



# Diary of Darkness Special Edition (Dark Diaries Duet)

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**Category:** Dark Erotica

**Description:** Born with a severe facial disfigurement, 21-year-old Alex Kingswood has spent his life locked away from society on his wealthy parents' country estate. He has never had any friends and longs to meet that special someone to share his life with.

Jessica Gardner is a girl from the wrong side of the tracks. Desperate to pay off her beloved mother's medical bills, she reluctantly joins an escort agency and agrees to auction her virginity to the highest bidder.

When the victor turns out to be Alex Kingswood, it sets off a terrifying chain of events. Once Alex has had a taste of Jessica, he simply can't get enough and wants to keep her forever and ever. He will stop at nothing to possess her and woe betide anyone who gets in his way.

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# Page 1

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Alex

1987

Of course, I always knew I was ugly. How could I not know when those around me took pains to remind me at every given opportunity? I'm told my mother Beatrix cried her eyes out when the nurses presented me to her at the hospital. Apparently, my grandmother almost fainted. My father Neville refused to believe I was his offspring and accused my mother of having an affair, despite me having the same unique blue-green eyes as his. He said no way could I possibly be his, no way could his good genes and breeding have produced such a freak of nature.

But sadly, I am indeed a Kingswood. Believe me, sometimes I wish it weren't so. Many times, over the years, I've fantasised that the man I called Dad wasn't related to me, but...there it is. You can choose your friends, but you can't choose your family. But I digress. Back to the subject of my hideousness.

My aunt Priscilla once told me that my unfortunate appearance was God's punishment for my father's murky business dealings—the sins of the parent falling on the child, as it were. My dad was a wealthy arms dealer who spent half the year working abroad in the Middle East negotiating lucrative trade deals. Behind his back, Aunt Priscilla constantly berated her brother-in-law for profiteering from the pain and bloodshed of others. She said all he cared about was money and had no concern for the lives destroyed by the wars facilitated by the rapacious stakeholders of his company.

Another theory was that my accursed face was some sort of karma for my ancestors

dabbling in witchcraft. The Kingswood family have long been famous for their nefarious obsession with the occult, the most prominent being my great uncle Lionel, a deeply feared black magician who worked as Winston Churchill's personal advisor during World War II.

Whether this is true or not, I couldn't say. All I do know is that when it came to me, my father was a cold, cold bastard. Amongst our extended family, there were whispers he spent so much time abroad because he couldn't bear the sight of me, so repulsed was he by my monstrous appearance. It wouldn't surprise me if this was true.

On the face of it, I had an enviable lifestyle. My family lived in Claremont Hall, an impressive manor house on the outskirts of the village of Grimschurch in Surrey. Nestled in an array of beautiful gardens and immaculate lawns, to an outsider, my father's ancestral estate looked like a dream but in reality, the stately home was more like a prison cell.

As a child, I was rarely allowed to go out, although I longed to explore the world outside. There was no warmth in my household growing up. No "I love you's," no hugs, no kisses. It was always purely formal. My father treated me with a mixture of disgust and disdain and had little time for me. The servants were polite but kept to themselves.

Even my mother Beatrix, who deep down I knew loved me, was never very demonstrative. I ached for her to hold me, to cuddle me, but she never did. It was as if she didn't want to touch me and could only offer her brand of love from a distance. Her feelings for me were complex, no doubt fraught with bitterness, as if she was resentful of the sacrifices she'd had to make for my sake.

Aunt Priscilla told me that before I was born, my mother had been a social butterfly, but retreated from the London party scene once I came along, becoming a virtual

recluse to protect me from the daily abuse I attracted from strangers. The guilt-tripping was endless and made me feel bad for even existing, as if I was to blame for everything wrong in my parents' lives.

Very early on, it was decided that I would need to be home schooled. Beatrix's frequent trips to the village with me as a young child saw to it that this was the only way to go. Whenever the neighbourhood kids saw me coming, they screamed and ran away. They called me a monster and all manner of hurtful names; sometimes they even threw stones. Their cruel taunts made me cry but even so, I still longed to be with them. All I wanted was to play with the other children, to be accepted by them, but after a while, it became clear that the safest option was for me to stay locked up inside, shielded from prying eyes.

My mother engaged a governess, and I was taught English, Maths, Latin and French with a little History thrown in for good measure. I was also forced to learn the piano, which I hated as I wasn't very good at it, but my mother insisted I carry on regardless. My grandfather had been a celebrated concert pianist so it was assumed I must have inherited some of his musical talent (believe me, I hadn't).

The turning point in my life came in the winter of 1987 when Aunt Priscilla gifted me a beautiful ginger kitten for my tenth birthday. Soft as silk with a lovely shiny coat, the cat was the sweetest creature I had ever seen, and I was overjoyed that she was mine. I had been begging for a pet for years, but Neville had always forbidden it as he detested animals. However, with him safely away on a business trip to Saudi Arabia, I'm sure Aunt Priscilla was making mischief, but I couldn't care less.

I absolutely adored the kitten who I named Trinity, and everywhere I went, she followed. Soon, the two of us were inseparable and we did everything together. Having a pet was a complete revelation. Trinity was not afraid of me, she loved me to touch and stroke her, and for the first time ever, I knew what it felt like to be loved unconditionally and not be judged on my looks. Trinity wanted to be around me all

the time, even slept next to me every night on my pillow. She more than quelled my deep sense of loneliness and I had never known such happiness. Finally, at last, I had the warmth and companionship I had so long craved and for six glorious months, that darling kitten was my best friend.

Then one cold Saturday morning in early November, I awoke to find Trinity missing from her usual place on my pillow. Frantically, I searched high and low but could find no sign of her anywhere. I asked my mother, the housekeeper, the butler, the cook, everyone, but nobody had seen her. And then I heard a car engine outside and was immediately hit by a deep sense of foreboding. I knew that sound well. It was the sound of my dad's Mercedes-Benz pulling into the driveway, returning unannounced from his business trip.

Racing downstairs, I got outside just in time to see Trinity's little corpse lying beneath the wheels of the car. My father had backed into her, killing her instantly. Uttering a guttural cry, I fell to my knees in tears, every part of my body numb with grief. It was like the sound had been turned down on everything. No, this couldn't be happening.

"Trinity, you killed Trinity!" was all I kept saying.

For a few moments, my father remained silently in his car, and then he got out and for a split-second we locked eyes and I saw a look of cruel defiance on his face. And I knew, I just knew, that it hadn't been an accident. He had sadistically run over my cat on purpose to inflict as much pain on me as possible and for that, I would never forgive him. He had taken away my best friend and her loss was like a knife in my heart. Something inside me died that day and I would never be the same again.

As I continued to sob my heart out, everyone rushed outside to see what all the commotion was about. Suddenly realising he had an audience, my dad switched his demeanour from triumphant devil to one of faux outrage.

“Who the fuck brought a cat into this house?” he demanded of no one in particular. “I thought I said no pets allowed. How the hell was I supposed to know there was a cat prowling around for me to be on the lookout?”

“Oh Neville, how terrible,” Beatrix gasped, staring in horror at Trinity’s motionless body. “What an awful, unfortunate accident.”

“It wasn’t an accident!” I shrieked. “He did it on purpose! He killed Trinity on purpose, I just know he did! It wasn’t an accident...”

“Shut up, you little shit! How dare you make such scurrilous accusations? Of course, I didn’t do it on purpose. I couldn’t bloody see the thing, could I? And it just came darting out of nowhere. This is why I said no pets, because they’re more trouble than they’re worth. Whose bright idea was it to bring a cat into the house? Tell me! Oh, stop your snivelling, will you? It’s only a stupid cat, the world hasn’t ended. You’re making such a fuss about nothing. Time to man-up and get over it, boy, or I’ll really give you something to cry about.”

That was the moment when I realised that I truly hated my dad. Up until that point, I had always disliked him but retained a sort of grudging respect for him, hoping that one day I might be able to win him over. But not anymore. Now I despised him with a black hatred that was all encompassing. My mind was made up and there was no going back. As far as I was concerned, he had murdered Trinity, so he and I were now mortal enemies. At the tender age of ten, I privately swore to avenge the death of my one true friend and no matter how long it took, I promised that one day, I would wipe that evil smirk off his face.

Against Neville’s wishes, we buried Trinity at the bottom of the garden and my mother received a severe beating that night for allowing me to own a pet. In some twisted way, it seemed my dad blamed her for what had happened and took out all his rage and frustration on her. And that made me feel terrible. I felt so guilty for being

the cause of the suffering my poor mum was going through.

Throughout the night, tears rolled down my cheeks as I listened to the crash of furniture drifting up from my parents' bedroom. The terrible noises of Beatrix sobbing and begging forgiveness. My father's booming voice berating her for daring to disobey his wishes. And nobody intervened. Not even one of the servants questioned what was happening. Nobody did a thing to help my mother in her time of need. They all turned a blind eye to my dad's violence because they feared for their jobs. The fucking cowards.

From that point on, I slipped into a dark depression. Nothing could console me or cheer my spirits and I felt as if everything and everyone was against me. For the next couple of months, I operated on autopilot, attending my classes as usual, but nothing had any meaning without Trinity. Neville returned to the Middle East and my mother became even more emotionally distant. I felt so alone.

Then one evening I was in my bedroom, waiting to be called down to dinner. Looking for something to read, I went over to the bookcase to get out one of my old Beano annuals. In my haste, I tripped and found something sticking up from the floor. Pulling back the rug, I saw that one of the floorboards had come loose. Crouching down to slot it back in place, I noticed something lying in the dark cavity beneath.

Cautiously, I reached inside and fished out a couple of tin soldiers, a Steiff teddy bear and a pretty porcelain doll dressed in Victorian clothing. Clearly very old, they were covered in dust and I imagined they must have once belonged to another child who had slept in this bedroom many years ago. I found them fascinating.

I was just about to replace the floorboard when I realised there was something else there. Squinting in the darkness, I reached down again and pulled out a rectangular board covered with pictures of moons and suns. In the centre, running in a curve, were the letters of the alphabet, the numbers 0-9 and the words "Yes" and "No."

