After the stabbing, he bundled me into the back of a taxi and paid the driver to take me home. Goodness knows what happened to the limousine Keanen had originally booked for the trip, though I suppose some lucky students might have talked their way into the back if it showed.

I'm almost certain he won't come, the arrangement seems like a dream, yet I'm still out here, in the freezing night air, waiting because the tiny sliver of hope that he will is enough to brave the elements.

Headlights turn the corner and I hold my breath, but it only takes a second to see it's not the right car. I duck my head, hiding my face from the passing motorist.

My stomach is tight. I'm scared I'm making a mistake. Nothing has changed since the night I told Lachlan no—Kari stood beside him as the taxi drove me away, his arm linked loosely around her waist.

The buzz from the whiskey would be welcome right now but it disappeared somewhere between the shock of my injuries and the weird rush of emotion that gripped me when Lachlan stabbed Keanen's hand.

I press my hands to my face. Somehow, even with the temperature dipping toward zero, my cheeks are hot. Blood pumps to them, pumps to other regions in my body, too.

The smooth motion of his body, the calm underneath the violence. I should fear him, should run a mile, not be stood here freezing myself to death on the off chance he shows.

Instead, my body revels in the attack. In the warmth that spread through me when he came to my rescue, battling a boy who hurt me, even if he didn't mean to, even if he would otherwise have woken tomorrow with no clear memory of what he'd done tonight.

The same emotion swept through me when he fought Carrod. Although perhaps emotion isn't the right word. Desire is closer to the truth.

Danger makes Lachlan look so damn good.

But it's not just that. The primal response might be persuasive but it's not the only thing in his favour.

In the past few weeks, he's beaten up my bullies. He's given my dad a chance to heal by banning him. Inviting me and Keanen to join his circle of friends at lunch saved us from exile. He was even instrumental in getting Keanen his place on the team.

The dress, the glass from an eighty-thousand-dollar whiskey, the jewellery I'm still wearing, including the precious treasure of my mother's rings. Even my job with Patrick only came about because of our shared acquaintance.

And some of that is just because he has the money but lots of kids at Kingswood have money, they're not spreading it around trying to bring joy.

My stomach knots again. I'm usually more careful about accepting gifts, I don't like feeling indebted, but Lachlan has bypassed that filter more than once.

I close my eyes as the panic bites but remind myself that he didn't tell me my father had sold Mum's rings, he just replaced him. If I hadn't looked at the empty box, I wouldn't know he'd spent money.

He's not trying to bind me; he's unlocking my shackles.

Because he thinks I'm worth it.

Maybe he's right. Maybe it's about time I thought that, too.

The car headlights pick me out as Lachlan turns the corner into my street. I wonder how I could have confused another vehicle for his, the sleek lines of his corvette so distinct even in the darkness.

As I wait for him to pull to the curb, I remember another point in his favour.

Orgasms.

Something else he generously gave me before seeking his own. Even though he'd bought me for the night, he didn't need to. Even though a boy who looks as good as he does could be forgiven almost anything, including not being generous towards his partner.

My blushes could now heat me from head to toe.

I run over to meet him at the car and he pulls me against his hard body, his lips seeking mine while my palms press against the strong contours of his muscled chest. He feels so good that my eyes roll back a little.

Nobody should be this delightful to touch. It's a crime to send so many tingles flying at once.

Lachlan draws back, wiping his thumb over my lip and wincing at the split. "Your poor face."

"I'm sure it'll heal."

He stares at me for so long that a quiver of worry works its way through to my bones. I know my eye is swollen, my lip is cut, there are bruises blossoming in shades to rival my eye shadow. Thankfully, the equally painful lump on the rear of my head is hidden.

"It's okay," I say. "We can postpone until I'm healed if you'd rather."

"Is that what you'd prefer?"

The only glow is from the streetlamps, not casting enough light to pick out the minor changes in his expression. I can't read his body language at all. "No," I whisper because it's the truth. My head is aching, the skin pulsing in a way that makes my throat clench. It's late, I'm tired.

I don't want to be anywhere else.

"Good," he says with a smile that I can see even in the dimness. "Because if this is a date, it's only fair you get to drive us where we need to go."

I might make a squeal when he drops the keys into my cupped hands. I might smack another kiss on his lips even though the pressure causes the split to deepen. I might even cop the tiniest feel of his gorgeous arse as he

presses against me, his cock growing hard along my thigh, making my clit jump in delight.

“Where d’you want me to drive?”

He waits until I’m behind the wheel to give me instructions, sending me on a journey into the hills, high above the city.

To control the powerful car makes me feel powerful too. Like my feet and hands don’t just touch the vehicle but merge with it until it becomes an integral part of my body’s system, no longer flesh and blood but steel and glass, rubber and alloy.

The night air is so cold, the lights of the city are clearly visible. So, too, are the stars, rising from the glow of urban pollution to sparkle high above.

We hit the hilltop and I keep going, winding around the curves, driving into the fresh scents of a pine forest before emerging to the dry scrub, tussocks dotted here and there, flax bushes the only grass strong enough to survive the continual assault of the prevailing wind.

But as much as I love the drive, I’m looking forward to parking and being alone with Lachlan more.

I pull to a halt in a gravel park, barely a metre from the road. Public if anyone else were to come this way, though given the hour, that’s unlikely.

Lachlan reclines his seat and lifts me onto his lap so I’m straddling him, thighs having to spread so wide to rest my knees either side that it leave me open, exposed. He manoeuvres me as easily as if I were a doll.

“Sorry I was a few minutes late. I came straight to you, but they kept us at the dance for ages.”

“What? Just for stabbing another student. How dare they?”

“Are you in much pain?”

“Nothing that can’t be fixed with liberal application of vitamin D.”

He bursts into laughter, sliding his hand up under my skirts, finding me bare. “You didn’t put another pair on?”

I brush some strands of his long fringe back, so I have a clearer view of his face. The natural beauty surrounding us is incredible, a nourishment for the soul, but doesn’t hold a patch to the natural beauty resting between my spread legs.

“You must think I’m made of underwear. Two pairs in one night? Sheer luxury.”

“Every time you think of wearing pants, know that I’m going to strip them off you and confiscate them.” He rubs his palm over my bare butt

cheek, making me shiver when his finger strays close to my needy pussy. I pump my hips gently, letting him know if he just stretched a bit further, he could put that hand to better use.

His other hand delves beneath my skirts, cupping my arse as he positions me so my clit is flat against his rock hard erection. A moan escapes my lips and I bend my head, trying to muffle the sound against his chest.

“No hiding,” he whispers. “That’s not fair.”

I tilt my chin up so he can see me, resting my elbows either side of his face while I kiss him again, leisurely, clamping my teeth briefly over his lower lip, seeing how he likes to be the one bitten instead of the bitee.

He bumps his pelvis upwards, hitting hard against my centre. I take that as a sign of assent and try again, this time nipping the sensitive skin in the curve of his neck.

“Little vampire.” He chuckles.

“You can talk.” My hands go on an exploratory mission, tugging his shirt out from his waistband and slipping underneath so I can touch his hard abs, the taut skin over defined muscles, the dip at the side where my hand wants to follow.

“Go ahead,” he tells me, reading minds his new speciality. “Take whatever you want.”

I unbuckle his belt, my fingers slipping on the slick leather in my eagerness. When I wrap my hands around his cock, air puffs between his teeth and he grabs large handfuls of my arse, squeezing tight.

“I won’t last long if you’re playing with me.”

Right now, I don’t care. My hand caresses up and down his silken skin, wary of rubbing too hard, tipping my hips so he hits lightly against my clit, just a tease.

Then he moves, pulls my hands away, flips me over and lifts my skirts so my bare backside is flush against his skin. He uses my body, rubbing me against him while his fingers slip inside me, stroking along the inside of my folds, pressing hard when my muscles twitch, then gentler, dipping his middle finger into my entrance, inserting it, curling it as he pumps in and out, in and out.

“How many times do you want me to make you come?” is his harsh whisper in my ear. His voice cracks with lust, sending me over the edge in

such an unexpected rush that I freefall my way through the orgasm, juddering and shuddering in his arms.

“That’s one. Is my good girl going to give me another?”

His fingers barely pause, going straight back to work, inside and outside, rubbing and thrusting and circling and curling until another rush of ecstasy builds.

“Oh, that’s it,” he purrs in my ear. “Do you want me to help you more? Do you want my fat cock inside you?”

“Yes,” I gasp, reaching behind me to grab him but he twists away.

“Nuh-uh-uh. If you want something, ask for it. Didn’t you mother teach you to say pretty please?”

His posture stiffens slightly as he speaks the words, perhaps remembering too late that my mother isn’t around any longer.

I hope if she’s in a better place, looking down at us, she has the good sense to turn away for the next few minutes. Or a bit longer to be sure.

“Please give me your cock,” I say, obedience to this beautiful boy already second nature. “I want you inside me, filling me up.”

There are probably a hundred more ways to beg, to plead, to supplicate myself until he gives me what I so desperately need, but he’s not toying with me. Not yet.

He positions me, then enters me with three hard thrusts, reaching so far inside me it’s like I’m creating a new cavity just for him, so much bigger, wider than my previous partners that they barely count.

“Is that what you wanted?” Lachlan growls in my ear as he grips my thighs in his large hands, spreading them wide with his thick fingers. It alters the angle of his entry, hitting inside me at a different place, creating a new favourite position to add to my limited repertoire. “Am I giving my girl what she needs?”

And it’s that phrase—*my girl*—that launches me over the edge this time.

A guttural cry half lodges in my throat, caught as my body convulses in pleasure, so soon on the heels of the last one that I can’t believe it happened again, building a crescendo so powerful my ears ring, my fingers digging deep into his hips as I cling to him to steady myself.

He gathers me, no longer spreading my thighs apart but pushing my knees together and pressing my legs back against my chest, hugging around them as his thrusts increase in power, in frequency, in need. My arms are

within the same tight band, bent at the elbows and crushed beside my thighs, unable to move anything except my hands, wiggling my fingers.

“One more.” The words are a command, an order. Only a foolish girl would dare disobey and as Patrick said, I’m a smart cookie.

Even so, I’m struggling. The pleasure rapidly moves from just right to far too much. Every nerve in my cunt feels tipped inside out, upside down, presenting themselves when they should be tucked away to avoid pain.

“Stop.” My fingers splay wide. “It’s too much.”

“I say when it’s too much,” he mutters into the side of my neck, but his relentless stroke slows a little, three instead of five, two instead of five, one, and... pause.

Now a new need takes over. The cessation of movement far worse than the messages from my overstimulated nerves.

“Please,” I whimper, doing a one eighty. “Don’t stop.”

“Call that a plea?”

“I need you,” I murmur, trying to move up and down but unable to get anywhere. “I need you inside me.”

His voice is hot against my ear. “I am inside you.”

The need is so loud in my head it’s hard to think. “Start. Please start again.”

He hums against my neck, twisting his head to the side to bite it, teeth sinking farther and farther as his rhythmic thrusts resume, turning me up from zero to one hundred in a few strokes.

I’ve overcome with the need, the supplication, the glorious friction as he thrusts in and out of me, greedily snatching everything his thick cock has to offer and still opening, salivating, begging for more.

All of it combines: the rush of emotion, the giddiness of being alive, the endorphins from the pain and the thrill of danger and fear and doom and him hitting the same spot, the *right* spot, over and over, mingle into an intoxicant far stronger than the whiskey Lachlan plied me with earlier.

Another orgasm tears through me, leaving me shaking, then revisits, redoubles, fires another shot this time deeper and stronger until I’m on the verge of passing out, my hold on the world suddenly tenuous.

Like my orgasm is a permission slip, Lachlan gives a guttural moan and a few final thrusts, pumping his hot cum into my waiting body. I swear I can feel it jetting up inside, as powerful as every other part of him.

He unwinds me, turning me to my side so I can curl into a ball against his chest, feeling as satisfied as a sleepy cat dozing in the late afternoon sun.

“Call this a date?” I murmur, snorting with laughter as my brain powers down to maintenance levels. “I didn’t even get fed.”

The comment hits Lachlan, sending him into a fit of laughter. I smile, enjoying the vibrations as I close my eyes and they buzz against my cheek.

“Next time,” he says in a low drawl that makes my fingers tingle. “I’ll feed you as much as you want, as many times as you want, until you’re satisfied.”

“Promises, promises.”

We stay like that for a long time. I’m more at peace than I can remember being for ages. Certainly, from before we fled from Auckland. Possibly longer, stretching back years. “You make me feel so good.”

“It’s mutual.”

The words spark something joyous in me. That as much as this boy gives to me, he finds plenty to take for himself. It’s a privilege to feed his needs. The luckiest girl in the world.

Then real life intrudes as he says, “I’d better get you home. Otherwise, you’ll get no sleep whatsoever.”

No sleep for such a perfect reason sounds divine, but I’m still too caught up in my afterglow to argue. Whatever Lachlan thinks is best. He’s been right about most everything so far.

I uncurl, shaking out my dozy limbs until I have control. The drive back is far more bittersweet than the trip out; there’s a lump in my throat when I finally pull up at my door.

I shouldn’t be greedy. My body is still twinging with pleasant spasms from its earlier exertions. I should take that as my lot and find it enough. When I hand back the keys and step from the vehicle, it should bring an end to the night.

But I’m as susceptible as my father and Lachlan is my new addiction.

“Do you want to come in?” I ask in a breathless voice, ready to be rejected, ready to have reality reassert itself with masterful control.

“Of course, I’m coming in,” he says, leaping from the passenger side and beeping the car door locks closed. “Did you think I’d let you get away with only three? We’ve got to make up for lost time.”

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CHAPTER NINETEEN

LOCK

INSIDE HER ROOM, I close the door and embrace her again, kissing her until my lips swell. I can't get enough of her mouth, the soft press of contact, the delicious taste of her, still with the lingering hint of whiskey, a slight umami flavour coming from her split lip.

I would kiss her forever but when the hand cupping the back of her head strays too far, she winces, briefly pulling away, and my stomach knots.

Damn Keanen and his low alcohol tolerance. The stabbing wasn't enough, but the shock of his clumsy attack took me by surprise. I wish I could go back and do it again, exult in the wrench of the knife slicing into his flesh, tearing through skin and muscle and fat and gristle. Stabbing until his grabby hands learned a lesson they'd never forget.

I shake with the need to punish him. Lost in a swirl of endorphins and pheromones and the only reason—the *only* reason—I'm not still back on that patio carving him into tiny little slices is because George hung off my arm and begged me not to hurt him any further.

But, oh god, how I want to. How my mind keeps getting distracted, even with the joyful beauty in my arms. Planning his demise. Staging his downfall. Stomping through his life until there's nothing left in it worth sticking around for.

The temptation is enormous but I need to be present, right here, right now. George needs to be cared for, petted, caressed, hugged... *loved*. Her safety and wellness is a thousand times more important than making sure that prick never gets the chance to hurt any girl, whether by design or accident, ever again.

So my voice is purposefully gentle, free of all that underlying rage, when I ask, "Can I see?"

When she nods, I lead her into the adjoining bathroom and lift her onto the bench next to the sink.

A small part of her hair is matted and dark with blood. It takes a few minutes of soaking with a wet cloth before I can pull the tangled strands apart to see the wound. There's one large lump with a smaller swelling underneath. A split about a centimetre long runs down the side of the injury, with speckled grazing visible in a wider mark.

"What's the v-verdict?"

I shake my head ruefully, blinking back the shock at how badly injured she is, how much damage Keanen inflicted in such a short time. One slip of my attention. That'll never, never, never happen again.

"At death's door," I say in the lightest voice I can manage. "I'm surprised you've survived this long."

"Oh, so funny. Remind me of this when you've got a splitting headache and double vision."

My chest tightens with worry. "You do?"

George narrows her eyes. "It depends. Do I get more respect?"

"You get a trip to accident and emergency."

"My vision's fine. I have a throbbing headache, though."

I put my lips close to her ear, whispering, "Now you tell me."

A blush ignites, spreading across her skin like a drop of ink in water. "I don't think it's bad enough to prevent me doing anything."

"Anything like what?" I tease, rinsing out the bloodied cloth until the water runs clear. I leave it on the edge of the sink and cup George's face between my hands.

I enjoy looking at her like that. With my fingers framing her.

Despite the developing bruises, the swelling flesh, she's never looked more beautiful. She's never looked more *mine*.

I nudge her legs apart, pressing between them, near enough to kiss her again. The split on her lip tastes of blood, a little tang on the side to whet

my appetite.

Her hips tilt towards me and I encourage them until her legs are wrapped around me, her heel in my butt pushing me closer.

I lift her, supporting her weight with one hand while I wave the other in front of me to avoid bumping her on anything as I carry her through to the next room. The zipper for her dress is on the side and once I'm standing by the bed, I hook it down, easing her nearest arm through the strap, changing my hold to free the other.

The fabric of the dress pools between us. It would be easier if I lay her down, but I don't want to risk bumping her head, even on the softness of the pillow. So, I fiddle and fuss and gradually expose more of her skin to the air. It's impossible to pull the dress off with her legs wrapped around me, so I turn and sit on the bed, letting George reposition herself until she's straddling my waist, kneeling, the outfit discarded on the floor.

We stay like that for long minutes, exploring each other in little bursts between kisses. I unhook her bra but when she tries to shake it free, the straps twist, catching her arms halfway behind her. A trick I wouldn't mind replicating later, but for now it's a mild annoyance.

"Just a second," I whisper as she shifts her weight, ready to stand. "I will not be defeated by some scraps of lace."

My knife makes quick work of it. I snap the blade closed but keep it in my hand as George returns the favour by unbuttoning my shirt, sliding it off my shoulders, intent on kissing every inch of the skin she exposes.

"Lay down," she orders me, and I play the submissive, my smile stupidly wide as she takes command. A million miles away from the mouse she was that first night. Confidence looks good on her, unbelievably sexy, a side to her I'm privileged to see. "Hands above your head."

I follow her instructions, happy to comply as I watch her work to strip all my clothes off me. When she tosses my suit pants and underwear aside with a crow of victory, my cock is rock hard against my stomach, eager for the soft press of her thighs against me again.

I can't get enough of her.

Before tonight, I was already dizzy for her touch, falling under her spell a little more every day.

Then she told me she wanted me, and I finally understood why I've been chasing her so hard.

She's everything I need, everything I desire, more than I deserve, the only one I can ever think of touching, now and into the future.

My girl.

She leans her weight forward, pressing on my wrists, her tits just above my face. I curl my tongue out, trying to reach one but she jerks away with a devilish glint in her eye. "Not yet. Not until I get to have a proper look at you."

Her eyes scour me from top to toe, then her mouth follows, licking, sucking, nipping at my skin until she looks replete, then going back for seconds, thirds, while my cock grows harder, throbs louder, seeking her attention.

My hips thrust up against her, aching for more contact, and she laughs again. The tease of her flesh on mine makes me giddy. I want her to claim me the same way I claimed her earlier, to mark me as hers.

I flick out the blade on my knife again and offer the handle to her. "Show me," I pant, tongue licking my lips before arching towards her to steal a kiss. "I'm yours if you want me."

George's eyes are puzzled. She lays the blade flat against my skin but doesn't move it further.

"Can I?" She nods and I move my hands to hers, guiding the blade so it points to the side of my sternum. Then I dig the blade into my skin, a blade of crimson swelling, shining like a jewel.

"I-I don't..."