Attached to it with a piece of string was a heart-shaped pointer made of wood with moveable wheels. I had no idea what it was. It sort of reminded me of my Fisher-Price magnetic numbers board, only much, much older.

Clutching my new toy in my arms, I raced downstairs in search of my mother to show her my exciting find. I found her in the lounge looking tired, sipping a gin and tonic.

“Mummy, you’ll never guess what I found under the floorboards in my bedroom. Do you know what this thing is?”

Frowning, Beatrix put down her glass, took my strange discovery and examined it closely. “It’s called a Ouija board,” she said. “And that wooden pointer thing is called a planchette.”

“What’s a Ouija board?”

“It’s an old parlour game from Victorian times. There used to be these people called mediums, who used Ouija boards to make contact with the spirit world.”

“Spirits? Do you mean like ghosts and stuff?”

“Yes. Ghosts. Dead people.” She shrugged. “It’s just a bit of fun not to be taken seriously.”

I was intrigued. “So, is it like a board game, you know, like Snakes and Ladders?”

“Not exactly, but it’s definitely a game of sorts. Look, let me show you how it works.”

Placing my treasured find on the table, my mother untied the planchette and demonstrated moving it around the letters of the alphabet. “This is how you play it.

You ask a question, and then the planchette spells out the answer. See? Go on, ask a question.”

“Erm...How old am I?”

“All right, watch.” Gently, she moved the pointer from the number ‘one’ then slowly onto ‘zero.’

I clapped my hands together excitedly. “Ten years old! That’s right! Oh, this is so much fun!”

“Yes, it is.” Then, massaging her temples as if feeling a headache coming, she said, “Listen Alex, you run along and have fun playing your new game, okay? I’ve got a few things to finish up here before dinner. Oh, and remember to wash your hands. If you’ve been playing in the garden again, then they’re probably filthy.”

“But I already did wash them.”

“Then do it again for me.”

“Okay.”

Eagerly, I took the Ouija board back upstairs and laying it on my bedroom floor, sat down to play with it. Placing my fingers on the planchette in the way Beatrix had shown me, I began asking questions out loud, hoping to make contact with the kid who had once owned the toys I found under the floorboards.

Initially, the things I asked were innocuous: Can you hear me? Do you want to play? How old are you? And to each enquiry, I took control of the planchette to answer my own question, which I found strangely gratifying. Even though I knew full well I was the one moving it around, I found it comforting to have an imaginary friend. In my

naivety, I thought it was all just innocent fun.

Then suddenly, there was a weird electricity in the air. An invisible force seemed to take control of the Ouija board and I watched in shock as the planchette moved of its own accord to the word “Hello.”

With a cry of fright, I bolted downstairs in search of my mother again to tell her what had happened. I found her in the bedroom in the middle of taking a call. I knew she didn’t like to be disturbed, but this was an emergency.

“For goodness’ sake Alex, what is it now?” she groaned, stopping the phone against her chest. “Can’t I have a moment’s peace around here? I’m trying to speak to your aunt Priscilla. Right, you have five seconds. What is the problem now?”

“Mummy, Mummy, the planchette just moved on its own! Someone said hello to me. Can you believe it?”

“That’s great. Good for you.”

“But what should I do about it?”

“Isn’t it obvious? Say hello back.”

“But I’m scared. What if it’s a ghost? Aren’t ghosts supposed to be scary?”

“If it is a ghost, then I’m sure the ghost is friendly. You know, like Casper the Friendly Ghost? Say hello back, start a conversation, have some fun with it. Now please, Alex, I really need to take this call. Go to your room and I’ll speak to you later. Go play with the ghost.”

“Okay...if you’re sure it’s friendly, then I will.”

Evidently, Beatrix didn't believe a word and thought I was just making it up. But to my childish mind, her blessing was all I needed to start communicating with the strange force that had taken control of the Ouija board. Returning upstairs, I sat down once again and attempted to interact with the unknown presence that had seeped into every corner of my bedroom.

"Um, hello, it's me again, I'm back," I said, staring nervously at the planchette. "Are you still there? Hello? Anybody there?" For a few minutes, nothing happened. Everything remained silent and still and I began to wonder if I had just imagined the whole thing. Then, clearing my throat, I took one final stab at it. "My name is Alexander Kingswood, but everyone calls me Alex. What's your name?"

Instantly, the wooden pointer began moving and spelt out the letters E-R-A-S-M-U-S.

"Erasmus? That's a funny name. I haven't heard it before, but it's nice. Hello Erasmus, my name is Alex. Pleased to meet you."

The planchette darted back to the word "Hello" and I almost fainted from excitement. I couldn't believe it. It was as if I had suddenly entered a world where pixies and fairies and giants really did exist. I hadn't imagined it. Somebody called Erasmus really was speaking to me!

Before I could ask another question, the pointer started moving once more and spelt out the sentence: Can I enter?

I stared up at the ceiling, as if my invisible companion was up there somewhere, clinging to the chandelier. What did the question mean?

Can I enter? Can I enter what? The bedroom?

For a few seconds, I remained frozen with indecision, waiting for further instructions,

but nothing came. Then the message was repeated on the Ouija board, this time more forcefully.

CAN I ENTER?

“Um, yes, all right,” I said with a shrug. I had no idea what I was getting myself into. As soon as I uttered the words, it was like a light bulb had suddenly been switched on and a door to another world had been thrown open. There was no going back now.

And that was when I heard it for the first time. A soft, silky voice, as quiet as a whisper yet loud enough for me to hear every syllable articulated with unmistakable distinctness. It was a man’s voice, but sweetly seductive and sugary as syrup. I was used to the harshness of my father’s deep booming voice and had no idea a man could sound like that.

“Hello Alex, would you like to play?”

“Yes, but where are you?” I replied, looking around the room. “I can’t see you anywhere.”

The invisible presence chuckled. “I’m playing hide and seek with you. I’m hiding somewhere secret where you can never find me.”

“Please come out! I want to see what you look like.”

“No. I don’t think it would be a good idea for me to reveal myself.”

“Why not?”

“Because you might be frightened.”

“Why would I be frightened?”

“Because I don’t look very pretty.”

I laughed. “Oh, that doesn’t bother me. People don’t think I’m very pretty either. Everyone’s afraid of me because I’m so ugly.”

“Oh, no, you’re not ugly, Alex. Compared with me, you look like a handsome prince.”

These words made me smile and I found myself warming to the mysterious stranger whom I couldn’t see. “Please Erasmus, come out and let me see you. I promise I won’t be frightened.”

“No. Sometime soon, perhaps. But not yet. I’m very shy.”

“Don’t be shy. Where are you from? Are you a ghost?”

“No, I’m not a ghost.”

“Are you a boy like me?”

“No, I’m not a boy.”

“Are you a man?”

“No.”

“Then what are you?”

“I’m...something else.”

“What?”

“I promise I’ll tell you when the time is right, but first, let’s get to know each other better.”

I hesitated, trying to process all this information. It was a hell of a lot for a ten-year-old to take in.

“Where are you from?” I resumed after a minute’s silence.

“I’m from a land far away,” the voice replied. “A dark, dark place where there is no sadness and everyone has fun all day long.”

“What’s this place called?”

“I can’t tell you that either.”

“Oh Erasmus, won’t you tell me anything?”

“I’d much prefer to talk about you. Would you like to make a wish?”

“Wow! Do you grant wishes?”

“I do indeed.”

“You mean like the genie from Aladdin?”

“Yes, in a way. Tell me what you want most in the world and I’ll make sure your wish comes true.”

Closing my eyes, I thought hard. “I wish...I wish I had a friend, someone who will

never go away and always be with me. I used to have a friend called Trinity, but she was taken away and I...I never want that to happen again.”

“Granted. I promise I’ll be your friend forever and ever and never leave your side...”

With a gasp, I felt an enormous bolt of energy surge into me, and my fingertips felt as if they were on fire. In my mind’s eye, I saw a million distorted images flash up at the speed of light. Then I felt strong in a way I never had before, and I knew, I just knew, Erasmus was now irrevocably a part of me. It was like a seed had been planted that was growing and growing, spreading its grip throughout every one of my nerve endings.

A joyful smile spread across my lips. Erasmus had indeed kept his promise and was now burrowed deep within my subconscious, waiting to be unleashed whenever I needed him. I found the feeling both comforting and thrilling. By rights, I should have been terrified by the alien sensations pulsating through me, intruding on the very core of my being, yet somehow, I wasn’t. I loved the novelty of the phenomenon, the exciting sense of the unknown and the exhilarating strength it gave me. With Erasmus inside my body, it meant I would never be alone again. I would always have a friend, one that would stay with me forever and ever.

Until death do us part.

“You can never tell anyone about me, Alex,” the voice whispered. “Listen closely, this is very important. If you do ever tell anyone, they might send people to try and take me away, and you wouldn’t want that, would you? You wouldn’t want people to take me away like they took away Trinity.”

“No, of course not!”

“Good. Then promise me you will always keep this a secret, just between the two of

us.”

“I promise.”

“Thank you. Now who’s your favourite superhero?”

“Superman.”

“Well, my friend, I’m going to turn you into Superman and give you lots of special powers. Would you like that?”

“Oh yes! Erasmus, please, please make me into Superman!”

“All right. Your wish is my command.”

My wonderful new companion was as good as his word. The next time I sat down at the piano, I effortlessly played Liszt’s Mephisto Waltz No1 from start to finish without even breaking a sweat. I was channelling Erasmus’ energy through my fingertips, and he was controlling my every movement. As my hands ran up and down the piano keys, it was as if the composition was being performed through muscle memory alone, no sheet music required.

A fiendishly difficult piece to play, old Mr Fischer, my music teacher, was astounded and simply could not believe it. I had never seen my mother so happy. Giddy with joy, I started to think that letting Erasmus into my life was the best decision I’d ever made.

At first, everything was great. My French and Latin came on in leaps and bounds as I found I could now speak both fluently and my vocabulary in general broadened under Erasmus’ influence. My governess declared me a child prodigy and had it not been for my appearance, no doubt there would have been arrangements made to show me

off to society.

Then there were the little day-to-day things which Erasmus did to make life easier for me. Whenever Beatrix asked me to tidy my room, all I had to do was snap my fingers, and all my toys floated back to where they belonged. With the powers bestowed upon me, I was able to move inanimate objects, just by willing it to happen. All I had to do was look at a wardrobe, and it would move positions. It was truly wonderful and I found my new abilities both exciting and liberating.

Then things began to go wrong.

My new friend started to make mischief. At nights, Erasmus would make the bed shake, waking up all the servants. Sometimes he would move chairs and tables around, completely rearranging the furniture in a room in a way which left everyone feeling unsettled. Another time, the cook narrowly escaped with his life after he was attacked by a succession of carving knives that had jumped out from the drying rack and pinned him to the wall. Then there was an incident where the maid swore blind she had been nearly strangled by vines in the garden which had suddenly come alive as she watered the plants.

Of course, Erasmus thought all this was terribly funny, and saw it as a game, but I didn't. He was beginning to upset the people I cared about, and I begged him to stop, but he wouldn't. He told me I was being a spoilsport, that this was all just a little game where no one really got hurt.

Soon there were murmurings of a ghost in the house and bit by bit our hired help began to leave the premises. Nobody wanted to work in a haunted house and no matter what she did, Beatrix found she could never retain anyone for longer than a couple of weeks. Eventually, even my governess had enough of the spooky goings-on and handed in her notice.

My mother was beside herself. She didn't believe in the haunted house theory, but at the same time, she had to admit that the atmosphere in the house had changed significantly. There was a creeping sense of dread hanging over everything that hadn't been there before, which I turned a blind eye to.

Obviously, I knew Erasmus was the culprit. I knew he brought a blanket of darkness with him wherever he went, but I didn't want to accept it. He was my only friend and I needed him to be around, no matter what the cost. After what had happened with Trinity, I didn't want to lose somebody else that was special to me.

And all throughout proceedings, I remained silent about my invisible friend. I didn't say a word to anybody. Not to my mother, not to Aunt Priscilla. Nobody knew I was the source of the strange happenings. Nobody knew who was really responsible for the seemingly supernatural events and that was the way I intended to keep it. Erasmus had sworn me to secrecy and there was no way I would ever go back on that promise.

By spring, things got so bad that only the butler Hobbs and the housekeeper, Mrs Bullivant, remained in our service. Nobody else could cope with living in a house with such a volatile, haunting atmosphere and a violent ghost on the loose. Rumours began to circulate in the nearby village that there was something very wrong in Claremont Hall and it got to the point where even the postman was wary of approaching the place.

Things came to a head one rainswept evening when my father returned home from Lebanon. Already in a foul mood, I could smell the alcohol on his breath the second he arrived in the house. Within an hour, he and my mum were fighting like cats and dogs. Hiding at the top of the stairs, I caught snippets of their argument. Neville called her a useless bitch. He said she was a failure as a wife and a mother and that she couldn't run a household to save her life. Where had all the servants gone? Why was the house quiet as the grave? Beatrix tried to explain about the ghost, but he was having none of it.

Then my father disappeared to his study and returned brandishing a cricket bat. Red with rage, he promised to teach her a lesson she would never forget. This was the point where I knew I must intervene. No way in hell was I going to allow the bastard to harm my mother.

Running downstairs, I shouted at him to leave her alone. But this only made Neville madder.

“You can keep out of this, you disgusting little freak!” he roared. “This is all because of you. Ever since you came into our lives it’s been one problem after another. Fuck, I didn’t know how good we had it before you came to destroy everything. I wish you had never been born!”

“Please don’t say that,” my mother wailed. “This has nothing to do with Alex. Leave him out of this.”

In a blind fury, my father swung the cricket bat towards her head. In an instant, I was standing between them on the stairs, trying to field the blows he intended to deliver.

“Out of my way!” Neville snarled.

“If you dare touch Mummy, you won’t like what will happen.”

“I can’t believe my ears. Are you trying to threaten me, you little freak?”

Then it happened. Something so miraculous, I still find it hard to believe. An enormous black tentacle tore through the skin of my back and landed my dad a stinging slap across the face, causing him to lose his footing.

With a loud scream, he tumbled down the stairs and broke his neck instantly when his head hit the marble floor. There was an awful cracking sound, followed by a

profound silence. A halo of blood rapidly oozed around his twisted and broken body. In amazement, I watched as the tentacle vanished back into thin air.

Breathing heavily, my mother stared at me, slack jawed. She couldn't believe what she had just witnessed.

Very soon, Hobbs and Mrs Bullivant arrived on the scene to see what all the noise was about. Mrs Bullivant screamed when she saw my father's dead body and looked up at us from the foot of the stairs.

"Oh my God, what happened?"

For a long moment, Beatrix said nothing, her face white with terror. She couldn't stop trembling, finding it hard to process the shocking spectacle. I wondered if she was going to hand me over to the wolves. Would my mother betray me even though she knew I had only been trying to defend her?

At last, after a painful interlude, she finally found her voice. "It was an accident," she said. "Neville was drunk and he lost his footing and fell down the stairs. It was nobody's fault. It was all just a terrible accident."

Hobbs and Bullivant exchanged glances. They didn't seem convinced, but they weren't about to risk their jobs by challenging her version of events. And of course, there was that small matter of a ghost on the prowl...

I breathed a huge sigh of relief. So, she did love me after all. She wasn't going to turn me over to the police or reveal the dark secret she had witnessed. By covering for me, Beatrix was now complicit in the deceit and would have to bear the consequences of her actions forever more.

Heart thumping, I glanced back down at my father's twisted corpse. His wide-open

eyes bulged out of his head and stared horribly at the ceiling. I felt nothing but delight at his passing. He was an evil man and without him in the picture, I knew our lives would be immeasurably better. Slowly, a wicked smile crept across my face.

“This one’s for you, Trinity,” I whispered.

## Page 2

*Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 3:31 am*

Jessica

1998

“Jessica, can you do me a favour and take this bottle of champagne over to table six?” my boss, Mr Indrani asks with a casualness that sets my teeth on edge. “Raj has already laid out the glasses so all you need to do is pour.”

“Sure, no problem,” I smile, wiping my hands on my apron. “You said table six, right?”

“Yes. You sure you’re okay to do this?”

“Of course! No worries, leave it with me.”

Taking the bottle of Moet and an ice bucket from him, I move through the crowded restaurant towards a group of rowdy men celebrating a stag do. The truth is, I’m not okay with this at all. Despite waitressing at Spice Palace Indian Restaurant for over a month, I still haven’t got the hang of how to serve champagne correctly. My workmate Raj has shown me several times, but I just can’t get my head around how to use the folded service cloth or master that funny way of holding the bottom of the bottle as you pour. I’m going to need absolute concentration, but from the way the guys are behaving as I approach, I know this is going to be a complete disaster.

“Hello sweetheart,” leers one of the men. “Seeing you feels like all my Christmases and birthdays have come at once.”

“What a stunner,” says another. “Looks like a catwalk model. Legs that go on for miles.”

Their sloppy attempts to flirt go unregistered. I’m lost in my own world trying to remember everything Raj taught me to ensure I get it done in the right order.

Let’s see, present the bottle, hold the bottle away so that the champagne doesn’t explode everywhere, do a taste test, then move around the table clockwise, serving the host first...

With trembling hands, I present the Moet to the men to check they are happy with their selection, and then, holding the service cloth around the bottom, release the cage. Gripping the base, I keep my hand over the cork pointed away from them and then, slowly twisting the bottle, ease the champagne open. With a sense of relief, I hear the muted gush of air as the cork is finally released with no unwanted spills.

Smiling, I lean forward to fill the first glass with the intention of working my way around the table. As I do so, the bottle suddenly slips and bubbly splashes all over one of the men’s jeans.

“Shit, I am so sorry!” In a tizzy, I grab a handful of serviettes to clean up the mess, but compound matters by knocking over another two glasses. “Fuck! What am I like?”

“It’s all right, love,” the guy grins. “No harm done. I only look like I’ve peed myself, but not to worry, the wet patch will soon dry. Is this your first day here?”

“Actually, I’ve been working here for a while,” I say. “Oh my gosh, this is such a fiasco. Please accept my apologies. Would you like a replacement bottle of Moet?”

“No, this one is fine, thanks. I don’t want to make a fuss and get you in trouble. Just

finish pouring the rest and we're good."

"Thanks. I really appreciate that."

To a chorus of whoops and sniggers, I throw him some more napkins and hurriedly resume filling the rest of the champagne flutes. All the while, I can sense Mr Indrani's eyes burning into the back of me from over by the kitchen. No doubt he witnessed everything and is less than impressed by my monumental cock-up. From the moment I started this job, I knew I was living on borrowed time. The truth is, I'm just not cut out for fine dining. I don't have the poise or composure for it and am far too clumsy to ever make the cut. Still, I live in hope that somehow, I can muddle through until at least the end of the summer.

Some chance.

Half-way through my shift, my boss sternly calls me into his office, and I know I'm in the doghouse before he even utters the first syllable.

"Take a seat Jessica. This won't take long."

"Am I in trouble?" I ask fearfully. "Is this because of what happened earlier when I spilt the champagne on those guys? It was an accident; you've got to believe me. A one off. I promise it won't happen again."

The old man sighs and rubs his temples. "Listen, I like you, I really do, but if I'm being honest, this just isn't working. When you first took this job, you told me you had waitressing experience."

"I do! I have a second job at a diner that I've worked at for over two years."