"I can't commit to you that way in public, not the way I should, but I can show you that you're the only girl for me." When she tries to tug her hands away, I exert a gentle pressure to keep the blade in place, ready for whatever design she wants to carve on me. "Put your initials so anyone who sees knows who I belong to."

For a moment, I think she won't do it. Her hand falters, she bites her lip despite the pain. Then her eyes clear, going from rough seas to calm waters. She leans forward, hair falling across her face, tongue sticking out between her teeth as she shapes the first letter.

"Bigger," I whisper when the curve is steep enough for me to map the trajectory. "I want everyone to see."

There's another second of hesitation. "What about when you're playing sports, or hot, or... or...?"

“You’re acting like it’s a mark I’ll be ashamed of.” I strain upwards, pressing my forehead against hers, ignoring how the movement twists the blade farther into my flesh. “When it’s a scar I’ll wear with pride.”

She inhales twice, both quick breaths, then nods. As I relax into the mattress, she continues her design.

“Deeper,” I say when the pressure is barely enough to mark my skin. “It’s got to last a lifetime.”

The knife bites harder into my skin, the pain mixing with the growing rapture on George’s face as she marks me, carving a place in my life that she knows can’t be erased.

When she finishes the last cut, she holds the knife aside, balancing on the mattress with it clenched in her fist as she ducks her head and runs her tongue along the crimson lines, licking me clean of blood. Placing her mouth against me and gently sucking when it doesn’t well up enough on its own.

I want to pull her astride my face, taste her, crank her heat up to eleven, but she wriggles against my hold, reaching behind her to grasp my cock in her fist, softly pumping.

Just when I think she’s about to guide it to her dripping wet entrance, she shuffles farther down the bed, lowering her mouth to draw the head of my cock inside, enveloping it with the wet muscle of her tongue.

The sensation drives deep shudders through my body. My hands clench into fists by my sides, then I raise them over my head again, giving myself distance because otherwise the temptation to grab her would become overwhelming.

Her tentative efforts become more adventurous. I groan as she licks in one long stroke from base to tip, her tongue swirling around the top, sucking off the drops of precum as my hips tilt towards her.

“Yes,” I say as she draws me into her mouth again, this time sucking at the head but relaxing around my girth to take me deeper. “That feels so good.”

Then I temporarily lose the power of speech as she bobs her head, moving up and down my shaft with quickening motions, her left hand grasping at the base of my cock, pumping in tandem with her mouth, then reaching farther down to cup my balls, squeezing and stroking until I’m right at the edge.

“Stop,” I beg, breaking my hand away from its self-imposed restraint and gripping the side of her face, the top of her jaw, easing her away, her mouth popping off the tip of my cock, while staying clear of her injuries. Drawing her back up my body as I growl, “I want to come inside you.”

“You were inside me,” she giggles, cheeks flushing so prettily that I almost orgasm on the spot, completely drawn in by her beauty.

I bend double to catch her mouth with mine, shocked when her tongue thrusts deep, then responding with the same enthusiasm.

“Sit astride me,” I order her, wrapping my free arm around her waist to pull her into position while my hand continues to cup her head, still scared of hurting her more than she already has been tonight.

“So bossy,” George grumbles back at me, the words echoing into my mouth. “When I’m on top, I should be the one in charge.”

I tug at her hair, gentle but serious. “You allowed to do whatever you like when I let you have free range but never, ever forget that I’m the one in control.” She wriggles against me, I guess in protest but it’s impossible to tell given how enthusiastic my body’s reception is. “Don’t you want to be my obedient girl?”

Her pussy is open against my cock, riding him rather than letting him inside, but I still feel it as she orgasms, as her soft cry turns harsher and her body spasms, a contraction spiralling farther afield as each wave ripples from her core.

My lips are tangled in her hair as I whisper, “You want to come for me again? While I’m inside you?” and her nod sends me into a delirium of need, a thirst that insists on being slaked. I let my fingers slide along her lips, teasing inside her as I feel how soaked she is, how brazenly her needs meet mine.

Thrusting inside her is an exquisite satisfaction. The moment I find my rhythm, she alters position, changing the angle, my head rubbing against her differently enough that she gasps, tilting her head back to open her throat, sucking in enough oxygen to continue the ride.

I cup her tit, bending my head at a sharp angle to take her stiff nipple into my mouth, rubbing my tongue against it, sucking it, drawing my head back as I palm it, then turning my attention to its partner, not wanting to throw her off balance.

“My turn,” she whispers, and I don’t know what she means until she takes my chin between her fingers, tilting my head back and bringing the

knife in front of my eyes. “Mark me with your name.”

Heat surges in me as I take the weapon from her grasp, lightly tracing the blade over her skin. When I stare into her face, wanting to be sure, I see bruises are blooming across the left side of her face where it hit the table, the split lip clearly visible.

Already so many marks on her pale flesh. None of them yet mine.

With one last nod of encouragement from George, I insert the tip, letting it draw its first taste of her blood.

My hips are still pumping, creating the delicious friction that I crave, but I force them to still, let George slow her response, not wanting our movement to cause a mark I can't take back.

I carve my initials smaller than hers on mine, making it possible to hide beneath a bra or a tank top. These lines are solely for the two of us to see; a private claiming but still indelible, enduring.

To see my initials, my name, my *brand* on her is incredible. For all I've claimed her over and over in my head, this is the first time I have lasting physical evidence she's truly mine.

She gasps as I carve the last stroke deeper before pulling the blade away. I rest the knife on the nearby windowsill, then cradle her, my upper arm curving along her spine as I tilt her back, getting my taste of her sweet, sweet nectar before I crush her against my chest, against my wound, the blood from each mingling as I drive hard into her, propelling her towards orgasm as I pinch her clit, listening to the moans and caught breaths, tailoring the experience so her orgasm hits a split second before my own.

Still mindful of her head, I lay her sideways on the bed, leaning to pull up the covers before I drag her into my arms, the soft waves of afterglow still pulsing across our bodies.

The sweet smell of her sweat mixes with the tang of whiskey and the aftertaste of her blood. A delicious elixir that is solely hers. As vibrant and intoxicating as the rest of her.

George is half asleep already, tumbling into slumber like it's a reward for a job well done. Even in sleep, her hand curves possessively over my hip, drawing me closer.

Contentment wells in my soul as I close my eyes, letting my other senses take over. Hearing the soft snorts of her deepening breaths, the rich scent of her blood, the pulse of warmth from her silken skin, and the sweet

taste I lick from my finger before chasing her down the soft planes of sleep,
grabbing hold of her again on the other side of that darkness.

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CHAPTER TWENTY

GEORGE

A MONSTER CHASES me out of sleep, jerking me awake as the front door slams behind my dad, heading to work. My eyes fly open, muscles tensing against the arms holding me. In the dim light shining through the window, it takes me a second to recognise Lachlan, to smell his familiar scent.

When I do, I relax and his arms scoop me closer to him, the soft puffs of his sleeping breath teasing the hairs alongside my face.

A dozen different points of injury clamour for attention. My chest stings, my jaw aches, my head feels like someone stretched my scalp over a larger skull than it could fit, tight and throbbing. Sensitive even to the movement of the air.

The worst signals come from my face. A needle of pain screams from behind my eye, the swollen mass of flesh around it reacting to the tiniest change in expression. When I blink, a bright light flashes in my right eye, changing colour from red to yellow to green. My lip feels like it sticks out a million miles.

I roll onto my back and Lachlan rolls with me, his lips pressing against the skin of my side as he wakes.

“My phone alarm’s about to go in a minute,” he whispers in warning, then lunges for his trousers on the floor, turning it off as the tinkling chime

just starts to warm up.

He makes a low combination groan chuckle deep in his throat, a rumbling sound that rolls over me like the vibration from judder bars. “Good morning,” he says, rousing enough to plant a kiss on my right breast. “And good morning to you, too,” he adds, moving across to my left.

“Do you need to get back before anyone checks on you?” I whisper, meaning Kari.

“Nah,” he murmurs. “I’m due a sleep-in and my new favourite method of sleep is holding onto you.”

“Is that why you set your alarm for the crack of dawn?”

He gives a wide sleepy smile, perching on one elbow while he trails his fingers across my stomach, moving in smaller and smaller circles. “I do have to get to work at some stage, but I’ll put it off as long as possible.”

“You work on a Saturday?” I shouldn’t sound so surprised—I have work, too—but it doesn’t sound like the sort of thing an elite should have to face.

He wrinkles his nose, burying his face into my stomach before pulling back and answering, “Yeah. My boss is a complete arse but what’re you gonna do?”

“Get a new one?”

“Mm. Talking sedition this early in the morning, eh? You’re a dark horse.”

More like a cat. Too curious for its own good.

I settle back into the crook of his arm, feeling the rush of possession as I see my letters on his chest. *Mine*. This gorgeous hunk of man is all mine. “What jobs does your dad have lined up for you today?”

“Nothing good.”

I give him a tiny poke in the ribs. “Avoidance is a toxic trait.”

“Really?” He arches his eyebrow in the most adorable way. “I’ll have to add it to my collection.” His hand lands on my knee and starts a slow, laborious journey up to my inner thigh, tickling and teasing me all the way. “There are so many, they form an entire personality of their own.”

His fingers part me, inserting his middle digit up to the second knuckle and curling it back against my walls, sending a spike of desire straight through me.

At my gasp, his smile broadens. “Are you sure you want me to leave right away?”

“You could stay for just a few minutes,” I concede.

“Mm-hm.” He leans over to plant a kiss at the edge of my scored flesh. I’m not sure if I want to look, even in the reduced lighting. When he withdraws his finger, he wipes it clean on my lower belly, then pulls me on top of him.

My groan startles him into opening both eyes fully. “What’s hurting?”

“It might be quicker to list the bits of me that aren’t,” I suggest, wrinkling my nose. “And why exactly did you stop?”

He carefully moves me to the side, then leaps to his feet, not exactly the response I was going for with that question. He strides into the bathroom, turning on the shower before he returns and lifts me from the bed.

“Ah,” I squeal, clutching at him and igniting a burn across his scored initials. “Aren’t you hurting, too?”

He rolls his eyes. “I’m a man. It doesn’t count.”

In the bathroom, he sets me on my feet again as I blink against the bright light, my hurt eye watering.

“Wow,” Lachlan says. “A whack in the face really doesn’t suit you.”

The comment hits my funny bone, making me squeal with laughter until I grasp hold of him to keep my balance.

“You also need to be exposed to more comedy if you think that’s funny,” he comments, testing the water and apparently deciding it’s ready for us because he pushes me inside the cubicle. “Nuh-uh-uh,” he chides as I reach for the shampoo. “I’m in charge of cleaning.”

“It’s only fair if you’re in charge of cleaning me, I should be in charge of you.”

“Fair?” He snorts, dumping a generous helping of two-in-one straight on my head. “What world are you living in where things are fair?”

I lean down to pump some bodywash into my hand, taking charge of rubbing it all over Lachlan, paying less attention to what he needs cleaned and more attention to what it will feel good to rub my hands over.

“I’m not sure the makers of this body wash expected it to be used as a lubricant,” he teases as I rub his cock clean, repeating the process over and over because it keeps growing larger and that must surely mean it needs more attention.

He twists me around, dunking my head under the nozzle and holding my shoulders for a second so I know how he wants me to stand. His gentle

fingers part my hair, exposing the bumps and scrapes to the cleansing spray. It stings a little, but the touch is more pleasant than painful.

“I think you’ll live.”

“Thank goodness.”

He briefly hugs me back against him, then lets me spin around to face him again. My fingertips find the wound I inflicted on him last night, frowning at the angry red of the edges. “Is this infected?”

“No, it’s healing. If it was infected, the surrounding flesh would turn red and puffy.”

Lachlan examines his handiwork on me. “Does it hurt?”

“Does my knife wound hurt?” I cock an eyebrow, too cheeky for my own good.

When an expression of faux outrage forms, I circumvent it with a kiss. Meaning to make it short, I instead letting myself be drawn into the sensation, closing my eyes, cupping his strong jaw in my hands.

He lifts me, cradling my arse and pressing my shoulders against the cold shower walls to hold me in place. When I’m steady, he raises my legs further, bending my knees over his shoulders, putting me completely at his mercy as he pushes first one, then two fingers into me, scissoring them to stretch me wide, then clamping them together as he thrusts them in and out, picking up speed as my palms press flat against the slippery wall of the cubicle.

“Does that feel good?”

I nod, my tongue darting out to lick my lips, then saying, “Yes,” when he threatens to pause activity. “It’s so good.”

“I want you to come on my fingers. Are you ready?”

“I’m not…” My voice squeaks and I swallow, shaking my head. “I can’t just do it on command.”

His thumb tightens along my jaw as he pulls my ear closer, growling, “You can, and you will.”

A thousand tingles race each other across my scalp, burying themselves in my spine and spiralling down my body, sending out a cascade of pleasurable signals. It’s like his voice taps into some unknown erogenous zone that makes my nerve endings sparkle.

My building arousal explodes into a higher gear as Lachlan adds his thumb to the pleasure mix, alternating between its rough pad circling my

clit and pressing the heel of his palm hard against me, driving me higher and higher.

I open my mouth, panting, refracted drops of water hitting my face, inside my mouth, trickling from my lips.

“Now,” he growls, pressing and holding his palm against me as a deluge of pleasure overtakes me, spinning out of control as I gasp for air, my cunt clutching around his fingers so hard I’m surprised his knuckles aren’t pulverised.

As the shudders lessen, he pumps them in and out of me one last time, then raises them, sucking his forefinger clean before shoving his middle finger deep into my open mouth.

I suck, so ineffective that he chuckles, then helps me manoeuvre my legs down so I can stand. They’re far too wobbly and I use the wall to hold me steady.

Not that Lachlan would let me fall. His arm is around my waist, then his hand slips down to grab a handful of my arse, squeezing until I moan.

When at least half of my brain has returned to duty, I reach down, wanting to return the favour. But Lachlan catches my hand before I can encircle him, raising it up to cover it in kisses. “Not yet. While I’m out today, I want to think of all the things I’d like you to do to me, then when we meet tonight, I can take you through each one in detail.”

A pulse resumes in my clit at the thought, eyes fixing on his in delight.

“Now, get clean,” he orders, pushing me ahead of him to stand in the spray. “We’ve got an entire day to plan.”

“Yes, sir.”

His thick fingers grip where my neck meets my shoulder. “Careful,” he mutters in such a low tone that my aural cavity is ecstatic. “Keep addressing me in such a tempting way and we might never get out of here.”

I’m not putting up any protests but Lachlan steps out of the shower, grabbing a towel and roughly drying himself while he eyes the solo show he left behind.

When I turn the water off, he’s waiting with a towel for me, watching carefully as I dry myself, patting over the areas where I’m bruised, abraded, or cut.

Once finished, he takes the towel from me and sits me on the cold bench, the difference in temperature making my skin zing. He searches

through the cabinet, then pulls out a first aid kit, soaking some gauze with antiseptic before he dabs it across the knife marks.

“You want a bandage?”

“Are you applying one?” He shakes his head. “Then I don’t need one, either.”

When I hop down and turn, he frowns at the discoloration marring one side of my face, pressing a gentle kiss against it. “I’m such a failure. I should protect you, and instead you were hurt.”

“You’re not bubble-wrap,” I argue, worried at his tone, like he might take my injuries to heart. “It’s not your job to keep me safe. The world hurts sometimes.”

“It shouldn’t. I never want you to spill another tear in pain.”

He’s so insistent, I can’t argue. I don’t understand why he needs this so much, but I want to give him as much as I can. “I promise whatever happens, you’ll be the only one I ever let kiss it better.”

Lachlan laughs against my neck, sending pleasurable tingles across my skin. “Chief Kisser Betterer.”

“Exactly.” I lay my palm flat against his cheek, staring adoringly into his eyes. “What else does a girl need?”

What she doesn’t need is for this moment to end, but it inevitably does. We arrange that I’ll come to Kingswood when I’m finished with work. If Lachlan’s not there, he won’t be far away.

My heart is full as I wave him goodbye, sending him off to fulfil his quota of dastardly deeds for the day. I sigh as I return to my room, half tempted to fall into bed and have another dose of sleep—just what the doctor ordered.

Instead, I pull off the beautiful jewellery, depositing it in my top drawer, keeping just my mother’s rings on my hand. I’ll have to find a better hiding place for everything later.

Once I change into my work clothes and paint half a tube of concealer across my face, I head off to catch the bus to work.

While travelling, I have a secret smile on my face. Ducking my head to hide the bruises, I glance at the solitary travellers, wondering if they also have lovers stashed away at home.

My feet float as I complete the short walk from the bus stop to Patrick’s club, the dim lighting in the back corridor welcome after the harsh midday glare.

I last all of two minutes in the cards room before Patrick pulls me into his office. “Okay, so first off, give me the number of whoever beat you up and I’ll kick the living shit out of them. Second, you can’t come into work looking like that.”

My hand goes to the bruise over my eye.

Despite starting localised, it keeps spreading and darkening, claiming more and more of my face as its own. By the time I reapplied my concealer in the staff changing room, the discoloration had spread from my forehead to level with the tip of my nose, staining half my cheek.

My eye has also maintained its commitment to watering, so I couldn’t apply eyeline and mascara even if I wanted to, even if the swelling hadn’t made it irrelevant.

“Like, I know as an equal opportunity employer that I’m not meant to say this aloud, but we hire staff who look good and, beautiful as you are, a beaten woman isn’t the kind of attractive our clientele wants to see.”

“It’s not that obvious, is it?” I ask with concern. I really thought I did a good job hiding the bruises.

“Obvious enough to look like you should be seated in a doctor’s office right now, not trying to hustle at a private club.” Patrick leans forward, putting his hand near my face until I flinch away. “And if your doctor cleared you for work, you need to invest in a second opinion.”

“It’s just a bit of bruising,” I counter, shame welling inside me the longer he stares. I duck my head to get away from the intensity of his eyes, but that makes me feel worse. Smaller.

Patrick’s jaw clenches as he mumbles, “Did Lock do this to you?”

At that, I jerk up my chin. “No. He fought off the boy who did.”

The glare grows more relentless but this time I’m fighting for Lachlan’s reputation, not just my own, so I find the strength to meet and hold it.

“Do you have enough money to tide you over for the next week?”

“I-I... Yes?”

“Good. Call through to Glen if you need an advance but I don’t want to see you again until you’re healed. Have you been to the police?”

“No!” The pulse of fright as I remember what Patrick advised me the last time police was mentioned grips my chest in a relentless squeeze. “I would never—”

“Why not? If it wasn’t Lock who attacked you, why wouldn’t you call them?”

His morality shifts give me whiplash. “Because Lachlan stabbed him.”

Patrick maintains his stony gaze for another minute, then a warm smile spreads across his face. “Good. I hope he got in one for me and all.” He picks up a biro and aims the end towards me. “And I mean it. Don’t turn up for work until you’re fully healed. Got it?”

I give a small salute and an eye roll. “Yes, sir. I understand, sir.”

He laughs and makes a shooing gesture at me. “Go on, then. Find yourself something nice and healing to do.”

The sudden freedom leaves me at a bit of a loss. I’m used to scrambling for enough time to do anything, having a sudden abundance of it to fill almost feels like a chore.

But there’s only one place I want to be and one person I want to spend time with. Luckily, his initials are newly branded on my chest, so I don’t forget.