"Yes, but with all due respect, waitressing at Sloppy Joe's American Diner is nothing

like working at Spice Palace. Here we have a different sort of clientele and a prestigious reputation to uphold. The food critics love us. We've had a four-star review in Time Out. It's a fast-moving environment and you've got to be on the ball at all times. There's no room for slackness." Grimly, he opens a small safety deposit box and begins counting 20 notes into an envelope. My heart sinks. "I'm sorry Jessica, but I'm going to have to let you go. I'm giving you your final week's salary, and then we'll call it quits."

"No! Please Mr Indrani, don't do this. I can change, I can do better. Please, just give me one last chance and I promise not to screw up this time. I really, really need this job. There's something important I'm saving up for and I really need the money."

"I'm sorry," he says firmly, handing me the envelope. "I'm not a charity and it's not just what happened today that's the issue. Your timekeeping is abysmal..."

"My little brother has autism," I blurt. "Sometimes he has these meltdowns before I leave the house and I have to help my mother calm him down. If I've ever been five minutes late, that's the reason. But I promise I can change. I can make sure that we—"

"It isn't only that," he cuts in. "You take ages to lay the cutlery. You take long toilet breaks. You still haven't memorised the key ingredients of our signature biryani. Laksmi only arrived from Kathmandu a fortnight ago and already his performance is out stripping yours three to one."

"I can change! Please, I'm begging you, just give me one last chance and I'll prove it to you."

Mr Indrani closes his eyes and steeples his fingers. "I'm so sorry Jessica. You're a lovely, lovely girl. Everyone likes you, and if it wasn't such a fast-paced environment, I'd love to keep you on. Can I give you a word of advice? I honestly

think you'd be better suited to something in fashion or retail. Something with a slower pace. You're great at talking to customers so try to find something that plays to your strengths. Unfortunately, Spice Palace is not the place for you to shine."

A lump forms in my throat and I struggle to hold back the tears. It's no use. From the unyielding expression on his face, I know his mind is made up and there's nothing I can do to change it.

Taking off my apron, I return to the kitchen to say a tearful goodbye to Raj and the others. None of them can believe I've got the sack, and their kind words and indignation at how I've been treated help to soften my humiliation. They're such a great bunch of guys, so sweet and caring. We haven't known each other long, but for the short time I've worked here, I feel like I've made some true friends. Eventually I leave the restaurant clutching a complimentary carton of korma and pilau rice, promising Raj to stay in touch and bring my family to Spice Palace for a meal on the house.

When I get outside, a cold, February wind chills me to the bone and I wish I'd worn something warmer than this thin denim jacket. Miserably, I trudge through the dark, treelined paths of Clapham Common, turning left at the bandstand which serves as a short-cut to my housing estate. Inside, I'm kicking myself.

What a fiasco. What a monumental fuck-up. How could I have been so stupid? Why didn't I try harder to fit in? Why didn't I do everything in my power to memorise the ingredients of that damn chicken biryani? There were so many things I could have done better but it's too late now.

I've let myself down badly.

Worst of all, I feel like I've let Mum down.

Eight years ago, my mother Cynthia was diagnosed with an extremely rare form of cancer, and she spent my early teenage years in and out of hospital undergoing various treatments. It was a difficult time for us all, but I found it especially challenging because she was told her diagnosis soon after giving birth to my younger brother Freddie, who has autism and ADHD.

With his father Darren out of the picture, it meant I had to grow up fast to assist with parenting duties and provide the unwavering support required to help look after a child with special needs. Of course, I love Freddie to bits, so I was more than happy to play surrogate mother when I needed to, but I still look back on it as one of the bleakest periods of my life.

Mum's cancer eventually went into remission, and we enjoyed a few happy years where her ill health didn't dominate our lives so much. Then around six months ago, the cancer returned and this time the doctors said there was nothing more they could do for her—on the NHS at least. Our one glimmer of hope is a pioneering medical procedure offered at an esteemed clinic in Germany where a course of treatment costs somewhere in the region of £50,000.

Unfortunately, as we're poor, we don't exactly have that kind of money lying around, so I've been working night and day to save up as much as I can to put towards her treatment fund. In addition to juggling two jobs, my fundraising activities have included sponsored runs, a raffle at my brother's primary school and selling off my old clothes and records at a tabletop sale at St Matthew's Church.

So far, I've managed to save £2438, which barely makes a dent in the overall cost, but hey, you've got to start somewhere, and as my mother Cynthia says, you've got to stay positive as you never know when your luck will change.

Sadly, my fundraising attempts have taken a bit of a setback now I've lost the gig at Spice Palace. However, at least I've still got the job at Sloppy Joe's and if I scan the

classified section of The South London Herald tomorrow morning, I can start getting some interviews lined up for early next week.

At last, I reach my home on the Terrapin Road estate—a small development of low-rise council flats built sometime in the mid-sixties. As far as housing estates go, this is one of the nicer ones. One of my mother's favourite anecdotes is how when she was pregnant with me and on the council waiting list, she refused the first couple of flats she was offered due to them being 'complete and utter hellholes.' She said she knew something decent would come up eventually and she was determined to hold out, even if it meant living in temporary accommodation for just a bit longer.

It turned out she was right. Compared to some of the sink estates around this neck of the woods, the Terrapin Road development is clean and tidy with well-kept front and back gardens and a communal entry hall that doesn't smell of urine. Mum reckons this is because the majority of our neighbours are elderly pensioners who purchased their homes through the Right to Buy scheme so are house proud and have that classic sense of working-class pride that was endemic in days gone by.

With a sense of relief, I approach the ground floor communal entrance and, rummaging through my bag, fish out my house keys. Once inside the block, I walk through a dimly lit hall and let myself into flat number 2. As soon as I enter, I'm hit by the sound of trumpets and drums. My mother is blaring out El Ritmo Latino, a collection of her favourite Latin American grooves on the record player and the whole place feels like one big carnival. Instantly, I'm infused with a sense of warmth and welcome and I thank God for sweet moments like this. No doubt the noise is winding up the neighbours no end, but I absolutely love it.

Smiling, I push open the door to the living room to find a familiar scene of beautiful, glorious chaos. Used as an all-purpose space, it doubles up as both Mum's bedroom and a makeshift art studio. Against the wall sits a second-hand futon while canvases, cardboard boxes and tubes of acrylic lie scattered everywhere.

In the middle of the floor, my nine-year-old brother Freddie is lying on the rug playing with his Matchbox toy cars that have been painstakingly laid out in symmetrical colour-coded lines. As I move through the room, I'm careful not to step on them because even the slightest slip could be enough to trigger a mini meltdown.

My mother Cynthia is standing before an easel, putting the finishing touches to her latest painting—a picture of a dark-haired man with a severe side-parting dressed in turn-of-the-century clothing sitting in a warm, gaslit room. The image is stunningly realistic and looks like something Rembrandt might have whipped up. I find her talent mesmerising and never tire of telling people just how proud I am or how amazing she is at art.

Physically, we are like chalk and cheese. Cynthia is short and slim with pale skin, blue eyes and red hair fashioned in a pixie cut. I'm tall, tan, and gangly with long brown hair and dark, almost black eyes. I'm told she is the image of my Irish grandmother Mandy, while I apparently resemble my father Carlos, the sexy and sophisticated art student Mum had a brief fling with at college when she was nineteen (the same age as me). It was the romance of the century until Carlos the Lothario pissed off back to Spain, never to be seen again.

“Darling, you're back!” Cynthia puts down her brush and wipes her hands on her paint splattered dungarees. “What do you think of my latest creation?”

Craning my neck, I squint at the picture fixed to the easel. “It's amazing, but who is it supposed to be?”

“It's a portrait of D.H. Lawrence contemplating Lady Chatterley's Lover.”

“Cool! I love the colour palette. Blacks and browns make it very...very atmospheric.” I laugh inwardly, amused by her pretentiousness.

“Glad you like it,” she grins. “Oh, guess what? I spoke to a man at Northcote Library today and he says they would be happy to put on an exhibition of my work there. Isn’t that brilliant?”

“That’s great, Mum. I’m so happy for you.”

She glances at her watch. “Hey, it’s just gone half eight. What are you doing back? Did you finish work early tonight?”

“No, I got the sack.”

Her mouth drops open. “Oh no! What happened?”

With a non-committal shrug, I flop down on a beanie bag and cross my legs. “Mr Indrani said I wasn’t good enough. I kept being late and wasn’t great at table service. Also, I dropped a bottle of champers over this group of guys and that was kind of the final straw. So, it’s back to the old drawing board in terms of finding another job.”

There’s an awkward pause. Then swiftly, my mother’s cheerful mood returns, and she tells me not to worry, life is too short to be depressed. Grabbing both my hands, she pulls me to my feet and spins me around in time to the music. Her playfulness is infectious and soon we’re both dancing around the room and laughing hysterically in a haze of sweet delirium. In the pit of my stomach, however, I’m still feeling a little sick.

Moments like this are golden but also tinged with sadness because I can’t help but wonder how much longer my mother’s fragile health can hold on for. Will she survive this time around or will she suddenly be taken away from me? The thought of losing one of the two people I love most in the world completely destroys me and the worry of it stalks me day and night. My mother is my best friend, the woman I most admire, and I can’t even begin to imagine a life without her. If she passes away, how

will we cope? The thought of it is utterly inconceivable.

To make matters worse, there's no one around I can talk to about my concerns. I don't have any close friends I trust enough to confide in, and Cynthia has banned all conversation about her health for fear of upsetting Freddie. As a result, we're never allowed to address the elephant in the room and must only focus on happy things. Even the subject of my firing is not something to be dwelled upon for long. No, we must all put on a brave face and keep up the cheerful charade, even though deep down inside playing pretend is killing me.

"Jess, have you seen my model Porsche?" Freddie cuts in, holding up one of his toy cars. "Don't you think it's really cool?"

"Yes, it's wonderful, Freddie."

"Do you like it? Really and truly?"

"Yes, that's one cool set of wheels. But, Kiddo, shouldn't you be in bed by now? It's almost nine o'clock."

He juts out his bottom lip. "But I don't want to go to bed yet. I want to finish playing with my cars! Mum, Jess is trying to make me go to bed. Do I have to?"

"Do as your sister says," Cynthia admonishes humorously. "She's right. It's long past your bedtime. Sorry Jess, this is all my fault. I should have been getting him ready for bed ages ago, but I got so caught up with this painting, the time just flew by."

I roll my eyes. God, what is she like? Sometimes she acts like such a big kid I'm certain if it wasn't for me, she'd let my brother stay up until the early hours. It often feels like I'm the only one in this house trying to establish any sort of routine. But I guess I shouldn't be surprised. By now, I should be used to how scatter-brained

Cynthia is. After all, I've been playing parent since I was eleven years old.

"Come on Kiddo, time for beddy-bye. Let's go." Gently, I take Freddie's hand and lead him to the bathroom to clean his teeth. Setting my stopwatch, I count each second out loud to ensure he brushes for precisely two minutes (a little trick I've learnt to get him to clean his teeth thoroughly). Then I help him put on his pyjamas and tuck him into bed.

"Jess?" Freddie asks before the lights go out.

"Yes, sweetheart?"

"If I'm a really good boy, do you think Father Christmas will bring me a Super Nintendo? My friend Ollie has got Super Mario World on the Nintendo and I want one too because I love Super Mario Bros."

I stifle a smirk. Sometimes he's so damn adorable it makes me want to weep. With his mop of red hair, snub nose and freckles, he's the spitting image of my mother only twice as cute.

"Christmas is a long way off," I say. "But sure, I don't see why not. If you're a really good boy, Father Christmas will bring you anything you want, as long as he can afford it. Sometimes Father Christmas has a tight budget to work with, you know. And sometimes Father Christmas and the elves may not be able to get you stuff that is always brand new, so the Nintendo might be second-hand, but it will work just as good."

"Cool. I just want one, I don't care if it isn't new."

"Good. Well, keep being a good boy and I'm sure it will happen."

“Jess, is today Friday 6th February?” he asks, changing the subject.

“Yes.” I smile inwardly, knowing what comes next. It’s the same routine every single night and I enjoy playing along. “Today is Friday 6th February.”

“And is Friday 6th February the 37th day of the year?”

“Um, I’m not sure, I don’t have a calendar to hand, but I bet you’re right. You’re always right.”

Freddie sits up excitedly, warming to his topic. “Yes, I am right, I know because I counted it on my fingers, and I also know this year is not a leap year so there will only be 28 days in February. And tomorrow is Saturday 7th February so that will be the 38th day of the year, and then Sunday 8th will be the 39th day of the year...”

“All right, Kiddo,” I soothe, pulling the blankets up to his chin. “Enough of that. Time to go sleepies.”

“Goodnight, Jess. I love you.”

“I love you too.”

“More than anything?”

“More than anything.”

“More than ice-cream?”

“More than ice-cream, Mars bars and all the Sherbet Dip Dabs on the planet.”

“Oh my gosh, did you watch Sunset Beach this morning?” Amina asks excitedly as

she wipes down the serving counter. “It was wicked! Annie is still acting the psycho, Virginia is still trying to break up Michael and Vanessa and Cole...oh my God, Cole! He’s so bloody hot he deserves a spin-off show all of his own.”

“Sorry, I didn’t see it,” I say. “But it sounds brilliant.”

“It is! I’m addicted. I’ve tape-recorded the last couple of episodes so if you ever want to check it out, let me know.” She pauses to pour herself a cheeky glass of Pepsi from the drinks’ dispenser (she’d better hope our boss Brian doesn’t catch her as he’s warned us not to take the piss with freebies).

“I mean,” she continues, wiping her mouth. “I know it’s not exactly Twin Peaks, but trust me, Sunset Beach is the most perfect guilty pleasure. The storylines are off the wall and the cast are so hot they’re on fire. I can’t get enough. Everyone I know watches it. At first it started out as a bit of a joke, but I think it’s got a cult following now.”

“You’ve sold it to me,” I say. “If it’s a guilty pleasure then it should be right up my street.” I can’t be bothered to explain the real reason I won’t be watching Sunset Beach anytime soon is because we haven’t had a TV for six months, not since the man from Radio Rentals came and took it away. In my home, television is a luxury we can ill afford, like the house phone that gets intermittently disconnected on account of the unpaid bill. Currently, we are blessed to have a working landline but for how much longer is anybody’s guess.

“I mean, when I say the storylines are nuts, I do mean nuts,” Amina laughs. “There’s this character called Meg—she’s a total sweetheart—who meets this random guy on the Net and moves to Sunset Beach to be with him. How freaky is that? Can you imagine falling in love with someone you met on a computer who you’d never actually seen in real life? I mean, the bloke could be a total perve, right? What kind of a weirdo would date someone they met on the Net? But hey, it’s just a show, I guess.

Not supposed to be realistic. Trust me, computer dating will never catch on.”

I smile blandly. I know very little about the world of the Net so I’m not in a position to comment, but I agree it does sound far out.

It’s Saturday afternoon and I’m working the lunch shift at Sloppy Joe’s American Diner with my friend and fellow waitress Amina Jones. As always, Amina looks too cool for school with her shaven head, black lipstick, nose ring, knitted choker and long green dress teamed effortlessly with a pair of blocky, limited-edition Dr Martens. We’ve worked together at the diner for over two years and have become pretty good mates.

Amina and I used to attend the same secondary school but didn’t know each other that well because we moved in different circles. At school she was part of the Grungers crowd while I, being a bit of a loner, didn’t form part of any group at all.

It’s funny, but looking back on my school days, I realise that so much of where you sat in the pecking order was dependent on what type of music you listened to. So, at the top of the hierarchy, you had two groups of popular kids—those obsessively devoted to Mark Owen and Take That and those who listened to the likes of Jodeci, Snoop Doggy Dogg and Adina Howard. Then you had Amina’s crowd, a motley crew of kooks known as the Grungers, who worshipped Nirvana, The Smashing Pumpkins and Skunk Anansie with the occasional side helping of Oasis, Blur and Suede thrown in for good measure. These kids weren’t exactly popular, but they had safety in numbers, and you picked on them at your peril. Then at the bottom of the heap you had the Swots—the kids who got straight As and sucked up to the teachers with an avant-garde musical taste ranging from obscure B-side dance tracks to The Beatles.

And then there was little old me who, with a penchant for ‘50s show tunes and Kylie Minogue after she stopped being cool, didn’t have a hope in hell’s chance of being

accepted by anyone. At school I was virtually friendless, a sad state of affairs caused by my complicated home life and a general lack of worldliness which meant very few of the other kids found me relatable.

My closest acquaintance (I hesitate to call her a friend) was a girl named Charlotte ‘Midge’ Ramsey who was in the same form class as me. With thick glasses, a face covered with acne and wildly unmanageable hair, Midge had all the attributes of a popular girl hiding in the body of a geek. She smoked. She loved Robbie Williams and Take That. She needed counselling when they split up. She studiously collected every single edition of Smash Hits and Vogue and was up to speed on all the celebrity gossip. Had her outward appearance been different, I’m certain she would have fitted right in with the popular crowd she so desperately wanted to be a part of.

But instead, she got lumbered me—boring old Jessica Gardner who nobody wanted to sit with or be friends with, but as we shared many of the same classes and often needed to buddy up, the two of us were sort of thrown together. Out of necessity, we formed an uneasy alliance, but we didn’t like each other much and had nothing in common to talk about other than how much we despised the bullies at our school.

Time and again, Midge would chastise me for being so weird and constantly took the Mickey out of my ‘deeply uncool’ fixation with Edgar Allan Poe and ‘50s musicals. She told me I was good-looking enough to be popular if only I would make more effort and stop sabotaging myself by getting straight As and wearing clothes from charity shops. Midge was the ultimate definition of the word ‘frenemy,’ and I can’t say I was sorry when she eventually moved to Scotland to live with her grandparents.

“Jesus Christ, look what the cat dragged in,” Amina groans, rolling her eyes. “Have you seen who’s just walked in the diner? Are you going to serve them, because I’m telling you, I’m not touching those creeps with a bargepole!”

Snapping from my reverie, I put down my stack of plates and sneak a peek through

the beaded curtain to view the shop floor.

“Fuck!”

My heart sinks as I recognise four familiar faces who used to go to our school: Georgina Wickham, Lorraine Templeton and their boyfriends Jack Parker and Thomas Statham. With beautiful faces, beautiful smiles, and perfectly toned bodies, the four of them could easily be mistaken for cast members from Baywatch. However, behind their glittering facade lies a poison that only those who had the misfortune to attend Salesian Comprehensive know about. Georgina Wickham was the biggest bitch in school and one of the worst bullies who tormented me mercilessly throughout my education.

It all started in Year Seven when a teacher complimented me on a poem I wrote. I was given an ‘A’ for effort and told to read it out loud in front of the class. No sooner had the words been spoken, then Georgina, who was sitting behind me, began kicking my seat and chanting “Swot” and “Little Miss Smartie Pants,” over and over again. Soon everyone joined in. Somebody threw a spit ball. Another kid poked me in my spine and put chewing gum in my hair.

That was just the beginning.

At every given opportunity after that, Georgina and her friends picked on me and made my life complete hell. Every day they made snide comments about my appearance, slagged me off for being a Teacher’s Pet and were generally nasty to be around. Worst of all, they encouraged my classmates to join in, branding me an ‘untouchable’ and completely demolished my chances of ever having any proper friends. I soon began to dread returning to class after the summer holidays and the very sight of a ‘Back to School’ sign in Woolworth’s was enough to make me puke. My fear and self-loathing were all consuming and I spent most of my time at secondary school living in utter misery.

During this terrible time, I've got to admit my mother didn't help matters. I never told Cynthia about the bullying because I felt she had enough problems already, what with her ill health and having to bring up two children on her own. Compared to that, my problems seemed insignificant, and I didn't want to burden her. But there were definitely things she did to seriously undermine my street cred. I've never understood why parents behave as if they don't know what it's like to be a teenager and that their well-meaning advice is likely to go down like a lead balloon when applied to real life situations.