On the bus back to Kingswood, I keep my head lowered, nervous that other people are seeing the same wreckage as Patrick and drawing their conclusions. When I get out at the stop, I almost walk straight into a pole, my vision is that obscured.

I use my student pass to enter the high security gates at the driveway into the school. I’ve never entered the place on the weekend before—though the library, gym, pool and other facilities are open to day students after hours—and I’m nervous walking through the comparatively quiet grounds.

The student housing block is on the west side of the school, and I head straight there, coming to a standstill when my pass doesn’t work for this block.

It hadn’t occurred to me it would be off limits. The only time I visited Lachlan out of hours, the front door had been open, a gaggle of students milling in the lobby when I snuck past.

I’m pulling out my phone to call Lachlan when I see him. He’s sitting with Kari, whose head is thrown back with laughter, another half dozen students also forming part of their group.

Lachlan’s arm is casually draped around her. He’s smiling as his eyes rest on her face.

I briefly reexperience the sensations from when he performed the same gesture with me, only to feel abandoned when I shift, and the sensation disappears.

A lump appears in my throat like magic.

I'm locked out. They have the keys to the castle. Anyone looking would think they're the perfect couple.

Maybe they are. Perhaps Lachlan just wants a bit of rough on the side and you keep giving it to him.

The thought hooks into my mind, the barbs setting it deep into meat of my brain until I can't shake it loose. Even when I press the heel of my palm into the wounds on my chest, I can't work it free.

The thrill of joy I felt last night, this morning, is replaced by the slow tug of reality. I don't know if I'm stupid for not being able to believe in Lachlan unless he's in front of me or stupid for ever believing him at all. The only thing not in question is that I'm some kind of stupid.

Nothing's changed. A few declarations don't mean squat.

Whether Lachlan has genuine feelings for Kari doesn't matter when I'm stuck in the exact same relationship I thought I left back in Auckland. A sidepiece to a popular boy. Someone to keep in the background while the public-facing partner gets all the glory.

I back away, heading for home, the aches and pains in my body throbbing with renewed vigour. The journey passes with unbearable slowness. By the time I walk up the front path, I'm ready to curl up in bed and do nothing. Absolutely nothing.

The top drawer of my bedside cabinet is slightly askew. I jiggle it until it opens and then, just before I close it flush, I see why.

The beautiful jewellery Lachlan gave to me at the dance has gone. So are the few twenties I keep tucked in the back for emergencies.

See? Stupid.

Dad isn't home now but he must have paid a visit while I was out and stole the only things of value. If I didn't have my mother's rings on my hand, he would have taken those as well.

I slam the drawer shut with an angry shove, utterly defeated.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

LOCK

I'M NOT sure what hours George works, so keep checking my phone for a message that never arrives. Surely even the most industrious employee can't spend all day at the restaurant. It annoys me I never got the name of the new workplace from her, so I can't even check the opening hours to see if I'm correct.

My own tasks took less than two hours to perform. Apparently, my father remembers something about the morning after a school dance because he went easy on me today. Just a meeting, during which I said all of ten words, most of them in greeting.

Learning the ropes is a lesson in patience—a thing of which I have an increasingly short supply.

I hang around the common room at Kingswood, waiting and hoping that every buzz of my phone will be George. Afternoon turns to night, and I still haven't seen or heard from her. I'm worried.

Finally, I can't stand it any longer. I need to see her. Kari has talked my ear off about everything and anything under the sun until I just want to be in George's comparatively quiet company. Doing comparatively quiet things to her body while she makes comparatively quiet moans of appreciation.

At her house, I work out her room from my internal references and study the window. No locks. The sash has a small gap at the base either because it's ill-fitting or she's left it open a bit for some air.

Or she might have left it that way in the expectation she would have a creeper.

I lift it up, pausing when the painted wood squeals an objection. When there's a large enough gap to fit through, I pull aside the curtain, smiling when I see George curled on the bed, fast asleep.

She's got a loose t-shirt and sweatpants on and is asleep on top of the covers, despite the chill night. It looks like she only meant to lie down for a second but succumbed to exhaustion, perhaps tired out by this morning's activities, and last night.

I'm quiet as I can be shuffling through the gap, taking off my shoes and stripping my clothes off in an untidy heap, before joining her on the bed.

It's not as narrow as my single at Kingswood but it's not large enough to count as a double. If she weren't crowded so far onto one side, there wouldn't be much room spare.

George gives a gentle huff, then settles back into her dream.

My arm is probably cold when I wrap it around her waist, but she doesn't move, doesn't protest, doesn't shift an inch. I tilt my forehead to rest against her nape, my breathing falling into synch with hers.

The rush of emotion is bittersweet. I want this every night. More than this. My natural impatience is stomping around, yelling at me to progress everything so I can take what I want right now.

I press my lips to the top of her spine, leaving them in place while I inhale deeply, smelling the clean scent of her skin. Underneath the soap and shampoo is a slight musk, George's natural smell. As perfect and attractive as the rest of her.

My fingers twitch, wanting to slide upwards and cup her tits, have her nipples harden under my palms, tweak them until she moans in a mix of pleasure and pain.

It might wake her. It might not. I weigh up the pros and cons.

George stirs, pressing her rear back against me, squeezing her thighs together as she utters a soft moan.

My girl is getting it on in dreamland.

The gentlemanly thing to do is assist her.

Instead of trailing up her body to caress her tits, my hand travels in the opposite direction. Her sweatpants are so loose on her, the waistband offers no resistance as I delve further.

Underneath, she's bare.

Following my instructions to a T.

I cup her pussy, leaving my hand in place for a minute while I wait to see if she's going to wake. She softly pumps her hips but her breathing stays steady, the slight hoarseness telling me she's still fast asleep.

Moving slowly, gently, I slide my middle finger between her lips, caressing the silken skin inside, slick with arousal from whoever features in her dreams.

There's a sudden spurt of envy when I consider George might be cheating on me in there. Might have another man locked in her psyche. Then she breathes out a name that sounds suspiciously like mine.

I grin ear to ear in the darkness.

"D'you like that?" I whisper and she groans, hips tilting again, seeking more friction. I give her what she wants, what she needs, drawing my finger back along her sweet folds until I'm circling her clit, making her whimper.

When I move again, I ease my finger inside her entrance, circling there, teasing, then thrusting up to my second knuckle, closing my eyes and pressing my forehead hard between her shoulder blades as her muscles flex and pull at me, urging me still deeper.

I send another finger in for company and feel her edging closer. Her breathing changes tempo, her thighs squeeze harder. Each stroke brings her nearer, nearer, my movements becoming ever slower the closer she gets, letting her explore the edge in all its glorious detail before I use the heel of my palm to take her over, losing myself in her ecstasy as her muscles clench and flutter around my fingers, eking out every last satisfying spasm until she's fully spent.

George smacks her lips together and puffs a breath out through her nose before resuming her normal breathing.

I fist myself, then can't stand the thought of going solo while she's lying there, ready for the taking. I roll her onto her front, lining myself up, then slowly, slowly ease my way inside.

The tempo of her breathing changes. I can tell she's awake by the third thrust. I pause, waiting for acceptance or rejection, waiting for her to show me how much she can take.

She moans, then her voice is breathy as she whispers, “Lachlan?”

I heave out a sigh, whispering in her ear, “I hope you don’t think there are other candidates who’d crawl into your bedroom and fuck you awake at night.”

A hand creeps onto my hipbone, the angle awkward but I take it as an invitation to continue. I press my palm into her lower back, moving her, changing the angle so her next moan is harder, filled with more urgency.

My arm goes around her chest, then higher, securing her shoulders so when I pump into her, I hit the spot in exactly the same way, exactly the right way, every time. She curves her arm, reaching behind me to squeeze my arse as she gives a guttural groan. Then she reaches for my free hand, pulling it upwards, squeezing it tightly in hers, then placing it on her throat, an open invitation to play with her air.

“You like that?” I ask, my voice taking on a hard edge as I draw nearer to my goal. Her answer is a vibration through my palm, the rough pant as I restrict her windpipe, pressing until she wheezes, then relaxing before it cuts off entirely, repeating the process, again, again, again, until she clamps her hand over mine, pressing more savagely into her flesh than I would dream of. Her arse slaps back against me, cunt muscles squeezing until the friction makes my head spin, my balls tighten.

I grab her hair, twisting her head at such a violent angle I expect a protest but instead she comes, the shudder taking hold of her centre and spinning out until even her mouth trembles with the impact.

My lips press against hers, no mercy. Stealing a kiss, stealing the last shudder of her orgasm, stealing her moans.

Another thrust and I explode inside her, thrusting again and again as my hot release pours into her wet, waiting body, having to pull away from her mouth as a roar catapults from my throat before I can clamp my lips shut to hold the loudest part in.

I press kisses to whatever part of her presents in front of me, catching her face, the corner of her eyes, the back of her head, then twisting her body around in my arms so she faces me, kissing her fingers as she reaches to cup my head, finally claiming her lips with mine.

“I thought I was dreaming,” she says in a small, stunned voice and I clasp her tightly to me, chuckling, gathering her even closer, wanting to tuck her away and keep her safely inside.

“Perhaps you were,” I tease when I have enough breath back to speak. “You might have manifested me from your sleep.”

“In that case, give an A plus to my imagination because you’re pretty much the perfect specimen of manhood.”

I take one of her hands between mine, the skin still slightly cold from her slumber, and massage it into warmth. “Only pretty much? I’m insulted.”

She softly laughs, moving to lay her cheek against my chest, resting atop the initials she carved across my heart. “I got sent home from work,” she admits with hesitancy in her voice. “My employer apparently doesn’t want servers who are beaten black and blue.”

“Sounds like a decent boss.”

“Yeah,” she murmurs, then her body stiffens. Not as rigid as fright, more like wariness.

“Is something the matter?”

I pay attention to her hand again, massaging the individual fingers, then moving it close enough to crunch my teeth over her index finger. Not hard, not to bruise or break the skin, just a little crush, so I can experience her with every part of my body that wants to.

She doesn’t draw back, flinch away. When I look directly at her face, she’s staring at me with a perplexed expression, like I’m a puzzle she just can’t solve.

A feeling that might be mutual.

“I went to Kingswood after, but I couldn’t get into the student housing.”

An explanation springs to my lips, but I stop. She doesn’t want me to offer a running commentary, she’s already struggling to explain.

“I saw you with Kari and I...” Her lips tremble and I rub my thumb along the back of her hand, stroking in a circular motion, willing her to speak the rest. “My dad stole the jewellery.”

The jump makes no sense to me. The two things don’t seem at all related. I wait for an explanation, but her eyes are closed, and she’s drifting away from me. Not into sleep, just away. Like a stiff breeze is blowing into her sails while mine lay limp, sagging against the mast.

“There’s always more jewellery,” I say, hearing it’s the wrong thing as soon as the vibrations of my voice hit the air. “Come here,” I add before she can react, pulling her closer. “You can say anything you like to me. I’m not going anywhere.”

She huffs out a breath, then another. Her hand slides up my chest and settles into the curve of my neck. “Do you ever feel like... you made a mistake, early on, and it’s like the universe said, that’s your mistake? That’s the one that no matter how many times you promise you won’t do the same thing again; you will always make it. You can’t learn your way out of it or think your way out of it or fight your way out of it. It’s just your mistake and you’ll repeat it forever until you die.”

Fear hits me and twists immediately into anger. “We’re not a mistake.”

“I used to date a boy, back in Auckland. My first proper boyfriend. He —” George makes a strangled sound deep in her throat and I press my forehead against hers, willing her to keep going. I’m desperate to know what’s happening in that head of hers. Why even when we’re so close, she pulls away.

My breathing falls into a rhythm with hers, my hand strokes her back. I remember her following my instructions, letting me humiliate her. Remember thinking how she was like my special pet.

A surge of such possessiveness sweeps over me I almost choke. The emotion wrapping around my throat and tugging.

“Would you like me to ask? Would that make it easier?”

She pinches her eyes closed, the moonlight picking out her delicate features and bathing them in silver until she looks carved from stone. She gives a tight nod.

“He forced you to do things you didn’t want to?”

She sputters with a laugh, sounding like the last bits of water to drain from the bath. “Way to go broad.”

“Hey. Don’t insult my questioning ability,” I say, smiling with relief that she’s still here with me, still taking part. “He was dating another girl at the same time.”

It’s a statement, not a question, but she still answers. “Yeah. I didn’t know at first—”

“Well, that’s a bonus point for me, isn’t it?”

Her smile is dazzling. “All the bonus points.” She pinches her lips between her fingers and twists them, letting them go with a faint pop.

“He told you that you weren’t good in bed and there was something wrong with you because he couldn’t make you come.”

She wrinkles her nose but nods again.

“And he used to punish you for making him feel inadequate. He needed to hurt you and he told you it was your fault.” In case she doesn’t yet know, I add, “But it isn’t.”

“H-how do you know all that?”

I stroke a path along the side of her cheek with my fingertip. “Because you’re important to me so I pay attention.”

“It’s not that I... broadcast some kind of signal?”

My voice goes ominously deep. “Like the batman?”

Her giggles are the most desirable soundbite I’d ever heard. I roll onto my back, taking her with me so we’re lying, belly to belly, her balanced on top.

“He threw a d-demonstration for me once,” she says, her voice far more secure than when she started. “Brought in his girlfriend and made her come by fucking her in front of me, just in case I wasn’t connecting the dots.” She hides her face in my shoulder.

“Holy fuck.” Even I’m surprised by that revelation. How inadequate can a boy possibly be? “And she was okay with that?”

“Apparently. Maybe she had a public sex bucket list to tick off or hoped for a career in s-sex education.”

There are still tears in her voice, but I can’t stop from chuckling at the job description. “If that’s the direction of sex ed, I’m sure the lessons will become a lot more popular. Was he not aware there are a multitude of porn sites that’ll achieve the same goal with much less hassle?”

Her soft laugh echoes around the room again. “Apparently, not.”

“It’s not the same mistake,” I whisper, linking my arms around her, kissing the top of her head. “I’m not completely inadequate in bed.”

“No, you’re not,” she says, and I’m pleased with her wholehearted agreement.

“I’m also not sleeping around on you.” George goes still and I hear her struggling to swallow. “It’s true. Any physical relationship that Kari and I shared, it stopped before you came on the scene.”

“Really?”

Her voice is so small and hopeful it makes my chest ache. “Really.”

She rests her cheek against my chest, closing her eyes. When I think she’s fallen back asleep she gives a tiny start, then asks, “Can you stay the night? You don’t need to get back?”

“I don’t need to be anywhere but right here.”

She gives a delightful wriggle against me, then drops straight into sleep. I lay awake, loving the weight of her body on mine, my thoughts travelling back over everything we said, hopeful that she knows history won't repeat itself.

I might do monstrous things, have done some of them to her, but I'm not a monster. I'm not so inadequate I need to hurt someone because my own failings leave me feeling insecure.

My thoughts wind back to the strange, aborted statement that she wove in there. The one about her dad stealing the jewellery. She might be wrong about making a mistake with me but she's right about making the same mistake with her father.

The man doesn't deserve her trust, doesn't warrant it, yet he uses it time and time again.

I need to act, sooner rather than later. Get him out of her hair so she can flourish.

Luckily, everything's already set in motion.

All I have to do is press play.

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CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

GEORGE

LACHLAN IS GONE when I wake the next morning. There's a small pulse of disappointment that he didn't stay the night after all, but it doesn't grow. Doesn't turn into the same fears that tore at me yesterday.

I might still be making a mistake, but the confession last night gave me enough optimism, enough confidence in the bond me and Lachlan share, that I can't get worked up over it.

If this is a mistake, let it be the biggest, most spectacular mistake I ever make. Let me invest too much of myself, my time, my energy, my love into him so even if it all shatters apart, at least I'll know I gave it my all.

No use in tainting my memories with misery. Let them glow as bright as they can.

I grab my phone and a broad smile takes hold as I see the message. *"Sorry to leave. My dad pinged me and you looked far too beautiful to wake. Enjoy your sleep-in."*

It was sent at four-thirty in the morning. I change my opinion to being grateful he didn't wake me. That's not a sensible time for mortals to be out and about.

I stumble along to the kitchen, tenderly poking at my face in between putting on a large pot of coffee. No sign of dad again. Embarrassment is

probably keeping him out all night. I guess he didn't get on enough of a winning streak to pay back the things he stole.

The thought of it sours my mood but I try to wrest it back into place. It would be terrible to waste my time with Lachlan by mooching around, being sad about my father and his determination to ruin his life.

And mine.

By the time I shower and go into my bedroom to select something to wear, I'm back on an even keel. The bed stirs memories of Lachlan, of his body sending mine into orbit, and my cheeks flush even though there's no audience to see.

My phone beeps as I'm getting dressed and I grab it, eagerly scanning the screen.

"Sorry. I'm going to be tied up until late afternoon. There's a show at the art gallery I thought you might like. I reserved a ticket at the front desk."

The Ron Mueck exhibition is absolutely something I might like but between the cost and the absence of free time, thought I'd never be able to attend. Now, with work postponed until I'm healed and a free pass thanks to Lachlan, I'm ecstatic.

After a quick breakfast, I head straight for the centre. It takes a few minutes to prove I am who I say I am, then I'm through the entrance doors and instantly transported to another world.

The first sculpture is just through the doors, an enormous face on its side, asleep. My head contorts itself trying to place the object in context. It looks so real but is such an inappropriate size that it feels like trying to stuff a square peg into a disastrously small square hole.

I lose myself in the art, laughing at some pieces, gut punched by others. The hours tick by and by and by and I still linger, not wanting to give up when there's a chance I might still spy something that creates a new question, needs a new answer. Even the process videos, usually something that bores me to tears, are a revelation. I sit through them twice, once in a room crowded full of people, again when the late afternoon has dissipated attendance so there are more seats empty than filled.

"Sorry," Lachlan's next text reads when I'm back out in reality, walking along the street and wondering why everyone and everything is back to its expected size. *"Still not done. Can I meet you at your home and take you out to dinner? Shouldn't be too much longer."*

I smile, wondering idly about what jobs are taking his attention. Probably nothing I want to know about and certainly nothing I should dwell upon.

After walking through the centre of town a few times, part window shopping and part catching up on everything new that's been built since I visited last, I go home. The door's unlocked, a good sign that my father's home. Something he has been far more often these days, I'm guessing thanks to Lachlan's interference.

I don't read it as a warning sign.

I yell out a greeting the moment I'm through the door, and Dad calls back, "In the kitchen."

The strain in his voice doesn't register until I push open the door and see he has company. A thin man, mid-twenties, dark clothes, dark hair, dark eyes, holding a baseball bat alongside his right leg.

I spin, trying to backtrack but he's quicker, grabbing my wrist and twisting it behind my back as he forces me to walk in front of him. He shoves me towards a chair, and I sit, glancing at my father, who cuts his eyes away the moment I do.

Anger surges up inside me.

"You were cut off," I insist, feeling the pinch of betrayal take root immediately. There shouldn't have been enough time since the last stumble for me to be hopeful but thanks to Lachlan's interference, I did.

Now I see how long that brought us.

Two weeks.

His line of credit was cut off, he was kicked out of his familiar haunts, he's spent half his nights at *home*, but here we are again, a fortnight later. Both staring at the same problem through the same weary eyes, sticking a dagger into the same bleeding wound.

"My daughter's nothing to do with this," Dad says. A nice sentiment except it's too late. It's always too late.

If he wanted me to get away, he had his chance. He could have shouted a warning the moment I stepped indoors. Instead, he called me straight in here.

My internal narrator tries to get a word in, to explain how it's an addiction and he can't help it, but I backhand that stupid bitch right out of the place.

I should have done that a long time ago.

“How much do you owe this time?” My voice is strained, my throat muscles so tense that it’s hard to force out any sound at all.

“Not much,” he lies. Then his eyes fix on my hand. On the rings. “Could we use the jewellery as a down payment on the rest?”

He doesn’t address the question to me. It’s to the man hovering with menace.

I twist the rings around my finger, wondering how much time and trouble it cost Lachlan to find them. All wasted.

And perhaps it’s because my life improved that I finally see it. What everyone else saw long ago, even Spencer. The man who knows more about my father’s addiction than anyone else because he shares it.

I can’t help him. The help I’ve given him so far isn’t actually helping anyone. It just makes things worse.

“I’ll swallow them before I give them to you.”

“Honey...”

My phone buzzes and I look to the man standing nearby. “Can I answer that?”

I don’t want to answer. I want to place a call out. It might be pointless to help my dad but there’s still a chance I can phone someone to help me.

To my surprise, the man says, “Go ahead.” His voice is far deeper than his scrawny frame would indicate.

I reject the incoming line—probably a robot—swipe into contacts and press on Lachlan’s number while pretending to answer. “Hello?”

It goes to voicemail.

“Just checking in,” I say lightly, then shriek as the bat slams onto the table in front of me, the man grabbing my phone and laughing as he checks the display.

“Calling the cavalry, are you?” he asks just before an automated voice tells him the mailbox is full.

The resulting sneer doesn’t improve the man’s looks any.

“Guess no one’s coming to rescue you, Princess.” He tosses the phone onto the table and turns to my father. “What about you? Any rich friends you’d like to call?”

“Give him the jewellery, love. I’ll replace it. You know I’ll—”

I slam my palm on the table. “You sold them, and you didn’t even tell me.”

His face floods with guilt and the ultimate confirmation that my logic was sound fells me. I can't speak. Can't even look at him.

"This isn't my debt," I tell the intruder. "Can I go?"

"No, you can't go." His face screws into mockery as he answers. "No one's leaving until I've got my money, or I've got your attention."

"Give him the jewellery."

"You want me to throw away Mum's jewellery?" I fold my arms like I'm a three-year-old mid-squabble. "Take it."

The bat hits me in the shoulder with such force that I can't even cry. It feels like my bones are shattering in the joint, the flesh surrounding them battered and bruised.

"No!" Dad yells, jumping up to grapple for control of the bat. The second swing hits him instead of me, catching him on the back of the head with such a heavy crack that my heart splits open.

"Stop." I try to pull the rings off but there's so much pain in my shoulder that the command never makes it to my fingers.

The phone rings and the man smashes it with his bat until it's a mess of shattered gorilla glass and shards of casing. I don't want to add up the hours I worked to afford the device; the cheapest smartphone I could find but still worth more than I wanted to spend.

Dad has both hands cradling his skull, pressing hard as though it's the only way the pieces hold together. As the assailant turns towards him, Dad holds a hand out to ward him off and bile rushes up my throat as I see the torrent of blood that's drenched his fingers, his hand, the cuff of his shirt.

"I have some money saved," I say, bitterly regretting my lame attempt to put my foot down. I should have handed over the jewellery when Dad asked me to instead of acting like a petulant child. "Please can't you tell your boss that—"

"I'm my boss," the man screams, slamming the bat into the nearby cupboards and dragging their entire contents onto the floor.

He smashes boxes of breakfast cereal and packets of noodles while I leave my chair and rush to my father, now slumping forward. Just as I reach him, his weight falls to the side and I tug him farther, shielding him from a direct landing on the hard floor and using the overturned chair as shelter while the collector continues his vendetta against our cabinet of dried foods.

I drop to my knees beside him, pulling him half onto my lap. The blood spilling from the back of his head is bad, the strange sounds coming from

his throat are worst. I hear the crack of the bat against his skull, taste the sound, metallic, purple, a conglomeration of every one of my worst fears.

“Daddy?” My query devolves to the language of my childhood, fear driving any thought of being adult into a far-off future. “Daddy, are you okay?”

And he’s not. It’s my fault. I could have fallen into line and instead I rebelled at the worst possible time.

The blood pools at the neck of his shirt, staining its vibrant crimson halfway down his back.

I pull the chair closer as the madman turns, hefting the bat in his hand as though testing the weight, getting used to its power so he can wield it against us. A single flimsy chair. Barely a shield at all but it’s the best we have as the man stalks us, raising the bat ready to strike at us again.

LOCK

The locked front door gives the first time I slam into it with my shoulder, pushing inwards with such force that the handle dents the wall.

I slam it closed behind me, giving the man in the kitchen ample warning I’m on my way. The three strides to the room stutter past like strobe lighting, then I’m in the kitchen, arms loose, ready to fight.

“Please,” I hear George beg before I see her. She’s curled around her father, both cowering behind a kitset chair. Her face is twisted with pain.

There’s so much blood I can’t tell how badly hurt she is.

There’s so much blood, my anger boils up and spills over in a roar of outrage.

I rush at Adnan, fisting my hands in his shirt to drive him backwards, pushing until he’s bent over the sink, his eyes wide. He stares at me the way George must have stared at him while he beat the shit out of her and her dad.

The bat comes loose from his hand, the distant snap of fingers telling me why he’s giving it up so easily. He’s lucky. I made it perfectly clear there was one target in the household and George wasn’t it. If I didn’t have

to follow through with the rest of the charade, this bat would pulverise his skull, smashing it until there was nothing left but loose shards of blood-and-brain-coated bone.

Instead, I ram the end of onto the bench, landing with force right next to his ear, making him scream.

“Lachlan!”

At her cry, I release my grip, taking a step backward, skidding in the blood. That snaps my attention back to George. She’s huddled so far over her father I can’t get a good look at either of them.

I knock the chair aside, crouching beside her. Dropping the bat so I can cradle her face in my hands.

“Are you okay?”

She nods even though her mouth is twisted with pain. “It’s my d-dad. He’s not—”

I see the end of the sentence for myself. He’s not conscious. If it weren’t for the bubble of blood blowing out of his nostril, I would have thought him dead.

“Come on.”

I try to raise her, pry her away from him. She clings on. Crying. Rocking his unresponsive body back and forth.

“Hey, man. You can’t just come in here and—”

I spring to my feet, grabbing the bat and poking the end into his chest so it rests on the hollow under his throat. He knocks it away, the action contorting his features into a rictus of pain. His broken fingers stick out at odd angles. I wish the rest of his bones did the same.

“Don’t tell me what I can and can’t do,” I growl, easing back half a step as I try to monitor George at the same time as keeping tabs on the assailant. “You know who I am?”

He nods, appearing confused, and I slam the bat hard against the bench next to him. To make him jump. To make him squeal in surprise like the little rat he is. “If you get the fuck out of here now, I’ll let you live.”

“And what about my payment?”

I stalk towards him, switching the bat to my left hand so I can flick the blade of my knife out with my right. “Did you misunderstand me?”

His mouth twists, tongue flicking out to lick his lips as he glares at me, taking in my stance and weighing up his chances. Unarmed. Already in pain.

A second later, he skitters past me, running for the front door, his performance over.

I drop the bat and tuck the knife blade away as I turn back to George, scanning her face. It's contorted with fear. Not for herself but for her father.

We need to go. I grip her shoulder to help her stand and she winces, giving a little cry.

"How badly did he hurt you?" My voice is granite, menacing, the opposite of what she needs, and I swallow hard, trying to fight past the flood of rage reddening my vision.

"It's just a bruise."

She shuffles away when I try to see more, jolting her father whose eyes pop open. "Where...?"

"Daddy!"

George's hug threatens him more than the blow to his head. She squeezes so hard, his arm flaps, trying to get free.

"Come on," I tell her, lifting her under the opposite shoulder to where she's hurt. "We need to get going now!"

"Help me with him." She ignores my direction, trying to get her father to sit upright.

"Leave him." I pull her away, grabbing her tightly around her waist when she struggles. "That man won't stay gone. He'll grab a few buddies and head straight back here. We need to go now."

"I'm not going to leave my father."

Yes, she is.

That's precisely why I've paid so much to stage this scene.

I throw her over my shoulder, and immediately change my mind when she punches me in my lower back. "Jesus. Stop that." I set her on her feet again, grabbing her wrists and holding them together. "Stop fighting me. We have to go."

"My father needs help."

"I don't give a shit what your father needs!"

My shout is so loud that George stops, staring at me in confusion. I close my eyes, fighting for control. "If we're here when they come back, they'll hurt you. We need to go. You can call for help from the car."

"I don't need an ambulance," her father groans, sitting up and leaning back against the counter cabinets. "You go on, love."

Love. What a fucking joke.

“No. I’ll stay here and we’ll—”

This time I scoop her into my arms, one around her shoulders, one under her legs. We’re halfway out of the kitchen before she adjusts to the change enough to struggle. I try to open the door one-handed, but she kicks it shut, bowing her body until I have no choice but to set her down.

“Dad needs help. We can’t just leave him here.”

“He needs help.” I let my head drop forward, giving a hollow laugh. “And has he asked you for help, George? Did he ask you to take him along to a meeting? Help him get back on track?”

“N-no, but once he’s—”

“No. The answer is just no.” I cup her face in my hands, staring into her blazing eyes, hoping she can see past the panic long enough to listen. “He caused this mess. He can live with it. We’re leaving.”

Her chin juts out as she stands her ground, eyes so angry they should come with their own fire hazard dial.

I can manhandle her to the car, but it’ll draw attention. A pretty white girl screaming blue murder while fighting off her attacker is every cop’s wet dream.

“Go get in the car, George.” I hand her the keys. “I’ll help your father call an ambulance but we’re not staying. Do you understand?”

“I’m not leaving until I see him get into the ambulance.”

“He’s right,” her father calls out. “Go on. I’ll be fine.”

I arch my eyebrow. “See?”

The man’s no further up the food chain than a cockroach. Of course, he can take a beating and survive.

She takes the keys, eyeing me with visible reluctance. I sigh with relief when she walks outside, casting a worried gaze back at me.

I walk back to the kitchen and eye her father. He grimaces and I throw a teatowel at him. “Use this to stop the bleeding.”

“Thanks for your—”

“Don’t thank me. I’m not doing anything for you. I’m here for George. Where’s your phone?”

He points to a landline, tucked behind a magazine stand. I check the battery’s full, then toss it to him, blocking his view when I slice through the cord on the receiver. Its screen goes blank as I ask, “You can handle the ambulance yourself, yeah?”

“Sure. Can I...” he licks his lips. “Can you let George stay with me? I don’t want her to worry.”

My lip curls into a sneer as I stare at the man in disbelief. I’m used to dealing with people who are consciously evil, conspicuously cruel. Handling someone who is both without the self-awareness to know those qualities are a choice is a new twist.

The sooner George is out of his orbit, the better.

Speaking of whom, there’s a creak behind me. A tread in the hallway. Instead of getting in the car like I asked, she’s snuck back inside to make sure her darling roach of a father is safe.

“Get yourself gone as soon as you can,” I tell him, aware I’m now performing for an audience of two. “If I were you, I’d skip the hospital. You’ll be a sitting target in there.”

I take a wad of cash out of my pocket and toss it over, hitting him in the chest. “Take this and buy yourself a plane ticket out of here. Go as far as you can, make them work to track you down.”

“L-let me... I want to go with him.”

I swing sideways, meeting George’s gaze. “No. You’ll stay here under my protection. Once I’m sure there won’t be any lingering unpleasantness from the gang he owes, you can do what you like, but until I know you’re safe, you’re not leaving my sight.”

Her expression says she wants to argue, but her face twists into a tic and I take advantage. “We’re going.”

“My father—”

“Just stop!” I step back, my hands fisting, wanting to punch something, hurt someone. “Look around you, George. You think this is what happens when someone loves you?”

There are shattered remnants from the cupboards along the benches. Food scattered everywhere. Blood covering the floor. Her phone in pieces.

And I know this visit is my doing but my first visit to this place wasn’t. The reason I came strolling into this place that first time was solely because of her father’s actions. If I hadn’t been in control of his latest descent, another gang might already be knocking down their door.

Even though everything Adnan has destroyed is cheap crap, it’s still hard to see it busted apart. It might be harder precisely because it’s all worthless. The demonstration that no matter how bad you thought things were, they could always go downhill.

I sat in that chair. I beat her father to let him know we were serious. I listened to his fumbling excuses.

And I know what my next step would have been that night.

If Kari hadn't offered her distraction, I would have hurt George. I would have hurt her, and I would have made her father watch. I would have done it and I wouldn't have cared.

Much as my father wants to send me overseas to toughen up, some hardening has occurred already. Perhaps more than even I know.

The thought I could have hurt her, caused irreversible damage while never knowing how special she is makes me cold with rage, but anger won't win her over. Not right now.

"Please," I say in my softest whisper. "I need to know you're safe."

She looks at me for so long, I think she's going to turn me down. To jump back onto her father's bandwagon, even knowing how much grief it causes. How much harm it'll do.

Then she tilts her head forward, breaking our gaze. "And once you know we're s-safe, I can find him?"

Over my dead body.

"Sure." I glance at her father. "Call her when you get settled. Give her your new number."

Her face clears as he nods, letting herself be talked into it. We leave the house together, her still clutching the keys as a prize.

"You're sure you're safe to drive?" I tease her as we get into the car, drawing her attention as two men slip into her house, one nodding to me from the top step. "Or have you been drinking?"

She gives me a shadowy smile, ducking her head as she adjusts the settings to how she likes them. I stiffen at a faint bang, but she doesn't notice, pulling on her seat belt and caressing the steering wheel like it's a long-lost pet.

"I'm always safe to drive."

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

GEORGE

DESPITE MY ANSWER, my brain is firing on so many cylinders I probably shouldn't be in charge of a vehicle. But the change in focus shifts some of the noise into the background, so I'm grateful for the distraction.

When I pull into Lachlan's permanent parking spot at the school and hand back the keys, it's with regret.

"I should hire you to be my personal chauffeur," he says, giving me a strange sideways look that makes me wonder what's going on behind those eyes. "What are the going wages for a dishwasher?"

Patrick hasn't told me to avoid the subject of my employment, but I skirted around the truth when the topic of jobs came up in our group. It's a reasonable guess that Lachlan won't be ecstatic about the change.

I shift in my seat, eager to break eye contact.

Deception has never come naturally to me.

A half-truth then. "I've upgraded to a server," I say, hoping he doesn't notice the pause. "But fairly terrible. What exactly are you offering?"

"For the right person? Limitless earning potential."

"Ah, limitless." I raise my eyebrows, struggling as I undo the seatbelt. My shoulder aches where the man hit me, the pain increasing as my shock dissipates. "Sounds more like you don't know."

He shrugs. "You got me. I have no idea how much to offer. If you want to take advantage, now's the time."

My fingers rest on the doorhandle when my shoulders slump. All my inside fears wanting to come out. "Are you s-sure he's going to be okay?"

He leans over, taking my face in his hand, using his thumb to tilt up my jaw. Even his fingers are firm, and I lean into them, craving his strength. "I don't know. What I know is that you being there won't change things if he's not."

"What happens if he doesn't call? He might d-disappear forever."

There's a twist to his mouth that makes me think he's not a fan of my dad. "Let's just wait and see."

When I nod, he withdraws his hand and gets out of the car, walking around to let me out since I'm still struggling.

He puts a comforting hand on my back as we walk inside, then drops it once we reach the corridors of the accommodation block. The only other time I've been inside here, I paid little attention. Now, I'm desperate for something to distract me from the worry.

The students we pass seem just as interested in me and I shuffle slightly farther away from Lachlan, realising any of them could be on their way to spill gossip to Kari. Falling over themselves to keep her up-to-date with her boyfriend's betrayal.

I feel guilty and I'm not even doing anything. This is just an emergency measure, I remind myself. Just until we're sure the men won't come back.

And then what?

Lachlan told my father to go. He might not get in touch for a while but when he does, he'll expect me to join him. It's not like I have a choice. I can't afford my own place on what I'm earning, even with the upgrade courtesy of Patrick.

So far, all I've done is pay down my credit card balance. I panic when I think of how much more money I'll need if I want to stay.

"Hey." Lachlan stops walking and pulls me into a hug, making me even guiltier. "It's okay."

It's not. It's really not.

I can't stand to start up with Dad again in a new town. I love him but I'll never be able to trust him again.

If it had been sooner, I would have tried to return to Auckland. Bunk down with friends and couch surf until I found some place to house myself

on a more permanent basis.

Move in with Jack.

Even thinking of him makes my skin crawl. Then again, it always did when we were apart. Whenever he stood in front of me, it was a different story.

“I know you can’t just turn off your brain but try not to worry.”

I snort at the platitude, working my way free of him. “Sure, I’ll get right onto that after I master trying not to breathe.”

Another student walks by. I don’t know her name, but she stares at me, stares at Lachlan, stares at me again, then breaks into a sprint.

Even gossip doesn’t need to travel that fast, surely?

When I look down at myself, I understand why. My outfit is stained with dad’s blood.

On the one hand, I guess that means no one’s running to Kari. On the other, a sob rises from deep within me as I realise again how badly he was hurt. How even now he might be dying.

Reinforcements might have come back before he could arrange a flight. He might have fallen into unconsciousness again, leaving him vulnerable when the men returned.

He might be dead already.

“Grab my hand,” Lachlan orders me. “Keep your head down. You remember where my room is, don’t you? I’ll take you straight there and you can share all those awful thoughts in your head so I can tell you how unlikely they are to happen.”

“Okay.” I follow his instructions, focusing only on the touch of his fingers twining through mine.

Inside his room, he unwraps me, carefully removing the soaked sweatshirt and easing down my jeans. They’re so drenched with Dad’s blood they look more black than blue.

He puts them into a hamper at the end of his bed, already overflowing so he has to jam them hard to fit. I shift from foot to foot, unsure of what to do next. Unsure of everything.

The last time I was in his room was so different. I don’t get any vibes off him right now except concern.

Lachlan catches my glance and says, “There’s an onsite laundry service. Once they clean them, I’ll get them back to you.”

He goes into the bathroom to turn on the shower, coaxing me through a moment later. “Relax,” he says when I try to wriggle around the side of him without touching, an impossibility in the small space. “I won’t jump your bones. You need to get clean.”

I glimpse myself in the bathroom mirror over his shoulder, looking like a still from the climax of *Carrie*. The image scares me, and I cut my eyes away.

“The water’s warm enough.”

I step into the small cubicle, dousing my hair under the stream. Lachlan joins me a moment later. He’s stripped off his shirt but left his jeans in place. In a minute, they’re sodden.

“I can shower by myself.”

“But you don’t need to,” he says in a light tone, pouring a generous serve of shampoo into his hand. The touch of his fingers as he massages it into my wet hair is soothing and I close my eyes. Scenes from earlier immediately crowd my memory and I open them again, feeling the sting of the shampoo.

My tears fall, mingling with the water. I wipe them away, but Lachlan nudges me. “Don’t worry about it. Pretend I’m not here.”

“And you like it when girls cry,” I echo from my memory.

He stops, tilting my chin up to stare into my eyes. A small frown furrows his brow. “That isn’t...” He shakes his head, then pulls me against him, hugging me tightly. “Not the situation I was thinking of at all.”