Case in point: my mother has always been a staunch feminist who refuses to kowtow to male ideals of beauty. As such, she refuses to shave her legs, armpits or pluck her eyebrows, and during my early teenage years, she insisted I do the same. If men weren't pressured to shave their bodies, she argued, then why should she? It was all about Girl Power, trying to make a statement, which is fine if you hang with a bohemian collective of artists, musicians and Yoga teachers. Not so fine if you attend a school where everyone's role model for beauty is Claudia Schiffer.

Georgina and her cronies had an utter field day when they found out my hairy secret in the changing rooms after P.E. and never stopped going on about it. They laughed and christened me the 'Devil's Daughter' on account of my eyebrows meeting ever so slightly in the middle. Even after I finally had the guts to stand up to Cynthia and get hold of a razor and pair of tweezers to ensure my skin was as smooth and hairless as a baby's bottom, the nickname stuck, and I'm still called it to this day.

"Jesus, did you ever see four such perfect tossers?" Amina hisses, watching as Georgina's group get seated in one of the booths. "Lorraine's got that G-string shoved so far up her arse she's walking on tiptoe." Grimacing, she pushes a stack of menus on me. "Here. You do it. Go and take their order."

I shake my head. "No way! I can't stand those guys. Why do I have to do it?"

“Because if I go, I’m likely to punch somebody’s lights out, and I need this job too much to give Georgina Wickham the satisfaction of getting me the sack. You know me, Jess. I’ve got a big mouth when it comes to arseholes and if they start anything with me, there’s going to be a bloodbath. So please, just do this, okay? You’ve got a better temperament than me. You can handle this.”

“Okay, okay,” I say. “I’ll do it, but if something bad happens, this is on you.” Discreetly, I sneak another glance through the beaded curtain. “To be fair, it’s mainly Georgina who’s the problem. Jack isn’t so bad.”

Amina’s eyes narrow. “Not so bad? Are you serious? Did you fall down and hit your head? Jack Parker is a complete and utter wanker.”

“No, he’s not. I think he’s nice. He’s not a bully like the others.”

“Ah. I see. You’re saying that because you fancy him.”

“I do not!”

“Listen, I’m not going to deny he’s sex on legs, but he’s still a wanker. Look who he hangs with. Look who his girlfriend is. Plus, I’ve heard that he sleeps around. He’s like a dog with two dicks. Don’t give him an easy pass just ’cos he’s hot and you fancy him.”

“I told you, I do not fancy him.”

“Yes, you do,” she laughs. “It’s written all over your face. So, you like a boy. Big deal. It’s okay to admit it, I won’t think any less of you. You can still be a feminist and want to give a man a blowjob.”

My cheeks flush. The truth is I do have a thing for Jack Parker. Always have done.

From the moment I laid eyes on him as an eleven-year-old, I've been nursing a monumental crush that simply won't die. I thought he was the most beautiful thing I'd ever seen. 'Hot' doesn't come close to describing the perfection of those chiselled features, dreamy blue eyes or that firm, muscular body that gets all the girls creaming in their knickers. Whenever I'm in his vicinity I get sort of tongue-tied and feverish and the only way to control my emotions is to keep at a safe distance. God help me if Georgina ever knew I was secretly crushing on her boyfriend.

Taking a deep breath to psych myself up, I step boldly onto the shop floor and enter the world of a '40s diner. A lifelong fan of vintage American culture, our boss Brian has really gone to town with the décor and no expense was spared to recreate this pretty time capsule. Sadly, that was about 20 years ago and now the pretty time capsule has stained carpets, faded furniture and a whiff of having seen better days.

As soon as I pass through the beaded curtain, my ears are serenaded by the sweet sound of the Cardigan's Lovefool playing on the stereo.

Lovefool? How ironic, given my hopeless fixation with Jack Parker.

Tentatively, I walk with purposeful strides towards the dreaded booth to face my nemesis, praying for my nerves not to get the better of me. Looking around, I see the diner is empty except for one old man drinking a cup of coffee by the window.

As I approach the booth, both girls start giggling and I feel a sick sensation in the back of my throat. All at once, the old feelings of inadequacy come flooding back and I'm almost paralysed with fear at the sight of Georgina's angelic face—that exquisite face that has haunted every one of my nightmares for the past eight years. Wearing a red NAF NAF jacket with a low-cut top and tight leather trousers, she looks gorgeous enough to give any of the super models a run for their money. It's just a shame her outward beauty only runs skin deep.

Come on, you can do this. You can do this...

No, actually, I can't.

Four blonde heads swivel in my direction, causing me to almost have a heart attack. Jack is looking directly at me, and I'm so overwhelmed by the attention, it's a struggle to meet his gaze. The beauty of the boy is astounding. Oh my God, oh my God. Breathe, breathe, breathe. Swiftly, my confidence evaporates and I'm back to being a frightened eleven-year-old again.

"Fuck, I didn't know the Devil's Daughter worked here," Lorraine hisses. "They must be really desperate for staff."

"Shhh!" Georgina giggles. "Don't be mean. Even the Devil's Daughter's got to work somewhere." Then, flashing a dazzling smile, she locks eyes with me. "Hello Jessica, it's so nice to see you again. How long has it been? Two years?"

"Yeah, something like that," I mumble, dropping the stack of menus in the middle of the table. "Um, can I take your drinks order?"

"What do you fancy, ladies?" Jack asks brightly. "Shall we get four Cokes?"

"Actually, I'll have an orange Fanta please," Thomas says. "I've gone off Coke lately."

"Hey Jessica, do you sell Devil's Food Cake?" Lorraine cackles. "If you do, then I'd like that for dessert!"

Georgina kicks her friend's leg under the table. "Don't be a bitch. Come on, let the poor girl do her job. If you keep on like that, you'll make her cry and we wouldn't want that, would we?"

“It was only a joke!” Lorraine fires back. “Can’t you take a joke?”

“Girls, girls, just stop it, okay?” Jack snaps. “Stop taking the piss. It isn’t funny anymore.” Turning, he treats me to the most heart-stopping smile I’ve ever seen. Kindness radiates from his face and I melt a little inside. “Sorry about that. Right, we’ll have three Cokes and one Fanta.”

“Cool,” I beam. “Cokes and Fanta. Got it.”

For a moment, his eyes travel over my body, before fixating intently on my chest. I blush. I’ve always had big boobs so you can’t exactly miss them. Truth be told, it’s not the first time I’ve caught Jack staring at them. Clearly, he likes what he sees. The sense of being appreciated makes me feel all warm inside.

Spluttering with rage, Georgina slams her fist on the table to get her boyfriend’s attention. “Jack!”

“What?” he says innocently. “What did I do?”

“You know damn well what. Just wait till we get home.” Looking up at me, she displays a dangerous smile I know so well. A smile that turns my skin cold. It’s the prelude to her sticking the knife in and sadly the victim in her sights is me.

“You know Jessica,” she drawls, “I’m really surprised to see you working somewhere like this. It’s so down market. To be honest, I’m shocked by how low you’ve sunk. You were always such a stuck-up little cow at school, I thought you’d be manager of Barclays Bank by now. Not to worry. Your mum used to work in Kwik Save so I really shouldn’t have expected you to do any better.”

Lorraine shrieks with laughter. “Oh Georgie, you’re so bad. Now you’ve gone and made the girl cry.”

My tears fall slowly, bitterly. I start to get palpitations. With a loud sob, I turn and scarper back to the kitchen like a frightened little mouse, wishing to God I had the guts to say something back to her, but it's as if I've been struck dumb. Years of having my confidence run into the ground has left me incapable of fighting my own corner the way I know I should. Years of verbal abuse from my classmates has trained me not to talk back and it's now so ingrained in my subconscious, it's built-in like muscle memory. I hate myself for being so weak, but it's like Georgina's evil aura has a way of sucking all my strength and leaving me a snivelling, quivering wreck.

"Hey lovely, what the hell happened?" Amina gasps when she sees the absolute state of me. "What did those bitches do to you?"

"I-I can't take this anymore," I wail. "Georgina hates me. I don't know why, but she does. She's just so fucking horrible, I can't do this anymore. Stop the world I want to get off."

"Right," she says through clenched teeth. "Have you got the twats' drinks order?"

"Uh-huh. Three Cokes, one Fanta." I wipe my nose on my sleeve.

"Okay, time to go Medieval." Thunderously, she grabs a tray from the stacking station and proceeds to fill four glasses with pop at the drinks' dispenser. "All right, now they're going to get it. An audience with the psychopathic bitch and her merry band of cunts, take two."

I laugh through my tears. I can't help it. Even when everything has turned to shit, Amina always gets me to see the funny side.

With a face like stone, she marches up to the booth and slams the tray on the table before whipping out her notepad.

“What food do you want? Be quick about it, I haven’t got all day.”

“Jesus Amina, what’s with you?” Georgina says with surprise. “Are you on your period or what? Take a chill pill, deep breaths and calm down.”

“I love that dress by the way,” Lorraine quips. “Are you going to a Halloween party?”

The boys exchange glances. A guilty grin spreads across Jack’s face.

Calmly, Amina takes a pencil from behind her ear and waves it menacingly at Lorraine. “See this? One more word out of you and I’ll shove it so far up your arse you’ll be shitting pencil shavings for the foreseeable future. So no more of your lip, okay? If you can’t play nice then you can all sling your hook. I’m not kidding. I’m in no mood to entertain your BS today.”

“Hey, hey!” Georgina waves her hands in a placatory gesture. “Wow Amina, what’s gotten into you? I thought we were supposed to be friends. Why are you behaving so hostile?”

“Because I don’t like what you did to my mate Jessica. You made her cry and that isn’t on. Like I said, if you lot are here to make trouble, then you can piss off back to the hole you crawled out from and find somewhere else to spread your misery.”

Lorraine’s mouth drops open in shock. Evidently, she’s never been spoken to like that before and is so taken aback, she doesn’t know what to say. I let out a quiet cheer.