Because of his encouragement, or because I can’t stop them, the tears pour forth. I rest my hands on Lachlan’s shoulders, hiding my face in his chest.

Slowly, slowly, he eases his embrace, returning to his efforts on my hair, the water gradually running through the shades from crimson to pink to clear as my emotions calm, the tension released.

Then a new fear cuts through me. “How w-will dad reach me? What if he calls outside of class?”

“He knows your number, right?”

I nod. “B-but my phone—”

“Is in my jacket and I’ve got my old phone in a drawer somewhere, so we can get the SIM working.”

His smile is reassuring as he takes my hands, one at a time, painstakingly lathering between my fingers and easing out the blood

beneath my nails. It's so strange to have someone take care of me, that I close my eyes, losing myself in the sensation.

It feels like my mother's back, and I regress years, shedding my necessary independence.

When we finally step from the shower, he wraps me inside a towel and slowly pats my skin dry. He works on my hair for longer and, once he's cleared the worst of it, he takes a wide-tooth comb and draws it through the tangles.

Dry, he wraps me back in the towel to take me through into his room, sitting me on the bed while he rummages through his drawers, finding something for me to wear.

"Oh, these are yours, right?"

I glance over to see the clothes I wore on the night of the party. The ones that disappeared after Tandi stripped them from me.

"Sorry, your underwear's missing." Lachlan has a rueful smile. "Guess the laundry service didn't think they were mine."

"But a paisley blouse? Obviously, that'd be yours."

He winks, making my smile grow wider. "I guess. Maybe I should expand my horizons. They'll do for tomorrow. Take these for tonight."

The sweatpants and t-shirt he thrusts at me are clean, sweet-smelling, and at least twice my size. Even when I roll the pants legs up, they trail on the floor. The tee swims on me so if I lean forward, everyone gets a flash of my tits for free.

They're also comforting. It's like being snuggled inside an enormous blanket. A sensation that doubles when I hug myself. The gesture makes my shoulder throb, sending a numb twinge along my arm to my fingertips.

"You're hurt?"

There's a low fury in Lachlan's voice that startles me. His jaw is clenched when I turn to him.

"Just a bruise. You said there was a phone?"

He pulls a smartphone out of his top drawer, and I stare at it, wide-eyed. It's last year's premium model. Far out of my price range, even secondhand.

When I don't immediately take it, he jiggles his hand, then pushes the phone into mine. "What's wrong? It's not that old. Never got around to trading it in." When I take it with my numb fingers, he snags his jacket and pulls the broken pieces of mine from its inside pocket. "And here's yours."

I fumble taking the back off until Lachlan takes it from me, easily swapping in the SIM and tossing the wreckage of mine into the bin. When I reach for it, my shoulder twinges again and I wince.

“Can I see your shoulder?”

“You just did. It hasn’t changed in the few minutes since the shower.”

Ignoring me, he perches behind me on the bed, pulling the neck of my t-shirt aside to expose the skin. It feels hot, puffy, but there’s no real discoloration yet. Just shadows where the bleed will take a few days to work its way up to the surface.

Lachlan holds his palm against it, the heat exponentially increasing at his touch. When he gently prods his thumb at the worst of the swelling, I suck in a breath, and he stops.

“He hit you with the bat?”

“I... he swung. I’m not sure he meant to hit me or Dad, but we were moving, and...” My voice disappears. I don’t know why I’m trying to absolve the debt collector of responsibility.

The phone needs charging. There are a few percentage points left on the battery but not enough to phone my father. Not enough to accept a call.

“The charger’s the same,” Lachlan says, moving over to his table. I hand the phone back to him and he plugs it in. “Ninety minutes to full.”

“Good. I want to speak to him again tonight if I can. Otherwise, I don’t think I’ll sleep.”

He sits beside me, rubbing my back. “Everything can wait until tomorrow. He’ll be on the move. There’ll be a ton of things to arrange. You mightn’t hear from him for days and he mightn’t be in a place where he can have his phone on or keep it charged.”

I want to argue every word, but I know he’s right. It might be days. It might be longer.

You might never hear from him again.

If I knew he was safe, I think that might be my favourite answer.

Lachlan leaves me alone to fetch some food from the cafeteria, then watches me like a hawk until I finish every bite. He even insists I finish up my soda, the sweetness cloying from halfway through so getting to the bottom is a struggle.

By the time I finish, exhaustion has its claws in me. My blinks come slower, my words slurring even when I try to enunciate.

“Lay down,” he orders when I can barely keep my eyes open. “You’ll stay here tonight, then I’ll check if there’s a room free for you to take from tomorrow.”

“I can’t afford—”

“Shh.” I’m so close to sleep that when he slips onto the bed behind me, I barely stir. “You don’t need to worry about money. I’ve got more than enough to cover one tiny female.”

I think I fall asleep while I’m trying to think of an answer. When I formulate a response, he’s lying in a different position. “It feels like I’m using you.”

It’s not quite what I mean, but it’s the gist of it. My internal ledger is now weighted so far in the red that I don’t know how I can ever get it back into balance. Not just the money, though that’s the most obvious. It’s all the little things.

That he stands up for me, has my back. He takes better care of me than my family. Forces his circle wider to let me join.

He chuckles into my neck, curling an arm more firmly around my waist. “You are. It’s okay to do that, George. We’re friends. That’s what friends do for each other.”

Is it? Is this companionship and support something other people take for granted?

My shoulders shake. No tears but I can’t stop trembling, even as he strokes my back, easing me towards sleep.

“He’s not getting better, is he?”

His voice is kind, but the truth isn’t. “Probably not.”

And I have a sudden need to explain. To justify my affection even if it’s obvious he’s not the best dad in the world.

“He used to be so different. Back when Mum was alive. I just want him to go back to normal.”

Lachlan touches his forehead to mine. “Yeah. Your father really is shit.”

The brutal honesty is such a relief, I laugh. “Says the only son of the devil.”

“Creighton wishes he was the devil.”

I’m silent for a few minutes, then stir again. “You’re the only person I can talk to about this. Because you know about him.”

His breath is hot against my neck. It sends a pleasant wave of tingles shooting down my spine. “Yeah, I know far more than I want to about

having an abusive father.”

“He’s not abusive.”

“When I walked in tonight, you were on top of him, protecting him from the armed assailant he owes money to.” The soft tone he uses is so opposite to his words. “What else do you call that if not abuse?”

“How...?” I start then have to clear my throat. My thoughts are hard to corral; it takes time to put them in order. While I wait, I draw small circles on the back of Lachlan’s hand. He doesn’t seem to mind. Doesn’t pull away. “How does your father abuse you?”

He stiffens but doesn’t answer. If I were fully awake, I might feel ashamed, but I’m too relaxed to care much about what I’m saying. Still wanting an answer, wanting to give him the same opportunity to confess as he’s given me, I try a different tack. “When he gave me the lift home, Patrick said you only joined the family recently.”

“Oh, did he?” he shifts his weight, rolling onto his back and tucking me more closely into his side. “Nice of him to spill all my secrets.”

“Is that why you don’t get on?”

He frowns at the ceiling. “He wants our relationship to be combative. If I didn’t fight him at every turn, he’d just assume I wasn’t cut out for the role and move on to the next in line.”

“Did you have much to do with him before?”

“Nah. It was just me and my mum, being part of the rabble.”

“Hey!” I poke him in the side, my hand immediately returning to its new home on his chest.

My indignation makes him laugh. “Don’t blame me. You’re the one who self-identified with that statement.”

When I look up at him, he moves away the few hairs clinging to the side of my mouth. “Does he hurt you?”

He suppresses a small smile. “He arranged a marriage that upsets the girl I like, so yeah.”

LOCK

I wait for minutes after George falls asleep before I move from the bed. The pills I crushed into her soda took forever to work, far longer than last time. I hate to use them, hate to lose her to unconsciousness, but I need to be sure she doesn't go wandering.

If they took longer to have an effect, they might also wear off more quickly. I need to move and enact my plan, then come back here. Innocence itself.

While I'm moving around the room, collecting everything I need, I think of George's love for her father. It's unthinkable to me she still has such a connection to a man who's treated her so badly. Who's simply a bad person, regardless of whether he started out that way.

Once upon a time, telling her the worst things about myself would have been unthinkable. An impossibility. Tonight is the first time that I wonder if she would mind as much as I tell myself she would.

I wonder if, even after hearing from the darkest part of my soul, she would stay.

The buzz as I load my pockets has nothing to do with the task in front of me. It's all to do with the girl I'm leaving alone in my room. The obsession I now want to own.

My elaborate web of plans is no longer a dare to see if I can, I need it to work. I want her here, near me, under the same roof. Somewhere safe where I can check on her, catch up with her, share our secrets without a time limit.

I want to always be the man who comes to her rescue. The first person she thinks to call.

She's challenging me.

She's changing me.

I want to be fucking worth it.

When I'm out the door, I pocket my key and move to the common room before I check my phone. It's just gone eleven so there's no one else in there.

A message from Patrick, complaining about the state I left his man. Like a few broken fingers matter in the greater scheme of things. I send him a tip to pass on to Adnan even though it grates.

Better that than have Patrick poke him too hard about what I needed him for.

Another message is from Alastair, my fixit guy. He's at a party and sent a picture showing him and Carrod together. The time stamp on it is ten

forty-seven, and the venue is over an hour's drive away.

Plenty of time, even if they left the moment the snap was sent.

Carrod's room is one floor up and on the opposite side corridor to mine. I don't like to think of George boarding that far away from me—I'd much prefer her take the cell next to mine—but even the least suspicious mind might have a twinge if my next-door neighbour was the one to be evicted just when George desperately needed to move in.

Besides, the pleasure of hitting Carrod again, even anonymously, is sweet.

No one's in the hallway to see me but I keep up a charade that I'm visiting in case anyone happens along.

"Knock, knock," I call out, trying the handle, then quickly inserting the copy of the key I had a minion grab from the main office, returning before anyone noticed it was missing. Inside, I pause for a second to get my bearings, then set to work.

The pills I bought from the maid are in a baggie, minus the half dozen I've reserved for personal use. I used gloves when prepping and pull them on again before handling it.

Kingswood probably won't go to the trouble of examining the plastic surface for fingerprints but if Carrod's dad kicks up enough, they might. Better to be safe than sorry.

There's a bookshelf on the wall opposite his bed. I try out a few positions, opting to put the bag behind a textbook, leaving it hanging slightly over the lip. Just enough to make anyone acting on an anonymous tip suspicious enough to pull it all the way out.

I linger long enough to rifle through the rest of his belongings. Nothing much of interest but I take out a Swiss Army knife hidden beneath his pillow and pull out the blade. Tempting but I put it back where I found it, staring at the photos pinned to his wall next.

Holiday snaps. Family pictures where fake grins can't hide the boredom lurking in their eyes.

Like almost every other family in the school, they look disgustingly wealthy. Yet they still raised a boy who thinks it's okay to mock people.

I hope they enjoy having him home again.

Job done, I lock the door behind me and saunter along the corridors to the common room again.

This time, when I check my phone, I have a different message waiting for me. The two men I left behind at George's confirm they took care of her father and tied up all the loose ends.

Everything is falling into place.

You could just ask your dad to get out of it.

I thrust that idea away with instant repugnance. Bad enough to plead with the old man regarding anything. To plead for the thing I want this badly would just offer him a window into my soul that I don't want him to have.

The image of the last time I saw my stepmother, my stepbrother soaks into my brain, dripping its acid until my nose stings and my eyes water.

It doesn't take a genius to know that my father's dangerous. To everyone but especially to me.

He already took care of one son and wife who couldn't live up to his standards. I'm never going to offer myself or my mother on that chopping block.

Not in a million years.

I sit for a while longer, pressing the heels of my palms into my eyes, running through everything as I search for spots of weakness. Areas where a misstep might cause the complete house of cards to tumble.

Nothing that I can think of. I'll just have to deal with anything like that as it comes.

"What's this rumour I hear about you escorting a girl doused in blood to your room?"

"Hey, Kari," I respond, slowly removing my hands from my eyes. "Nice to see you, too."

She's dressed to the nines and my gaze flicks up and down her, enough that she catches it and smiles. "I'm going to a party if you want to come. You'll need to change."

"I'm good."

"Aren't you going to answer my first question?"

I let out a long sigh. "George's dad got beaten up. She called me because she had nowhere else to go and I generously offered her my room for the night."

"Right. The girl who's caused nothing but trouble, and you offer her a place to stay. What's next? Let me guess." Her voice turns falsetto. Cutting. "Oh. But there's only one bed!"

“I’m here, aren’t I? If I wanted to jump her bones, I’d be in my room ravishing George with you none the wiser.”

“Thanks to every loudmouth in this place, I am very much the wiser, thank you. How d’you think I feel when every time you stray, I get told about it in detail from a hundred different sources?”

It’s a fair point, even if I don’t care to hear it. “Sorry if it causes you trouble, but I was hardly going to leave her there to get beaten to death.”

“And the city doesn’t have any hotels?”

A pertinent thought strikes. “Would you care? If it wasn’t for the gossips, would you actually give a shit?”

The crease on her brow tells me she doesn’t understand.

“You don’t want this relationship any more than I do,” I say, hazarding a pretty firm guess. “If you told your dad that, wouldn’t he call it off?”

She narrows her eyes like she thinks it’s a trick. “Why don’t you tell your dad?”

It’s a fair question. Soren and Creighton are much of a muchness.

I raise my eyebrow, staring at the beautiful façade of Kari’s face. She puts so much effort into her appearance and for what? To marry the son of a man she can’t stand. To spend her life skulking in the shadows, having her moves determined by the family patriarch rather than her own common sense.

If I confess the truth, we might be able to sort this out together.

“When I helped get rid of the Golden Boy one-point-oh, Creighton held onto some evidence. If I don’t do what he says, he’ll turn me in.”

Her eyes turn round, and her mouth falls open. “Oh, shit.” Then she giggles. “Nice way to stitch yourself up.”

“So? Can you tell your father to call off this charade?”

The whole pantomime is so unnecessary. Our family businesses are already aligned. To cement them with a marriage between parties is grossly archaic.

If our fathers were to die tomorrow, we’d still co-mingle our operations. It’s a no-brainer.

My face is a mask of hope.

“If I don’t marry you, my father will go to the next name on his list. Currently, that’s Philip Milovic. Even if I didn’t want to marry you, I’m not getting hitched to that piece of shit.”

Milovic is sixty if he's a day. He buried wife number four back in May last year. Given how many decades younger she was than her husband, the smart money is on him having killed her.

Her and possibly the three who preceded her.

"What if we—"

"If you take him out, there'll just be another one. If we're being brutally honest, no. If I had my choice of partner, you wouldn't be the one. But since we're going by my father's list, you are."

A horn honks outside and Kari glances over her shoulder, making a signal to whoever's waiting in the car. "It's interesting that your dad's so set on this. Could you imagine how angry he'd be to find out you snuck my nemesis into your room? Perhaps angry enough to turn you in."

She blows me a kiss while a horrible sinking feeling swallows my good humour, then sweeps out the door.

Fuck.

Fuck.

I mean, she probably won't use it against me, but she might. Her behaviour has been erratic lately.

What was I doing, feeding her information she can use against me? Even without specifics, I've just given her leverage.

I hate these people. Why did I align myself with them? I want to go back in time and say no. Turn down my father's catastrophic proposal like he'd refused every opportunity to be part of my life to age sixteen.

In a fit of pique, I head back to my room, startled to find George outside, struggling to get back in with a set of keys.

Not that the latter part of that is any surprise. Mine are in my hand.

"Those are a spare set to Kari's room," I tell her, taking them from her and swapping them out for the real ones. "Did you need something?"

"I was just looking for you." The edges of her words are all mushy, still half asleep. "When I couldn't find you, I came back here."

I dump both sets of keys on the table inside and hunt my spare set for my room out of the desk drawer, holding them up so she can see the blue tag rather than the pink. Kingswood is so proud of having entered the twentieth century they're not sure about hauling themselves into the twenty-first. "You can take these."

Given what just transpired with Kari, I should probably get myself back to the common room and show what a caring boyfriend I am, giving up my

room to a girl in need but not succumbing to the temptation to crawl into bed with her.

On the other hand, I can't stand to be alone and don't want George to be, not when she's so vulnerable.

I'll deal with the consequences tomorrow. Tonight, I clamber into bed behind the girl I adore and fall asleep with her in my arms, taking just as much comfort from her as I'm giving.

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CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

GEORGE

LACHLAN'S PHONE buzzes us both awake the next morning. My brain is scrambled, trying to work out what's going on, only able to retain a few fragments, not enough to create an entire thought.

He kisses me goodbye and goes, and I immediately fall back to sleep. The next time I wake, an annoying tone fills the room. I don't know what's making the noise, let alone where it is, and have to get out of bed to hunt the aurally offensive device.

It's my phone. Not the one shattered into a million pieces by Mr Softball Bat but the old one Lachlan gave me.

I grab it from the sidetable, hoping to see a call from Dad, but it's just a wake-up alarm that I quickly disable. The moment I put it down, it buzzes again, this time with a message from Lachlan.

Whatever tasks Creighton has sent his son in pursuit of, they're obviously taking a lot longer than expected. The text says he'll catch up with me at breakfast... or before class if he runs even later.

Left to my own devices, I shower, get into the clothes he left for me, then nosey about his room.

The keys on the table spark my memory. With the few brain cells I had operating last night, I'd left the room then couldn't get back inside. Lachlan

explained... something? They belonged to someone else.

Kari seems a logical bet.

I briefly consider stashing them somewhere impossible to find, then fight back against the urge. When Lachlan doesn't turn up, I go to breakfast by myself, hoping to see him there.

No such luck.

"Hey, George," Greta calls out, patting the empty seat next to her.

I slide into it with a grateful smile, then bite back a groan as I see who's opposite me. "Morning, Kari."

She barely flicks me a glance. Despite her customary perfection, she seems a bit down. I wonder if that's because I'm here.

"You should thank me, you know," she says out of the blue, eyes so unfocused I take a second to work out that yes, she's talking to me.

"Thank you for what?"

"If I hadn't stood Lachlan up that night, you wouldn't ever have met."

I shrug, unsure where this is going. "I guess, although he was standing in my kitchen at the time you called, so maybe not."

"He was what?" Greta asks, her interest piqued.

"Stop eavesdropping," Kari says, baring her teeth. "It's not polite."

Issy rescues her friend, calling her away to another table before whatever infected Kari's mood has the chance to spread. I'm already in its clutches, so it's too late for me.

"You won't win. I don't know what lies he's spinning to you, but there's absolutely no chance our parents are going to change their minds. Come near him once we're married, and I'll have my father or brother kill you."

Her voice is mild but judging from the harshness of her gaze, the threat is real. The room closes in on me, sweat beads along my temples. My hands clutch each other for comfort in my lap and I stare at the edge of the table, scared to meet her gaze. It's nothing I don't know but coming out of her mouth now, it feels far more real.

It hurts.

When Lachlan's beside me, I can pretend that everything's okay. The moment he leaves, I know it's not. Our relationship is impossible. A couple of carved lines on our chests won't change that. It'll just be an anecdote for him to tell his future children about a girl he knew once upon a time but hasn't seen in years.

If Kari carries through, that'll be because I'm long dead.

“Oh, what?” she says with a vicious snarl. “You gonna cry?”

Probably. It’s my number one reaction to most news, good or bad. But a kernel of steel extends along my spine, pushing back against the reaction. “I’m not the one whose future husband wants another woman. Why would I cry?”

Greta sends me a startled glance, obviously not having learned her lesson. Kari’s hand clutches her fork so tightly I can only imagine she’s planning where to stab it into me.

“I don’t have any argument with you,” I continue softly. “My dad’s an absolute shit sometimes but he’s never dictated who I can and can’t be friends with, let alone who I can and can’t marry. It must be awful but it’s not my fault.”

“I told you to stay away.”

“And I did.” My voice comes out louder than expected, drawing a few curious glances and I duck my head. “I tried staying away, but it didn’t change anything.”

“He doesn’t even want you,” Kari continues like I haven’t replied. “You’re nothing more than a symbol of his fight against Creighton. You should fall onto your knees and thank me for not stepping aside, because the moment he’s free to date you, Lock will lose all interest. If it weren’t for me, he wouldn’t even know your name. If it weren’t for me, you’d just be some poor girl whose dad owed him money.”

The jibe hits home, landing a strike because it’s true. If Kari hadn’t cancelled, Lachlan would have gone on his way, leaving me and my dad to collect the wreckage of our lives and flee to the next town.

And the next.

On and on and on until we were too broken to run any longer. On and on and on until he died, or I ended up being taken like Lachlan had explained in such graphic detail.

Maybe both.

The entire room stares at us. Not directly but from underneath their lashes or behind their fringes or around the books and magazines they’re only pretending to read.

My heart thumps loudly in my chest. My vision grows fuzzy at the edges. I want to run home, curl up in bed, and cry until I fall asleep.

But there’s no home. Not with the threat of the debt collector returning. There’s no bed except for Lachlan’s. The only things I have left in the world

are at his expense. If he changes his mind, comes to his senses, I'll have nothing, no one. My dad is running again, this time by himself.

My new job is great, but it's hardly separate. Patrick might continue to employ me for a while just to tease his cousin but he'd never choose me over him. Not given how their family operates.

Without Lachlan, I'm out on my arse. No home. No job. No prospects.

Fear clutches at my lungs until I can't breathe. How did I let this happen? I pride myself on my self-sufficiency, so how did I let him take over every aspect of my life, leaving behind nothing that's truly mine?

I struggle to my feet, trying to keep whatever scraps of dignity I have left, walking out of the room, then fleeing along the corridors until I can barricade myself behind the safety of Lachlan's door.

Inside, I check my phone but there's no new message. Before I can think, I put a call through to Patrick, desperate to know if my job with him is just a family affair or if I have some value outside of my connection with his cousin.

All of which I blurt out the moment he answers the phone.

"Woah," he says when I stop to draw breath. "Just give me a minute."

There's a momentary pause, long enough to ratchet my nerves up to eleven.

"Okay. First point, no. I wouldn't have hired you if you hadn't gone out with Lock because I wouldn't have met you, therefore the girl crying next to the rubbish skip would have been left to sort out her job situation on her own."

I nod, though he can't see me. Just as I thought.

"But if we ignore that hurdle, you won't lose your job based on who you go out with. Get a nice polycule going, have a pack of men at your disposal, or get a nice girl, I don't care. You've found your place in my business and I'm rather fond of keeping you right where you are."

I'm so grateful, I can't speak. A few gibberish noises flow from my mouth. Patrick interprets them with increasing concern. "Has something happened? Where are you?"

"I'm at sc-school. My dad—"

But I cut myself off. I can't talk about my dad. If I put my worries into words, they might manifest into reality.

"Are you okay? Do you need help?"

“No, I’m fine,” I say in a deliriously un-fine voice. “I just... my dad left town, that’s all. I can’t afford to stay in our rental, and I just panicked.”

“Shit, we’ll have somewhere for you to stay. That’s no problem. We’ve got real estate all over.”

“Oh, no. I’m sure I’ll find somewhere.”

“I’ll buy you a house if you want.”

He sounds serious but must be joking because that’s completely insane. Nobody just goes and buys a house because their employee got evicted. It’s ridiculous.

“Thank you,” I tell him with far more enthusiasm.

“Are you still seeing Lock? If he’s causing you problems, you have my permission to kick him to the curb.”

The idea makes me chuckle then I break off as someone pounds on the door.

“Lock!” A new bout of furious hammering follows, immediately filling me with tension. “Open up.”

The thumps are so loud, even Patrick can hear them. “Are you all right?” he asks in a far sharper tone. “I can come and—”

“I’m fine,” I say, wishing the door had a peephole. “Got to go.”

As I hang up, another barrage of thumps shakes the door on its hinges. “Lock! I swear to God if you don’t—”

I pull the door open to reveal Carrod in the hallway, face contorted with anger, a plastic bag clutched in one hand, the other fisted ready to knock again on the door.

“What?”

“Where’s your fuck-buddy?” He pushes past me, checking the bathroom then turning to me with a face mottled with rage. “D’you know what he’s done? Are you in on it, too?”

“On what?”

Perhaps he reads my genuine confusion because he shoves the bag into my hand and hightails it out the door. “It’s your problem now.”

I grab his collar, dragging him back inside the moment I work out I’m now holding what appears to be a shit-ton of drugs. “What the fuck’s this?”

“Ask Lachlan. He’s the one who planted it in my room. He’s the one who called the fucking security tip line and gave them my name and room number.”

“Don’t be—” I cut myself off, shaking my head, trying to think. “How d’you know security have been—” With another burst of energy, I switch questions mid-stream. “Are they here n-now?”

“They’re on their way,” he says with an evil grin. “Luckily, I have a friend in the main office who was courteous enough to give me a heads-up. Now it’s your problem.”

I try to hand the bag back to him, but he raises his hands and dances out of my reach. “Nuh-uh. They’re nothing to do with me.”

“They’re not Lachlan’s either,” I shout. “He’s not even here.”

“Oh, it’s down to him all right, even if he didn’t do the dirty work himself. Hope you have a nice life, visiting each other in prison.”

My mind freezes, staring at the bag, which I set on the desk. I can’t think where to hide it. I’m not used to this place. I don’t understand where things go or what to do. Who empties the bins or where the security cameras point.

In a movie, they’d be flushed and gone by now, but I’m scared if I try that, it’ll just clog the toilet and lead even the most casual of observers straight to the source.

I back away like it’s a snake ready to strike.

My gaze falls on the set of spare keys next to it. The ones with the pink tag. The set to Kari’s room.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

LOCK

I GLANCE in the cafeteria but if George has been there, she's not now, so I head next for my room. A knock on the door for politeness' sake, then I open the door, scanning the empty space with a puzzled scowl, until I hear water running in the bathroom.

I hope to find George in the shower but she's standing at the sink, staring into the mirror like it's a source of existential dread.

"Hey," I say in my smoothest wouldn't-you-like-to-head-straight-back-to-bed voice, sliding my arms around her waist and kissing the side of her neck. "Sorry I had to leave."

She's trembling and her arm moves awkwardly as she reaches out to shut off the tap. I pull down the edge of her top and see faint purple hovering beneath her skin, the blow rooted so deep it barely discolours the surface at all. The swelling tells another story, one about how it must hurt like a bastard.

The stab of guilt recurs, though it's Adnan that should be stabbed. He didn't hurt her on my instruction.

"Kari and I had a fight," she says, chewing her lip hard enough that it splits open again, bright crimson against the pale pink colouring. "In front of everyone."

I'm genuinely puzzled. "Where? What about?"

She meets my eyes and I incline my head. Okay, yeah. The latter question is obvious. "In the cafeteria while everyone was eating breakfast. She told me that if I'm still hanging about when you get married, her father or brother would happily rectify the situation."

"The fuck they will." I pick up a comb and start working on her hair. It's tangled and since her bruised shoulder means she's operating one-handed, it seems the least I can do. "Besides, the marriage is six months away. It might never happen."

I cringe at the sound, glancing at George to see a mirror of my reaction. There are probably some magic words to make it right but I'm not aware of what they are.

"How about you come to bed, and I'll make you forget all about her threats?"

She nods, giving in immediately, something I should find suspicious but having had so little sleep over the past few nights, my brain can't fathom it out.

When I lay her down, she bites her thumbnail. The flesh is so scarred by her repeated mauling that I don't know how she can stand to attack it again. I move it away from her mouth so I can kiss her, but she turns her head, then startles at the clock.

"It's nearly time for class."

"The key word is nearly."

"I have to—"

I stop her with a kiss, but she flinches, the split lip now bleeding. When I fetch a tissue, she's sitting on the edge of the bed, staring blankly at the keys on the desk. Kari's keys. I tuck them into a drawer so she can stop obsessing, but instead of lying down again, she stands.

"The class bell will sound in a few minutes."

"So, we've got a time limit. Who cares?"

"Where were you this morning?"

I shake my head. "There's stuff I can't—" I break off as her expression collapses and she stares at the floor, cupping her elbows, and really, what does it matter if I reveal my secrets? Who's she going to tell? "I intercepted a shipment from a rival company and rerouted it to a contact who's going to drive it down south."

The words don't appear to mean anything to her.

“Why don’t we skip class today?” I suggest. “I wouldn’t mind having a nap and we can start the—”

“I have classes.”

“Yes. The ones I’m suggesting you skip. If you’re worried about your grades—”

“I can’t afford to skip classes. My scholarship depends on getting good marks.”

I catch her hand trying to tug her near, but she resists.

“They don’t give me the same latitude as other students. If I screw up just one class one time, I’ll lose the whole thing.”

“So? If you lose your scholarship, I can pick up your tab for the rest of the year.”

I don’t understand why but it’s the exactly wrong thing to say to her. She struggles to breathe, crossing her arms so tightly they look like hoops holding the staves of a barrel together.

“George? What’s going on?”

A tear slides down her cheek and my internal alarm screeches at full volume. She steps out of range, sidling near the door, like she’s about to cut and run.

“I’m a t-terrible person.”

And honestly, I’m gobsmacked. There’s so much blood staining my hands, I could pass as Lady Macbeth. What the fuck has George ever done except hold her tiny family together long after it should have busted apart?

She doesn’t have time to be awful. Between studying and working and keeping her home on an even keel, there’s no space for mischief let alone evil.

“Please just tell me what’s happened? Is this because of Kari? You know you’re not the one cheating, right? If there’s any blame, it’s down to me.”

“I h-have to go.”

“Go where?”

She fumbles behind her for the door, and I’m suddenly terrified she’s going to go home. That she’s going to leave me. That she’s seen through every piece of shit stunt I’ve pulled and doesn’t want a bar of it.

I’m terrified that she’ll leave and never let me touch her again.

I remember her laughing, driving my car that first night. Remember thinking we should just keep going.

Why didn’t I follow my impulse? Everything could have been different.

My voice reflects my growing panic, turning harsh. “Tell me what’s going on.”

Instead of doing that, she opens the door and I overreact, jumping from the bed and trying to slam it shut before she can go through. In doing so, I bump against her hurt shoulder, making her cry out in pain.

“I’m sorry, just...” I run my hand through my hair. *Don’t leave me.* That’s what I want to say. Want to beg. *Please don’t leave me.*

The words should be simple to say but they’re not even simple to think. I just wanted to have sex with her again, to hear that funny snort she made before she promptly fell asleep, that’s all.

How did I get this tangled up, my life winding around her until I can’t even stand to think of her leaving?

I wanted a brief respite from my life and instead she’s taken over the entire thing so I can barely go a minute without dreaming of her, wondering what she’s doing. Wanting to touch her, *needing* to touch her. Like she’s my oxygen and if I lose her, even for a few minutes, I’ll die.

“I killed my brother,” I shout, and the door is still fucking open, why is it open when I’m confessing the worst thing staining my soul? Why am I fucking *shouting* my confession when anybody in the school could walk by?

But my panic doesn’t care. It just sees her trying to escape and I should be happy for her, rooting for her to go because who would want a part of this fucked up life if they had another option? Anything’s better. Anything. Even her disaster of a father who didn’t give a shit about her was a thousand times better than mine.

“It’s why I can’t...” My breath runs out and I grab for the bed behind me, my legs spilling me onto the mattress, feet skidding out from under me like the ground just turned to slick ice. “My dad he...” I shake my head, trying to clear it but the fuzziness just gets worse, the panic grips harder.

Then the door slams shut.

I gulp in a breath that does nothing. Nothing. My lungs don’t even try to pull the oxygen from it, mounting a protest, thumbing their noses at what I need.

She’s left. She slammed the door behind her on her way out and who could blame her? I’m so worthless that I’m drowning in perfectly good air.

Then the bed sinks to the side as she sits beside me. Her arms curl around my back and chest, clutching tight.

The pressure should make it harder to inhale but has the opposite effect. My head clears, my lungs drop their placards and get back to work. Strength flows back into my muscles, my limbs, my joints, until I can raise my arms and hug her back.

The same old images swamp my mind, dredged up from the dark sinkhole I keep throwing them down, always finding renewed vigour, bobbing up to the surface like a gently rotting corpse.

I want to be rid of them, to speak the truth of them aloud and banish them from my brain once and for all.

George runs her fingers through my hair, massaging my scalp, making small humming noises that are oddly soothing. She was about to leave but she stayed. I must make sure not to waste this unexpected gift.

“Patrick said they died a few years ago.”

I nod, relaxing as I understand she’s doing for me the same thing I did for her. Making educated guesses to ease the torment of formulating words for myself.

“He wasn’t in contact much before then?”

“No. Not much.” The understatement makes me smile and I pull her into my lap, needing to touch more of her, using her weight to anchor me. “Mum got child support paid into her account and occasionally I’d see him. We went to a family barbeque once and my stepmother threw a fit.”

“Your mum was... seeing him the whole time.”

My eyes flick open, and I stare into George’s eyes. “How did you—?”

She shrugs. “Just watching them at dinner, they were so coordinated. You don’t get that way in a year or two.”

“No.”

“He didn’t kill them for you. He did it for her.” She frowns. “But he needed to make you think it was about you or you would have rejected him because...”

Yeah. *Because...* My father was built from ‘because.’

The way she trails off makes me laugh even while I’m trying to puzzle out the rest of her words. I hadn’t seen it that way. Even now, it still feels like he was pitching to me, wanted me, wanted a replacement for his failed first attempt at a son and heir.

I knew he manipulated me but until George says it aloud, I never stopped to think why. Why he couldn’t just tell me I was taking over. Why he had to make it seem like an honour rather than a tiresome chore, like he

was giving me something. A sleight of hand to ensure I didn't notice what he was taking away.

She turns on my lap, straddling me and resting her brow against mine. "Why would he kill your brother? That's what I don't understand."

I tense and she responds. "I know what you're about to say but it wasn't your idea. No matter what you did, it came from your father. He just used you as a... a delivery method."

"A delivery method." The description tickles me, a complete distraction from everything else flooding my brain. "That's what you're going with."

"Mm-hm." She pokes me in the collarbone. "Why? You have a better description?"

"Nope. I'm not saying anything."

She giggles against my neck, and I hug her closer. If I put aside the change in my distress levels, George also seems a lot happier. Whatever crisis was going on a few minutes ago, aborted.

"Why would he kill Sean?" she asks again, the words puffing out softly against my skin.

"Because he was a disappointment."

She stiffens, not to get away from me but in horror. "How c-could he—"

I stop the question with a kiss. My soul might be a few grams lighter right now but I'm nowhere near the state I'd need to be in to continue along the path raised by that question.

The warning bell sounds. Fifteen minutes until first lessons.

"Guess we better get ready, so you don't lose that scholarship, huh?"

I'm listening out for another noise besides the bell. The one I arranged before going out on my job this morning.

A faint stir is coming from the lobby when I open my door. George hangs behind me, the crimson streaks high on her cheekbones a sign she's nervous.

About me? I shake my head. If she was going to flee, surely it would have been in the split second after my botched confession. Besides, she grabs for my hand, squeezing it so hard I wonder if she thinks the security cars parked directly outside the entrance are here for her.

Maybe that is the answer because she's dragging her feet, suddenly in no hurry to go anywhere. Her grip is so strong the bones in my hand feel like they're being fed through a mincer.

“Hey, what’s wrong?” Another thought strikes me. “Don’t worry, they’re not here for me.”

“I n-need to t-t-tell you something,” she whispers, dragging even harder on my hand, drawing me to a halt.

She’s all stiff joints and tense muscles. “What is it?” George opens her mouth, trying to say something, but it’s caught behind a tic, contorting her face.

When I try to draw her closer, to soothe her, she pushes me away. “C-Carrod c-c-c-came to...”

Carrod?

I hear the ice crackling again, straining and squealing as it moves about, shifting and collapsing under my weight, about to spill me into the cold, dark water.

An announcement comes over the loudspeaker. “Could all boarding students please assemble in the cafeteria? We’re searching the premises.”

The disembodied voice makes George’s face pale in terror.

Carrod came to... what? Breakfast? My room?

“George,” I whisper, jerking her arm. “What did Carrod do?”

But she lets go of my hand and strides along the corridor, almost running, heading straight for the two security officers standing inside the lobby doors. “Excuse m-me? Can I go to class? I’m a day student.”

She flashes her pass, but the head teacher holds up her hand, chatting briefly then waving her into the cafeteria. When I follow, the security guard forcibly directs me to a different table. All the students are segregated, sitting as distant from each other as the limited space allows.

George won’t meet my eyes.

Carrod smirks at me from the next table along, sending another warning bell ringing.

I take my seat, listening to the low buzz of concern from the other students. A much louder buzz of curiosity atop it. In the end, four security cars are parked by the entrance and there are too many officers inside to keep track of them.

Sniffer dogs gambol along the corridors, running their talented noses along every surface, inhaling the scents and giving indications from every open door.

And *all* the doors are open. They’re being far more thorough than I expected.

When I arranged for the tipoff to be called in, I never imagined there'd be this level of response. I thought maybe an officer would drop in near end of shift to follow up on the call. At the most, two.

Certainly not the overkill unfurling before our eyes. I'm halfway convinced the head is about to call in the actual police instead of her private units.

Carrod keeps giving me self-satisfied grins until I want to punch his face in. I want George beside me, not only because she seems to know more about this situation than she should ever have been exposed to but because I enjoy holding her hand. I like feeling her presence next to me.

If I was the sort of sappy halfwit that those sentiments applied to, I might be mistaken for thinking I loved her. That whatever pull we've exerted on each other since the first night has taken root and blossomed.

There's a flurry of movement from the east corridor and, like every other student within earshot, I follow that progress with interest. Not least because it's on the opposite side of the school to where Carrod boards.

Perhaps they've found something besides what I've planted. Some unlucky student getting caught up in Carrod's trap.

A more sensible part of me understands something went on while I wasn't here. Something that changed the course of what should have been a simple drug arrest for possession and supply.

Something that left George feeling crap about herself and puffed Carrod up into the grinning shit two tables away from me.

An officer comes into the cafeteria, walking straight over to the head teacher and talking in a voice pitched too soft to hear.

"Kari Abercrombie?" the head teacher calls.

I sit up straighter in my chair, half the room following suit, so we look like meercats called to attention. From the corner of my eye, I track George. She doesn't look surprised. Her chin dips to her chest, her hands pressing hard on her knees like she's trying to hide the shakes.

Guilty.

I hold a sneaking pride that my plans exploded and rather than falling apart or letting the blame land on either of us, she took care of things. A trait that always comes in handy in my world.

Kari frowns but follows them out of the room. They go into the student housing office, across the lobby. Not the best choice of meeting room, given

the glass walls expose everything. Not that Kari's poise gives anything away.