Georgina’s face darkens. “Oh, for crying out loud, Jessica’s such a soppy cow. We were only playing around. Can’t she take a joke?”

“It wasn’t a joke, and you know it,” Amina shoots back. “You guys made her life hell

all throughout school so don't pretend to be all sweet and innocent. Now I repeat. Are you going to be nice today or what?"

"Look, we don't want any trouble," Jack cuts in, finally calling time on the dispute. "Please accept my apologies for the girls' behaviour. They can be so childish sometimes." He quickly scans his menu and hands it back. "Let's have four cheeseburgers with chips and a side serving of onion rings."

Amina scribbles down the order. "Cheeseburgers, chips, onions rings. Got it. How do you want your burgers?"

"Medium rare, please."

"Right, will that be all?"

"That will be all," Jack confirms with a nod. "And I'm sorry again for any trouble we've caused."

"It's not me you should be apologising to," she mutters as she storms back to the kitchen. "It's Jessica who deserves the apology, you complete bellend."

Four pairs of eyes shoot in my direction, and with a yelp, I dart out of view behind the beaded curtain and crouch down on the floor, my heart thumping so hard I can barely breathe. Jesus, Amina was magnificent. Jules Winnfield would have been proud.

## Page 3

*Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 3:31 am*

Jessica

The next morning, I go to the local corner shop to buy some groceries for my mother. As I approach the newspaper stand, I scan the covers of the Sunday tabloids. Dripping with double entendres and copious helpings of scandal, I never buy them but always read the headlines for a bit of a laugh. In our household, Cynthia is a committed Guardian reader and wouldn't be seen dead touching what she calls the 'sleazy red-tops.' I'm inclined to agree with her, however, on this occasion, one particular story catches my eye.

'I sold my virginity for ?250,000,' screams the headline of The Sunday Sport. Frowning, I step forward to take a closer look. The cover story features a photo of a stunning brunette wearing very little clothing, lips parted, cupping her breasts with a look that says, 'come hither.'

Wow, what an explosive headline. I've got to hand it to The Sunday Sport. They have featured some supremely crazy stories in the past but this one takes the biscuit.

For a second-long eternity, I gaze at the woman's heavily made-up face and let reality sink in. She sold her virginity for ?250,000. What the fuck? In one night, this lady made more than I'm ever likely to earn in my whole entire lifetime and all she had to do was have sex with someone who was willing to pay to be with her. Insane as it sounds, I admit to having a grudging admiration for her audaciousness and it does get me thinking.

All throughout my fundraising exploits, it never once occurred to me to enter the sex trade as a short-cut to success. Working as a waitress is good and honest work, but

the money isn't great and won't be paying for Mum's medical bills anytime soon. The astronomical sum this girl made from selling sex is jaw-dropping, but I know Mum would kill me if she ever thought I was considering selling my body for money. It would be like a knife in her heart because she has always had such big plans for me.

She wants me to go to university someday and do something academic with my life, something that makes use of my brains, so it would completely destroy her if she knew I was considering joining the world's oldest profession.

"Your body is your temple," she always says. "Never let a man take advantage." Oh, what to do, what to do...

Biting my lip, I stare down at *The Sunday Sport* again and wonder if I would ever have the guts to do something like that. I too am a virgin—not because I'm a prude or religious, or particularly sentimental—it's because I've never met a guy I liked enough to have sex with. Well, except for Jack Parker, but he's taken so that doesn't count.

Every time I've heard girls talking about their 'first time,' it always sounds like such an anti-climax and not particularly enjoyable. And nine times out of ten they nearly always end up breaking up with the boy, so would it really be so bad if my first time was with someone who paid me?

I wonder if I could do it. I wonder if I could spend a night with a complete stranger for money, someone who I wasn't in the least bit attracted to. Probably someone much older than me. It's such a moral conundrum. Would I be compromising my principles to go on the game? Sure, I'm nowhere near as pretty as this brunette, and doubt anybody would be willing to pay me £250,000, but I could try for say £50,000 to cover all of my mother's medical expenses.

Deep down, I've always had a bit of a soft spot for the sex industry (although I would never admit this to Cynthia). Ever since I watched Natalie Wood playing a stripper in the movie *Gypsy*, I've always felt there was an excitement and glamour to it that is hard to surpass. Escort or stripper, the idea of being the object of desire and earning a living from it is undeniably sexy. However, the truth is, it's probably just a naive daydream of mine that could never play out in reality. The world of Gypsy Rose Lee was always just a little fantasy, something I swore I would never act upon.

Until now.

Imagine that.

One night with a stranger could solve all my problems. One night with a stranger and afterwards I could get on with the rest of my life safe in the knowledge I managed to raise the funds required to save my mother's life. It would be just a one-off, not something I would continue to do on a regular basis; a secret deal to solve all our money worries and give Cynthia the cancer treatment she so desperately needs.

With rising excitement, I decide I need to know more, so I pick up a copy of *The Sunday Sport*, at the same time grabbing yesterday's *South London Herald* to cover up my embarrassment. Mr Kumar who runs the newsagent is a good friend of the family and God knows what he'll make of me buying this paper which treads the line of soft porn. He's known me since I was ten and probably still thinks I'm all sweet and innocent. Sadly, that illusion is about to be shattered.

Somewhat sheepishly, I enter the shop and hastily browse the aisles in search of milk, bread and sugar. After I've filled my basket, I take my purchases up to the till and grab a couple of penny sweets to tide me over as I forgot to eat breakfast this morning.

Funnily enough, Mr Kumar barely bats an eyelid as he runs the newspapers through

the till and keeps the conversation light by making jokes and asking me to pass his regards to my mother and Freddie.

Thank God for that.

Breathing a sigh of relief, I leave the shop and head for Clapham Common to get some privacy to read the story in peace. It's a Sunday and the place is packed with families wanting to catch a bit of that ever-elusive British sunshine. After walking aimlessly for a couple of minutes, I finally retreat to a secluded clearing dappled with lights and shadows where I find a nice bench to sit on. Confident that there's no one around, I unfold the newspaper and eagerly dive into the story.

It says that a twenty-something woman called Vanessa Taylor from Stoke used the services of an escort agency to set up an auction to sell off her virginity. Following a heated bidding war, a successful businessman (who the paper refuses to name) secured Vanessa's affections for the princely sum of ?250,000. What follows is a toe-curling description of their night of passion at a Mayfair hotel and I pretty much skim the rest. Their sexual shenanigans are of no interest to me, but at least I've got the information I wanted—namely, how to go about selling off my virginity. Quietly, I fold up the newspaper and put it to one side.

So, it seems I'll need to find myself an escort agency...

I'm no expert in these matters, but one thing I know is that for the kind of fee I'm looking for, it will need to be one of the high-end ones. Somewhere located in the West End.

For a long time, I remain frozen on the park bench, battling with my conscience, agonising about which road to take. Could I really cross the Rubicon and do something that might change my life forever? In my head, I pick apart the pros and cons.

Pros: obviously, saving my mother's life. Cons: somebody might find out and I'll never live it down. Then there's the potential long term psychological damage. What if after I've committed the deed, I regret what I did? What if I'm traumatised by the experience? Could I ever live with myself?

In the end, I decide to leave it to fate and toss a coin. Reaching in my jacket pocket, I pull out a 50 pence piece. Okay. Heads I do, Tails I don't.

Heart thudding, I throw the coin in the air and catch it in my palm.

Heads. All right. Let's do this.

Opening my copy of The South London Herald, I flip to the back pages to view the 'Classified' section. This is where people advertise everything from second-hand clothes and furniture to unwanted pet supplies. It's also the place where premium rate sex lines, dubious 'modelling' jobs and escort agencies are displayed.

In no time at all, I spy an ad that looks promising.

'Models Wanted: Premiere Ladies Escort Agency offers high-class introductions for elite gentlemen seeking the very best in female companionship.'

Well, for ?50,000 I'll certainly be needing an introduction to an 'elite gentleman,' so this Premiere Ladies place sounds like just the ticket. Also, the telephone number has an '0171' area code, suggesting the agency is based somewhere in Inner London, which gives another brownie point in my book.

Hurriedly, I pack up my stuff and go in search of somewhere private to make the call. Ten minutes later, I'm standing in a red telephone box in a secluded area of woodland on the east side of Clapham Common. All around is tranquil and quiet, just the way I like it.

Suddenly, a cute grey squirrel darts out from the hedgerows and stalls just outside the phone booth. Smiling, I knock on the glass to get its attention. Frightened, the creature disappears back into the undergrowth. My heart melts. I love animals and relish seeing them in the wild, something you don't get an awful lot of living in the city.

Tentatively, I lift the black telephone receiver, put some coins in the slot and dial the number. As I wait for the call to connect, I fleetingly remember it's a Sunday and wonder if the agency will even be open as most businesses are closed.

After two rings, a lady with a cut-glass accent picks up. "Hello, Premiere Ladies Escort Agency."

My pulse quickens. Shit, I'm so nervous I'm getting tongue-tied.

"Hello?" the woman repeats, sounding slightly irritable. "Anybody there?"

Tucking a hair behind my ear, I clear my throat and finally muster the courage to speak. "Um, hello. I saw your ad in The South London Herald, and I just wanted to make some enquiries, you know, about how to join your agency."

"Have you ever done this sort of work before?"

"No, but I do know what it involves. I mean, I know it's not just going for dinner and stuff. I know what's expected of me..." My voice trails off. Fuck, I'm blabbering so much crap.

"Do you have a portfolio you could send me? Any headshots? I don't normally book an appointment without first seeing some photographs. I need to know if you'll be a good fit for us."

“No, I’m sorry. I don’t have any photographs.”

There’s a short silence. I’m sweating buckets. Have I blown it already?

“What’s your name?” the lady resumes calmly.

“Jessica Gardner.”

“How old are you?”

“Nineteen.”

“What dress size?”

“Eight.”

“What height?”

“5ft 9.”

“Hair colour, eyes?”

“Brown hair, brown eyes.”

“Long hair or short?”

“Long hair.”