Seeming to realise the mistake, a guard closes the door to the cafeteria instead, curtailing our nosiness.

Carrod smirks until I'd love to punch him out but doing that in front of the security guard stationed at the cafeteria door is dicey, even with my connections.

Now they've discovered whatever they needed to, the excess vehicles depart onto more fruitful endeavours, leaving just the one car and two security officers behind.

"Excuse me, sir," Issy calls out from the next table over. "If they've arrested whoever, can we go on to our lessons?"

Anton snorts out a laugh then tries to disguise it as a cough. Issy has never attended a class in her life that she didn't immediately try to get out of. The idea she would prefer that to sitting and watching a fellow student go down in flames stretches credulity.

I presume she's covering for her friend. An attempt to draw our attention from the pupil in our midst who's being questioned. Trying to forestall the gossip as though it won't already be flying around the school.

They might have contained us in the cafeteria, but no bright spark thought to take our phones away. The rumour mill will already be churning content across the internet.

My head's still spinning but I can work with this new narrative. It might even be better than my original plan.

If Kari gets expelled, then I won't be constantly looking over my shoulder. Soren's likely to keep her on a tight leash, not willing to draw criticism to his family name. She'll be tucked away, out of sight. My father might even come to his senses and give up the ridiculous matchmaking and draw up a fucking business contract instead.

Not likely, but possible.

The future suddenly looks brighter. Not least because I told George the worst thing I'd ever done, and she didn't run from me.

A security guard moves out of the room, and there's a short, tense conversation, then I turn to look through the window as a car screeches to a halt outside, a man jumping from the rear seat the second it comes to a complete stop, striding towards the building with a face like thunder.

"Who the fuck is that?" Anton asks as he stares out the window.

I clear my throat, struggling for the words, and George says, “It’s Creighton,” at the same time I utter, “It’s my dad.”

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CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

LOCK

“WHERE IS SHE?” my dad barks the moment he’s through the door, then stops, squinting at the suited officer. “You’re not even police. What the fuck’s going on?”

He spins on his heel, finding me from among the crowd of students straight away. “Lock?”

“They were doing a search,” I tell him, keeping my face expressionless. “Kari was called to go into the office. That’s all I know.”

“Right.” He whirls back to tower over the security guard. I’m surprised the guy doesn’t leg it, his face broadcasting clearly that’s exactly what he wants to do. “You still haven’t told me where she is.”

“In the office, sir.” The man points the way, and my father ignores him, gesturing me over instead. “You. Stick by my side until this is over.”

“Why are you even here?”

His dark eyes rest on me, assessing, poking, prying, trying to find out more than I’m willing to give. Then they turn back to survey the room, fixing on George. His displeasure immediately fires into anger. “You. What are you doing here?”

“She goes to school here,” I tell him, poker faced. “You know that already.”

“This isn’t the entire student body,” he answers, immediately zeroing in on the discrepancy. “She’s a day student. Why’s she in the cafeteria of the residential block if she’s not boarding?”

I shrug, feigning nonchalance while my heartrate catapults skyward. “She was just stopping in for breakfast.”

His eyes fix to mine as he advances, menace oozing from every pore. “Is that right?”

“She stayed overnight,” Carrod yells, happily outing me at the worst possible time. “When I last saw her, she was carrying a plastic bag full of what looked like pills.”

I break the eye lock to turn and glare at Carrod instead. “What the fuck?”

“It’s the truth,” he gleefully continues. “Strap me up to a lie detector if you don’t believe me. I’m happy to undergo an interrogation.” He pauses for the longest moment then slyly adds, “But I bet George isn’t willing to do the same.”

“Both of you, with me.”

George jumps to her feet and scrambles after him, already white-faced. Bad enough that someone called her out in front of the entire school but to do it in front of my father? And when he’s already got his knickers in a twist. No.

No, this isn’t good.

I try to grab her hand in a show of solidarity but she snatches it away, looking guilty. And of course she does because what Carrod said is obviously true.

The only bit my father’s missing is that the drugs were in Carrod’s room. That George wasn’t trying to land someone in trouble but to get me out of it.

It’s a truth I doubt I can convey to my father.

He doesn’t understand nuance. He only understands doing your job or fucking up and George is already embedded deeply in the fucking up column.

The student housing office is spacious, often used as a flow over staff meeting room when the newer one in the main entrance building is overbooked. Kari sits stiffly in a chair, the head installed behind her desk and giving her looks crammed full of deep suspicion.

When my father enters the room, she jumps to her feet. A jackrabbit for authority.

“Mr McManus,” she says, almost bowing to him. “I can assure you we have everything under control. I’ve already spoken to—”

“George planted the drugs in your room, Kari. You can get back to class.”

“Ah...” The head looks flabbergasted, eyes cutting back and forth between us. “Is this true, George?”

“Of course it’s not true,” I interject. “This is a complete fit-up. Who called the security staff in to do a check?”

“It’s routine,” the head begins, drawing the immediate ire of my father.

“It certainly is not. I pay good money to this school to ensure my son can complete his studies in peace, then I find out you’ve set up a witch hunt that’s pulled him out of his classes at a crucial time for his education.”

“Ah... Okay... Yes. We had an anonymous tipoff.”

“From Carrod?” I narrow my eyes while a beat of hope sounds in my chest.

“Well... the point of the tip line being anonymous is—”

“How many prank calls does it get a week?” Creighton demands.

“Oh, um. A few. Yes, quite a few.”

“And you don’t respond to all of them, do you?”

She shakes her head, belatedly deciding that talking is irrelevant.

“What does it matter?” I ask, trying to steer him off the subject. I hadn’t made the call myself but I’m willing to bet someone could easily identify Alastair’s voice if they wanted to. From there, it won’t take a rocket scientist to reach his connection to me.

“Why’s she here?” Kari asks, further distracting him.

“Apparently, I’m not allowed to go to Kingswood,” George answers in a desultory voice. “Or something to that effect.”

My dad glares at her. “I never said a damn word.”

“How about I call in the security guard?” the head says, jumping to her feet and scurrying around the desk. “I’ll just let him know he’s needed.”

I’m surprised that my father lets her leave the room but as he flicks the lock to stop her re-entering, I understand.

“Good. Now we can discuss this ridiculous situation in private.” He glares at George. “Where did the drugs come from?”

She helps herself to a chair, sinking low into it. “Kari.”

My dad's lips twist. "Carrod says he saw—"

"Carrod's a damn liar," I interrupt.

George shrugs. "I'm not responsible for what other people say. I'm answering your question to the best of my ability."

"Right." Creighton leans over, pinning her with his gaze.

I know this game. Know how it goes. "Leave her alone. She has nothing to do with it."

"Right." He changes targets to Kari. "You're fine with this relationship happening right under your nose?"

"What relationship?" she asks in a syrupy sweet tone. "I don't know of any relationship."

"D'you know why I'm here?" When she doesn't answer, he ploughs ahead, regardless. "The call came through to your father, but he was in the middle of a delicate operation. He sent me instead. How do you think he'd feel, walking in here, hearing another student say this girl fitted you up?"

She tries to hold his gaze but soon drops it, deferential as usual. "I really don't think he needs to know."

"Someone has to take the blame for this mess. If it's not George, it's you."

"Nobody needs to," I snap. "It's a stupid drugs charge. Just buy the school off and we can all get back to class."

All I wanted was a room free so I could move George into it. The idea of having her here, under the same roof, has been my plan all along but it's not worth this level of hassle. I'll find her another place close by.

The location doesn't matter. Not any longer. My plans were set before she capitulated, before I confessed. Before I realised that whatever we share goes a long way deeper than I could have imagined at the start.

"A brilliant plan except the head's already reported the incident to the board of governors."

My face turns pale. What the hell? It was just meant to be expulsion worthy, not prison cell worthy.

"Even for a first offence, you're supplying to school children. The head informs me they've confiscated drugs from several year ten pupils this term. The mayor's son landed in hospital last month with an overdose. He's thirteen. They're after blood."

"So? Find someone else to pin it on."

“And have Kari’s name come out during court proceedings?” He points back towards the cafeteria. “Because every one of those students saw her getting called into the office. Every single one of them has already texted their parents or friends or posted it on social media.”

“Well, you’re not having George take the rap.”

“Yes. I am.” He draws himself up to his full height and stalks towards me. “That’s exactly the plan.”

“No. She’ll lose her scholarship.”

He tips his head to the side. “For supplying drugs to the minors of the city’s glitterati? She’ll lose a lot more than that.” He pats her shoulder with his large hand, hard enough for her to wince. “Sorry about that, George. But so many people get shanked in prison, we don’t have time to mourn all of them.”

“Fuck that. I’ll take the blame.”

“No, you won’t.”

“It’s my fault. I planted the drugs.”

“Right.” My father has a look of utter disgust on his face. “You’re going to throw away your entire inheritance, maybe your life, for this girl you’ve barely known a month. Do I have that right?”

“She’s not taking the blame for something she didn’t do.”

His hand slaps across my face before I even know he’s raised it. The force knocks me sideways, stinging so hard that after a second the whole side of my head goes numb. My eyes water.

The humiliation hurts as badly as the blow.

“You’re going to throw your life away on this girl you barely know. You’ll destroy generations of family tradition for a fling with someone who isn’t part of our world and then what? You think she’ll stay?”

“Yes.”

“This girl?” He grabs George by the neck, raising her to her feet and putting her in a headlock until she winces. His tone is scathing as he roars, “You’re going to fuck up everything over this one stupid girl.”

The words tear through my brain, causing carnage. To see her in pain wriggles into some deep dark place and unleashes a storm.

“She’s not stupid,” I shout, shaking with rage, knowing I’m building up a world of hurt and retaliation but unable to stop. “She won a scholarship to a prestigious school while running away from everyone and everything she’s ever known. Do you understand how fucking smart you have to be to

do that? Or have you bought everything you ever wanted for so long that you've confused your bank account balance with your IQ?"

His mouth curls into a snarl. "If she were smart, she wouldn't be fucking you to clear up her father's mess."

"She's loyal. I thought you appreciated loyalty. Isn't that why I'm here and Sean's rotting in his grave?"

He roars again, louder, hauling George up until her feet leave the floor. Until she's choking.

I lunge at him, battering his head, his wrists, kicking at his feet, stomping at his knee to drive it out from under him. I attack him like I've lost my mind and perhaps I have. Perhaps this is where my life ends, with me unleashing a shitstorm of fury at a man I can never beat, who's been playing this game and winning longer than I've even been alive.

Who understands control and doesn't care if he's merciless in its application.

But my father is a better read of character than I give him credit for. Rather than retaliating, he retreats, holding George more firmly. Her face is turning a faint maroon colour, her lips are darkening like shadows.

He's cutting off her air.

Once he knows I've seen, he eases up on her. "Why don't you stay back and we'll keep her alive for a little longer, hey?"

I'm half sobbing, half shouting. "You fucking bastard. You fucking useless bastard."

I didn't see Kari move, but she's sheltering behind the desk, holding a stapler in her hand. Something that would be amusing if it wasn't so frightening. The knuckles holding it are white.

"You seem perturbed," he says with slow enjoyment. "Maybe a few sedatives are in order."

The bag of drugs sits in pride of place on the desk and his smug grin says he knows exactly what they are. Of course, nothing is coming into his house without him knowing about it. I wonder if the maid survived his questioning or if she's acting on his instructions, causing chaos because that's the environment within which he thrives.

George has her footing again. Her tiny hands claw at his arm, but I've experienced the strength of her fight before. Even energised, she's not powerful enough to get free. Even my chances against him would be down at fifty-fifty.

“She’s not worth it, Lock. Just say your goodbyes now and it’ll be over with.”

I swipe a hand across my face, trying to clear my vision. “Let her go. Do anything you want to me but just... let her go.”

“Why? Are you really going to go against everything we have planned just so you can sink your dick into this whore who doesn’t even understand our world? Are you planning on telling Soren this is who you’ve picked to replace his daughter?” He barks out a filthy laugh. “Because if you do, you’ll have to kill him.”

The anger and futility engulf me again until I’m shouting, “Fine by me. The more the merrier.”

“Oh, what’s that? Now you’re killing me, too?”

I’m shaking from head to toe. I have never meant anything more than when I spit the words, “It would be my fucking pleasure,” at him.

“Why? Why her?”

“Because I fucking love her!” My hands are in fists, veins popping in my biceps, my temples, wishing the words were a weapon because I feel them so strongly, they should be. They should be a lightning bolt to destroy anything in our path. Anything that tries to hold us apart. “Because I love her.”

He releases his grip on George, still holding her but no longer trying to crush her throat. “Well, good.”

I’m halfway through formulating my response when I hear his actual words, watch him push her towards me, into my arms, and my train of thought derails completely.

“What?”

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

GEORGE

“GOOD,” Creighton repeats, pushing me hard enough that I stumble the two steps forward into Lachlan’s waiting arms.

I thought I was dead. That his dad would kill me. But what kind of ultra-detailed dead person can feel the warm breath of the boy she loves tickling her ear? Can feel his warm palms pressing against her back, pulling me closer to him?

Lachlan sounds as lost as me as he mutters, “I don’t understand.”

Creighton angles a glance at Kari. “Want to run along, love? This really doesn’t concern you.”

Like she’d wandered into the middle of a private conversation instead of him barging into the office where she’d been waiting.

Kari doesn’t need another prompt. She unlocks the door and exits the room, sending me a frown as she leaves the door wide open behind her. Creighton and Lachlan only have eyes for each other so don’t notice.

“You’ve been drifting along so aimlessly your mother was getting worried about you. Drinking and shirking classes and barely engaging with work. Next thing you know, you’d be getting high just to plough through the day and then I’m straight back to where I was with Sean.” He shakes his head. “It nearly killed me to lose him. I refuse to lose you, too.”

Lachlan stiffens, all the tension returning to his body in a second. There's some weird energy between them. Even though Creighton is saying different words, they're packed with the same menace.

"You didn't lose him." His voice is small, tight. "You made me kill him."

"Because I couldn't do it myself."

Creighton moves, leaning against the desk, hands on the edge, ankles crossed. A study in forced casualness. "There wasn't anyone close enough, apart from you." He sighs. "It wasn't the drugs; it was that he grew so sloppy using them, my rivals could use him to get to me."

Lachlan's tension eases and I want to tell him, no. Don't do that. Surely, you can see it's a trick? "He was a snitch?"

Creighton grunts in assent. "That he talked once was bad enough, but he did it again and again and again. With anyone else, the first time would have been their end. I gave him every chance I could." He shrugs. "It wasn't just me or the money or the business I've spent my entire life building and expanding. He was going to cost my men their lives." His eyes grow cold. "He'd already cost me some."

"We should go," I tell Lachlan, willing him to see that this is some kind of elaborate trap. It could be he's grown so accustomed to his father that he no longer sees through him. I want to shake him, tell him to wake up.

"I spent twenty-two years married to the wrong woman. It's something I wouldn't wish on my worst enemy. I can't tell you how awful it is to lie beside someone, night after night, knowing you can't trust them." His voice grows hoarse and his lips curl. "Knowing they'd rather you were dead."

Even with the ghost of the man's arm around my neck, I feel sorry for him. To have had a wife plotting against him, a son whose loose lips might bring about his downfall.

"This life is hard enough travelling through it with someone you love, someone you'd die to protect. Without that, there's no joy in life." He clears his throat. "I didn't stay away from you all those years because I didn't want you. It was because I wanted you and your mother so much, my enemies would have seen you dead."

Lachlan softens, swaying towards him. It's not my place to intervene but I'm appalled. Even with the new dose of pity, the man's a monster. Hand me a ring gag and I could explain why.

But Creighton is forging a new connection to his son. He's drilling into it when he says, "It's not turning eighteen that makes you a man, it's finding the woman you love."

His cold eyes fix on Lachlan, hypnotic. I shift within his arms, hoping to break whatever spell it is he's casting when Creighton's lips curl into a wintry smile.

"Hopefully, your girl still feels the same way about you once she gets out of prison."

"She's not going to—" Lachlan breaks off, exasperated. "Can't you"—he waves his hand—"I don't know, sort things out with the school board? It's a few pills. There's no need to press charges."

"I wish I could. Prison's a terrible place. It'll take a lot of resources to make sure she's protected in there. I can arrange that, but I'll need your reassurance you're committed to the work before I cash in those favours."

And I understand. From the way Lachlan stiffens, he does, too.

Creighton isn't offering his son an olive branch. They're not bonding over falling in love with the wrong women.

No. He's found a new lever to control his son when nothing else was working.

Me.

I close my eyes, wanting to beam out of the room and go anywhere, anywhere at all. A man clears his throat and I know without looking who it is even though I don't understand why he's here.

I open my eyes again as Patrick says, "She's already protected."

He slouches in the doorway, dressed in a suit that doesn't look like it's made it home from last night yet. Whereas Creighton's relaxed stance looks staged, Patrick seems to be made of cat, so liquid he easily conforms to any space.

"Prison also seems like overkill," he says, sending me a wink. "I'm sure Lock can find a far more appropriate punishment for her if he puts his mind to it."

"What are you...?" Lachlan's voice tangles, a feeling I know all too well. "How did you even get in here?"

"Chatted up the lovely security guard hanging about by the door." Patrick's smile grows even wider. "He's become such a close friend; he's paying me a visit tonight."

"You fucked your way in?"

“Well, not yet.” Patrick runs his long fingers through the loose waves of his hair, pushing off the doorframe to walk inside. “But that’s the hope.”

Creighton’s gaze tracks him into the room. I can’t tell anything from his expression, it stays the same. “Who’s protection?”

“I should say something clever and threatening here, like try pushing your luck and you’ll find out.”

“Right. You think you should say that do you?”

“Mm. But on second thoughts, perhaps not.”

Creighton shakes his head. “Just give me the damn name.”

“Billy Torrens.”

My head snaps back to Patrick, frowning. Billy is the boat builder who is almost always playing cards in the back rooms. The man who’s always been incredibly chatty with me, enjoying his conversations instead of paying attention to his game.

I purse my lips but finally ask, “What does it mean?”

“Only good things,” Patrick reassures me. “I told you if you need it, I’d buy you a house. Billy is why.”

Lachlan pulls me hard against him, arms lacing over me like fleshy armour. “Could someone tell me what’s going on?”

Patrick doesn’t even glance at him, still focused on his uncle. “If you try to send her to prison, it won’t end well.”

Miracle of miracles, Creighton’s the one who concedes. “Someone has to take the blame.”

“Could that be the someone who possessed the drugs?” Patrick says with amusement. His eyes twinkle as they briefly rest on me, then he finally looks at Lachlan. “The someone whose nose seems a bit out of joint.”

Lachlan’s voice whispers in my ear. “Why didn’t you tell me you worked for him?”

I don’t know what to say.

Because I enjoy the job and hate arguments?

That’s near the truth but sounds awful. Like I don’t trust him enough to be honest and that’s not the case. I’ve told him things I’ve never confessed to anyone before. Trusted him with the dark secrets I locked away in my heart.

Because you hate Patrick, but I like him?

Even worse. Like I’ve been sneaking around with another man behind his back and, believe me, I see the irony, but I don’t know that Lachlan will.

“I prefer not to speculate on why she didn’t tell you,” Patrick says, saving me, wearing his smoothest grin. “Just like I prefer not to speculate on why she needed a job to begin with.”

And suddenly, I’m the one on the back foot. Lachlan’s tension comes more from the latter half of that sentence than the former, and I don’t even know what Patrick means.

I burst out laughing. Jokes on both of us, then.

“Little liar,” Lachlan whispers into my hair and I decide if he wants to give me a nickname, I don’t hate it.

“If neither of you are volunteering,” Creighton says in a low rumble. “Then pick a student. We need to give the head a name.”

Carrod springs to mind. I twist my neck about a hundred degrees to glance at Lachlan, but he’s staring out the door where, over Patrick’s shoulder, Kari is lurking. She has a hard set to her eyes and one hand rests on her hip.

The kind of expression a girl wouldn’t want to see approaching her in a dark alley.

“Is there CCTV?” I whisper to Lachlan, though my reduced volume probably isn’t a match for the room occupants’ interest levels. Both Creighton and Patrick have their heads tilted, ears alert for every sound.

“The better question is are you on it?” Creighton mutters.

“Not in the hallways,” Lachlan answers. “The entrances, exits, and common areas are monitored.”

Common areas like the stairs? Because I used those to get to Kari’s room.

Something Carrod’s defence team would soon find out.

Creighton stares at me through narrowed eyes. “If you’re the one who should take the blame, you should also be the one to pick. It’s your time they’ll do, after all.”

“Jesus,” Lachlan murmurs. “George didn’t bring those pills into the school.”

“No,” Kari says, standing in the doorway, leaning casually against the side. “I did.”

I stare, perplexed, as she sashays into the room, pushing Patrick aside to stand in front of Creighton, her chin jutting out in a dare.

“Pity we’ve already had a student clear you,” he says lightly. “Try again.”

“Who cleared me?”

“Carrod,” I tell her, wondering what her game is. I’m grateful for the intervention but there must be an angle. “He accused me of planting the drugs in your room.”

She studies me with her slate-coloured eyes, then shakes her head. “That’s just silly.” She turns back to Creighton. “The boy has it in for George, that’s all. Everybody knows it.”

“Oh, do they?”

When she nods, Creighton leaves the room, crosses the lobby, struts into the cafeteria, and grabs the first student he finds by the scruff of the neck, frogmarching him back to us. “What’s your name?”

“Rhys Briarly.”

“You know a student called Carrod?”

“Mm.” Rhys appears so intimidated that he can’t even get a yes out, making a hum and nodding like a bobble-head doll going over rough roads.

“You know George and Lachlan and Kari?” He jerks his chin at each of us, the student following his indications with wide eyes.

“Uh-huh.”

“Can you think of a reason Carrod would make up a lie to get George in trouble?”

“S-sure.” There’s a pause, probably not long but I imagine to Rhys it lasts pretty much forever. Then he grasps Creighton wants him to continue. “It’s... He teased George and Lachlan beat the shit out of him for it. He’s said openly that he’d love an opportunity to get back at them.”

“Right.”

Creighton releases the boy’s collar, and he flees, ducking on the far side of the security guard when he makes it back to the safety of the cafeteria.

Kari smirks at the answers, tossing a shrug at Creighton when his attention returns to her. “See? Carrod’s a liar and he just wants George to be in trouble. He didn’t see a thing. Those drugs were in my room all along.”

“And when did you get them from my house?” he asks, softening enough to rest a hand on her shoulder. “Your father won’t accept this. He knows the suppliers and distributors of our chains better than anyone. Lock could’ve got these pills any time he wanted but you haven’t been in our home since New Year’s.”

“Dad’s not going to care.”

Creighton stiffens. “He’ll care very much.” He shakes his head. “No. I don’t understand what game you’re playing, but Soren will never—”

“Dimi dropped you off, remember?” Lachlan interjects. He stares straight at Kari then turns to his dad. “Have Soren check the footage and you’ll both see. Mum can probably give you the exact date. We sat in the kitchen while she ate three slices of lemon poppyseed cake. Dimitri should have given Kari a lift back to school, but he forgot, so she came back with me.”

“And is this what everyone wants?” Creighton asks but his eyes only search for confirmation from Kari. “Soren won’t be happy.”

“Then he can take that out on the school board,” she says with a smile. “So I hope they’re as determined to exact punishment as you say they are.”

“Right.” Creighton points to me and Lachlan. “You two, get back to class. I’m not paying these exorbitant fees so you can stand around all day.”

He ejects us from the room, including Patrick, then settles in for what looks like a long discussion with Kari.

“What’s that about?” I whisper to Lachlan, genuinely puzzled. “Why’s she so keen to take the blame?”

He curves an arm around my waist, dropping a kiss onto my lips in front of the students still segregated in the food hall, then shrugs. “At a guess, she’s avoiding a sixty-year-old with a penchant for murdering his wives. Kari’s a lot of things but she’s not stupid.”

The answer doesn’t mean a lot to me, but when I glance back in their direction, Kari has a peaceful smile on her lips, nodding along as Creighton outlines whatever plan he’s implementing.

“Guess that means I won’t get seated opposite Soren at any upcoming family dinners.”

Lachlan squeezes me so hard I can barely breathe. “Maybe family dinners themselves can be nixed for a while. That’ll be the best solution.”

Patrick bends to kiss my cheek and whispers in my ear, “You owe me one. I’ll send you a text, okay?” before striding away to his car, tipping a last wink at the security guard who stands, watching him go with a distant smile on his face.

“You didn’t...” Lachlan trails off, staring after his cousin’s car. “When Patrick hired you, he didn’t put you through an application process, did he?”

There's a hint of concern in his eye and I wonder if he's referring to the club's rather enthusiastic hands-on policy. I could tease him but after the strain of the past weekend, neither of us are in a fit state to deal with that.

"He found me crying outside after I got fired and hauled me into his club, pointed to the uniforms, and told me I was hired. Is that the application you mean?"

"Good." His hand slips slightly lower than my waist, fondling an entirely different part of my anatomy. "Just checking."

The students are dismissed back to class, even though it's now mid-lesson so the buzz of the pupils' return will probably derail any education the teachers were trying to deliver.

I leave Lachlan outside his art class and join my history lesson. I sit as far back in the class as I can, letting the stress of the morning, of last night, flow out of me. In its place comes a nagging worry. My brain reassuring me that no matter how well things work out, there'll always be something it can pick at. Some personal torment it can deliver.

It lasts all the way to the end of first period, then, when we're released to our next class, I have the chance to check my phone.

There's a text from my father. "*Just landed in Hamilton. I'll be in touch once I'm settled.*"

My anxiety untwists in one smooth motion.

He's safe. He's alive.

Along with the text, there are a few missed call notices. I feel a low buzz of relief that I'd left the phone on mute. I want to know he's okay but talking directly with him while my nerves are still so raw would have been a struggle.

The text is perfect. I should leave my phone on silent more often.

Under that is another message, the one promised by Patrick. "*One day I'll ask you for a favour to do with Lock. Say yes.*"

A favour. Such vague language I shouldn't have the slightest idea what it means but I might have an inkling. If I'm right, then once the pair align and take power, the first thing they're getting rid of is any bloody collateral arrangements.

If I'm right. Time will tell.

A familiar tread sounds in the corridor behind me and Lachlan slides his arms around my waist. "We have at least twenty seconds until second bell,"

he says in a voice crammed full of mischief. “And I’ve got a list of things to fill it with.”

With a joyous laugh, I melt back against his powerful frame. “Better get cracking, then.”

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CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

LOCK

DURING THE FINAL week of the school year, I stop by Christchurch Women's Prison to check-in with Kari.

The visitor's area is tame compared to the images I've seen in a hundred different television shows over the years. The tables and chairs—moveable, not mounted—are spaced out with a children's play area in the corner. Guards stand watch at either end of the room.

Kari sits at a table already, her long dark hair cut short in an easy-to-maintain style. That and the limited makeup mean her appearance is a shocking departure from the last time I saw her, standing dutifully in court, accepting her sentence.

A first-time drugs charge shouldn't carry a custodial sentence, but Kari had been determined to get away from her family and decided that adding a few years onto any potential term by punching a court officer was the way to go.

Since she rebuffed all subsequent attempts by her counsel to appeal the sentence or offer any meaningful defence to the charges, she'll probably serve out half the term imposed before being offered the chance of release.

"Looking good," I tell her, and she rolls her eyes.

"Sure. The quality of the shampoo in here is incredible."

The thing is, I'm not lying. Not using flattery to butter her up.

Everything about her manner is a vast improvement. She looks relaxed and mildly amused, an expression I can't recall seeing on her face before.

I guess escaping her family is worth the bother. If our roles were reversed, she'd probably see the same.

Soren and Imelda tried to keep her in the family, but a few well-planted articles put paid to that. At the first inference that she might swap stories with the crown to reduce any penalty, they'd gone into damage control mode, excising her from the family business like any good doctor would remove a suspicious mole.

Her dismissal of any attempt at name suppression meant a catalogue of tabloid articles flew across the internet. With a family as Machiavellian as any prime-time television show, they have no shortage of fodder.

"I'm moving," she says, giving me a nudge in the ribs and earning a black glance from the nearest guard. "They're relocating me to Auckland."

"Why?"

She stares at me, that unfamiliar smile haunting her lips, then shakes her head. "Who knows? I couldn't possibly comment, but I'm glad you answered my call. I didn't want to go without seeing you again."

The words are alarming, but I can pull the pieces together easily enough. The planted stories might be false but she's obviously now talking. I guess she'll be guarded as a vulnerable prisoner and, upon release, will be bundled into witness protection.

"Thank you," I tell her, the words not equal to the level of gratitude in my heart but that would take days to pull the right sentences together, so I go ahead with what I've got.

"For what? Being a constant irritant? For trying to freak George out?"

"I should be the one in here."

She guffaws at that, the undainty laugh so dissimilar from anything I've seen Kari do before that my mouth falls open in shock.

"I'm sure you'd thrive in a women's prison," she teases. "Good-looking boy like you."

"I'm sorry."

"For what?"

My eyes cut sideways to a disturbance at a nearby table. The argument grows heated but there's love behind the harsh words. No one is threatening

anyone, they're just airing grievances so the safety valve on the pressure-cooker environment will reduce the likelihood that they'll explode.

"If I'd talked to you earlier, perhaps we could've found a way out of this that didn't involve..." I trail off, waving my hand at all the things I can't put into words.

"Or I'd have turned you in for a better deal for myself."

"Ah. And the Kari we all know and love is back."

"She never went away," she says with a chuckle, then winks. "Remind George that you should watch out for each other, just in case."

I take it as a joke, but also make a mental note to double check all our security arrangements later.

The rest of the visit passes, mostly in comfortable silence since we never had a lot to say to one another. Still, it's with genuine affection that I say goodbye. We might never meet again—that would prove disastrous given her trajectory—but it's good to know we didn't damage each other too badly; any scars are small enough to easily heal.

I zip back to Kingswood, evading the known camera spots to make it in record time. George is outside the housing block, bouncing on her toes with excitement. I wave and she runs up to me, tilting her head back for the kiss she knows is coming, my hand nestling along her jaw, my thumb just touching her windpipe, feeling the vibrations as she laughs with pleasure.

"How's the school dux?"

She rolls her eyes. "Over it, is what she is. They expect me to make *two* speeches now. Like the one in front of the entire school assembly wasn't enough to give me night terrors."

"Tell them to sod off."

"But then I won't get the pretty piece of card telling me how great I am." She mock slaps me. "Honestly, are you even paying attention?"

"I can have someone write them if you want. Anton's got far too much free time now term is ended."

"Anton is not writing my speech."

The level of aggression is perhaps not surprising, given he was the student she beat out for the title.

Her phone buzzes and she pulls it out, looking delighted at the message waiting on it for her. "Dad's rented a new flat forty minutes out of the city. That's good, isn't it?"

"Hamilton city?"

“Yeah.” She shoots me a glance. “Why? Did you think he might come back here?”

“Just checking.”

Playfulness aside, I know exactly where he is. Under the foundations of a brand-new state-of-the-art milking shed. Those texts come courtesy of me and I’ve been steadily tapering them. Eventually they’ll stop.

I imagine the last real hurdle will be when I get around to putting a child in her belly. Births, christenings. Those are the life events you want your parents to share. I hate that thoughts of him will steal joy from those precious moments-to-come, but we’ll get through it. George is far tougher than she looks.

Speaking of knowing where people are, there’s a fellow up in Auckland who’s currently standing by, under intensive supervision. A graduation present for my special girl. An opportunity to put some nasty memories to bed.

I’ll ask her when we’re at home tonight. Ask her if she wants him to be hurt, to be killed, or to just be scared witless before being let go. Ask if she wants to be the one to do the beating or to sit back quietly and enjoy the show.

The show.

That triggers another possibility. A little performance where I strip George naked in front of him and demonstrate how easy it is to make her orgasm... you know. Just in case he’s having trouble connecting the dots.

I like that one. I like it a *lot*.

“We should probably get you a nice dress,” I say, watching the first tender stains of an oncoming blush-fest light up the base of George’s neck. “Tandi would love to see you again, I’m sure.”

George snorts. “Yeah. She can’t get enough of me.”

“This time, I’m definitely buying you a bag to go with your outfit and it’s a graduation present, so you don’t get to refuse.”

“Such a bully.”

“And Dad also gave me a present that you might be keen to share.”

Her eyes light up and I fetch the half bottle of whiskey from the back of my car, waggling it until I see the recognition in her eye before locking it safely in the boot again.

“An eighty-thousand-dollar bottle of whiskey?” George plants a kiss smack on my lips as I return to her side. “Sounds far too expensive to me,

but all right.”

“Oh, you’ll let yourself be persuaded, will you?”

“For sure.”

“Got a confession.” I bend and put my lips to her ear, resting there for a second while I inhale her perfume, floral tones intermixed with exotic spice. “It’s only worth forty thousand.”

“Hm. Would that be because somebody drank half of it already?”

“It might.” She settles within my arms, her body becoming boneless for the long moments while we kiss. “Should I pour you a finger now? It might help with those public speaking nerves.”

“I think the only thing that’ll help is if the head changes her mind but why not give it a go.” She winks at me. “After all, I’m worth it.”

GEORGE

Later that day, I’m cruising through an easy shift at the club. Billy has a new client he’s keen to gossip about while he loses a small fortune at cards. The two ladies he’s playing with are such lightweights they only need a drink each and they’re done for the night.

My mind is still worrying at the prospect of standing in front of the assembly hall at school. I’m trying to give it enough freedom to let out its fears without dwelling so long that it turns into free-floating anxiety.

Even while I’m changing, ready to go home, my brain is still pick, pick, picking at the idea, flushing me with colour even though the embarrassment is invented.

I’ve just pulled on my jeans when a man strolls into the space, making me glance over my shoulder. It took far less time than I thought to get used to the unisex room, but it still hits odd on occasion.

Not that anyone in the club would ever look. I’m fairly sure Lachlan would be happy to “do a Keanen” on anyone who makes me uncomfortable.

The glance tells me he’s not a regular staff member and the way he apologises and immediately shuffles out raises my eyebrows more than him

staying would. It's only as I slam my locker shut that my brain connects a few dots and I realise I've seen him before.

I stand for a moment, hand still pressed against the cold metal door, letting my mind sift through its folder of casual acquaintances. A chill at the base of my spine tells me the circumstances weren't pleasant, but it's still a shock when I find the right image in my memory and scrutinise it.

The collector.

He's the debt collector who beat the shit out of my father with a bat.

My face goes numb, my jaw aching because my teeth clench so hard. A piercing arrow of fear travels through me, its barbs catching in my flesh.

Did Patrick send him that day? Does he know what the man did to my dad?

I stagger back a few paces, slumping onto the bench in the centre of the room. A thousand horrified thoughts chase each other through the tunnels in my brain, racing each other, playing tag, leaping atop one another in a scrum.

They come to a halt when I realise Patrick would never be that careless. He has a laissez-faire attitude to the workplace, sure, but he's still mindful of his employees. Especially when, in some obscure way I still don't one hundred percent understand, I make him money.

If he had sent the collector, the man wouldn't have just strolled into the changing room. Patrick would ensure I never saw him, never connected him.

But there are other associates, other connections that might bump against one another occasionally.

I prefer not to speculate on why she needed a job to begin with.

The memory is so clear, it's like Patrick's standing right beside me. That was his response to Lachlan when my employment here was discovered. The words I dismissed because it seemed like there was fault on each side, so we didn't need to dissect anything further to know we were both in the wrong.

But now I *want* to dissect it because it seems like the type of statement that might offer me some clues to what's going on.

In fact...

In an instant, I can see how all the things that happened at the start of our relationship could be... not false exactly, but massaged, manufactured,

directed according to one very unhappy, very determined, very powerful boy's fancy.

After all, this is the same boy who thought nothing about planting drugs in another kid's room to open a vacancy. Who bought my company for a night just to piss off his girlfriend when she wouldn't toe the line.

A boy who humiliated me before my classmates, then defended me from the repercussions.

A boy who invited me and my one friend to join his popular group at lunch, then took that friend away by offering him a place on an impossible-to-join team.

That's the kind of boy who might get a girl fired so she became dependent on him for her finances. That's the kind of boy who might cut off her father's creditors with one hand but introduce new lenders with another, lenders operating completely under his control.

Who might introduce her to impossible-to-afford pleasures, knowing she's wired to feel indebted because she turned up at his door one day and demonstrated that's precisely how she thinks.

So many tendrils that look separate but, when you give them a tug, turn out to be hopelessly intertwined.

I sit with that story resting in my head, letting it settle. Waiting to see if it falls apart within seconds or if it holds; all the disparate parts fitting snugly together in their new narrative.

It does. Every piece of it could be one hundred percent true.

But so is the story I already live with. The one where a boy saw a girl whose father had stolen from her, then spent time and effort to make her whole without ever revealing she'd been robbed.

I fidget with my mother's rings, the ones I still wear, even though with my father in another city, he's hardly likely to steal them again.

The rings that give me so much pleasure not just because they connect me to the mother I adored and lost but because they remind me every day that Lachlan cared for me, right from the first moment.

The ones that prove we were meant to be.

I shove the errant thoughts from my mind just as Lachlan reaches the door, knocking on it to alert me to his presence. He dangles the car keys in front of his face, a male temptress. "Thought you might like to go for a ride to clear your head."

“Have I told you recently that I adore you?” I ask him, grabbing the keys from him in exchange for a kiss.

Because yes. Yes, I would like to drive until the raft of awkward new ideas stop populating in my brain. I have a multitude of thoughts that need clearing.

The voicemail was full. How did he know to come to your rescue?

Thoughts like that one.

What service does it perform? None. It’s useless. Good for nobody unless they’re a person who likes to stir up trouble for themselves and I don’t.

I tuck myself under Lachlan’s arm and press my head against his chest. Right at the part where my initials form a permanent scar, a reminder that this gorgeous boy belongs to one lucky girl, and that girl is me.

“That’s good,” he replies, the vibration from his words hitting against my ear like a rumble strip. “Because I just happen to adore you, too.”

We stand like that for a moment, neither of us wanting to move. Finally, Lachlan’s the one to break the pose.

“Come on. Let’s go.”

And we do.

Thanks for reading!

If you enjoyed George and Lachlan’s story, and would like to stay up to date with future book releases, please sign-up for my newsletter at:

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Layla Simon is a fictional entity writing dark romance stories because she keeps running out of books to read.

(and please don't tell her TBR I said that)

She enjoys writing about large dangerous men and tiny feisty woman, possibly because she is neither of those things.

You can check out her available and upcoming titles on my website: <https://www.laylasimon.com>

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