“Are you pretty?”

The question catches me off guard, and for a moment, I don’t know what to say. I’ve

never been one to blow my own trumpet and I'm not sure what the correct response should be. If I say 'yes,' will that sound egotistical? Cynthia always taught me never to boast about my appearance because it cultivates the wrong type of qualities in a woman.

"Are you pretty?" she repeats with a note of exasperation. "Come, come, no false modesty. Be honest. Do men look at you? Do you turn heads?"

"Um, yes, I suppose so," I reply. "I would say I'm pretty. Yes."

"Where are you based? I mean, where do you live?"

"Clapham."

There's another short pause, and I hear her shuffling through paperwork, then she returns to the phone: "Okay look, I don't normally do this without first seeing pictures, but I like the sound of your voice, so I'm prepared to give you an appointment for six o'clock this evening. Can you make it?"

My brows snap together. "Wow! Six o'clock this evening?"

"Yes. We're based in Kensington. If you have a pen and a piece of paper, I'll give you the address. Make sure you arrive promptly as we don't tolerate tardiness."

"Yes, of course, I'll be on time, I promise." Ruffling through my bag, I fish out a biro and scribble the address on the back of a tattered Sloppy Joe's leaflet. "Great! Okay, so I'll see you at six pm."

"Six pm and don't be late."

With a cry of elation, I hang up the receiver and step outside the phone booth, my

body tingling with nervous excitement. My stomach roils. God, how am I going to survive until this evening? What will I wear? How will I style my hair? I need to pull out all the stops and make a good impression. I need this to be perfect.

Glancing at my watch, I suddenly realise it's well gone eleven-thirty. Shit. Mum will be wondering where I've got to as I still have to take these groceries home. Slinging my bag over my shoulder, I turn on my heel and head in the direction of the main footpath that leads back to Terrapin Road.

I spend the rest of the afternoon in a kind of daze. Following my usual Sunday routine, I do a little spring cleaning around the flat, play Jenga with Freddie and help him construct a robot out of cardboard for a school project, but it's hard for me to concentrate on anything as all I can think about is this six o' clock appointment. By lunchtime, I'm so on edge I can hardly hold any food down.

"Darling aren't you hungry?" my mother asks as the three of us sit eating homemade Chicken Chow Mein off a picnic blanket on the living room floor which serves as our makeshift dining table. "Are you having trouble using the chopsticks again? Would you like me to get you a fork?"

"No, it's not the chopsticks. I'm actually getting pretty good at using them now."

"Then what's wrong? You seem so distracted today."

"Would I be able to borrow some of your make-up?" I blurt. "I'm going out tonight so I thought I might put on a bit of lippy and mascara, nothing too fancy."

Cynthia's face lights up. "You're going out? Where to?"

"Just down the pub with Amina. No big deal."

“Amina? Isn’t that the nice girl you work with? She’s phoned here a couple of times for you, hasn’t she?”

“Uh-huh, that’s right. We’re just going for a couple of drinks. It probably won’t be a late one.”

“Oh, how nice for you. It’s great to hear the two of you are getting close, which makes sense as you’ve worked together for such a long time. Amina always sounds so polite on the phone. And of course, you can borrow my make-up, help yourself to anything you want, though I must warn you, some of the bottles of foundation are ancient and have probably dried up.”

“Thanks! I might give the dry foundation a miss, but if you’ve got some lipstick and powder, that will be great.” Casting my eyes downwards, I focus back on my plate. I can hear the excitement in my mother’s voice, and find it sort of endearing. She worries I spend too much time on my own and always says I need to have more of a social life. She’s always on at me to go out and meet people, so the news of this girly night out with Amina is like music to her ears. Of course, I’m not really going to the pub. That’s just the cover story. I’m not proud of myself for lying to her, but it’s got to be done. I simply cannot tell her the truth. If she knew I was going for an interview at an escort agency there’s little doubt she’d tear me a new arsehole.

At three-thirty I start to get ready. Standing in front of my wardrobe, I wonder what the heck I’m going to wear tonight as I don’t really do sexy. My dress sense is more what you would describe as offbeat and quirky and presumably not the sort of clothing escorts wear. Hurriedly, I begin rummaging through the drawers, trying to find something appropriately demure and alluring.

As always, my bedroom looks as if a bomb hit it, partially because it’s so small there’s nowhere to put anything so everything ends up on the floor. The bed is piled high with clothing and on the walls are posters of The Spice Girls, Brad Pitt and

Juliette Lewis. There's also a cheap reprint of Hokusai's The Great Wave (my attempt to throw in a little artistic self-expression).

In the end, I settle on a long dress in blue-and-white tie dye print, with spaghetti straps and a scooped neckline. I finish off the look with a studded leather jacket and a pair of brown wedged heels. It's not exactly the height of sophistication but it will have to do. At such short notice, I'm just grateful to have found something remotely workable. Finally, I go to my mum's room and put on a little powder, bright red lipstick, mascara and blusher. I don't usually wear make-up so I'm not exactly an expert, but I feel the amount I've applied works to enhance my features. Once more, it will just have to do.

Pursing my lips, I stare at my reflection and wonder what the evening has in store for me. What will happen at this interview? Somewhere deep inside, a voice is telling me that after today, things will never be the same again, and I find the thought sort of scary. Am I seriously ready to do this? Am I completely out of my mind?

Around four-thirty, I say goodbye to Mum and Freddie and head for the bus stop located opposite Clapham Common Tube Station. I don't have to wait long and very soon I'm seated on a bus heading in the direction of Old Brompton Road. Outside, the sky is already growing dark and there's a slight chill to the air that suggests it might rain. I hope not, as I forgot to bring my umbrella.

Forty minutes later, I arrive at South Kensington, an upmarket area of London I'm not particularly familiar with, although I do remember coming here once or twice as a child to visit the Natural History Museum. As soon as I get off the bus, I immediately pull out my tattered old A to Z to find the precise location of Premiere Ladies. After a couple of false starts and wrong turns, I finally reach Troubadour Street, a quiet road lined with beautiful white stucco-fronted terraces from the Georgian era.

Glancing again at the address I have scribbled down on the leaflet, I see that I'm

looking for number 66. Crossing the road to the even numbered properties, I walk for another two minutes and then stop outside a grand pillared entrance.

Here it is: 66 Troubadour Street.

Right on time too.

Nervously, I climb the stone steps to the door and press the buzzer on the Intercom. A few seconds pass before I hear a low crackling noise and then a woman's voice.

"Hello, Premiere Ladies Escort Agency."

"Um, hi," I squeak. "My name's Jessica Gardner. I'm here for my six o'clock appointment."

"Come on up. We're based on the second floor."

The buzzer sounds to release the door and I enter an opulent entrance hall. A crystal chandelier protrudes from the ceiling and the carefully placed furniture looks antique and expensive. Smoothing down my dress, I trudge up two flights of stairs to the second-floor landing. As I walk, my footfalls sound hollow and there's an eerie sense that the entire building is empty except for me and the lady who spoke on the Intercom.

At last, I reach a door with a brass plaque outside that reads: Premiere Ladies Escort Agency.

Taking a deep breath, I turn the handle and step timidly into a luxurious office with regal furniture and high ceilings. Over by the window, gazing at the London skyline, stands a tall, handsome-faced woman in her early sixties. She is dressed in a beautifully tailored suit and her statuesque figure suggests that she may have once

done modelling in her youth.

As soon as I enter, she glances sideways and gives a warm, accommodating smile. “Hi, I’m Jane Waters. We spoke on the phone.”

“Hi! I’m Jessica,” I reply shyly. “Pleased to meet you.”

Still smiling, Jane moves towards a large circular desk in the middle of the room and I’m about to follow her and take a seat, when she suddenly raises her hand. “No, please remain standing. I want to take a proper look at you.”

Taken aback by the forcefulness in her voice, I stand to attention and watch helplessly as she opens one of the desk drawers and retrieves a packet of wet wipes. Pulling out two, she turns and fixes me with piercing grey eyes. Slowly, she steps towards me, her gaze travelling from my head to my toes, drinking in every curve of my body and appraising me in the way a man would.

She stops just a few inches from my face, then reaches out and proceeds to use the wet wipes to remove all of my make-up. When she has finished doing a thorough job of it, she takes off my jacket and throws it over a chair. Then, clasping her hands behind her back, she slowly circles me like a predator sizing up its prey, taking her time to continue her appraisal. My body trembles. I’ve never felt so on edge. The suspense is killing me.

At last, she looks me in the eye and murmurs, “You should never wear too much make-up. Remember, in this business, less is more. If you look like a harlot, you’ll be treated like one. Always keep it classy, understood?”

“Y-yes.”

“Good. Now take a seat and we shall begin.”

Sagging with relief, I follow her to the desk and take a seat opposite. For a moment, Jane doesn't say anything, then she presses her perfectly manicured fingers together and tilts her head to one side. "So, Jessica Gardner, you want to be an escort, do you?"

"Yes," I nod eagerly. "Only...well, see, the thing is, I don't intend to make this permanent." My voice trails off as I struggle to find the words. "What I mean is, I want this to be a one-off, if you know what I mean."

The woman looks confused. "A one-off? What on earth do you mean?"

"Sorry, I'm not explaining myself very well." I stare at the floor, floundering. "Okay, what I mean is, I don't want to become an escort permanently. Currently, I work as a waitress, and I intend to keep that as my main job. I only plan to do this escorting thing as a one-off venture. Earlier today, I saw a story in the newspaper about a girl who sold her virginity for ?250,000, so I thought...I thought that maybe I could try for ?50,000."

"And you want me to broker the deal?"

"Yes."

Jane bursts out laughing. "You must think very highly of yourself."

"No, actually I don't," I say with quiet dignity. "Quite the opposite, in fact. I don't think I'm anything special. But I do know I've got to get ?50,000 because that's the amount my mother needs for her cancer treatment. We're not exactly loaded and there's no other way for people like us to get that kind of money. So, I'm asking for ?50,000, nothing more, nothing less."

"You do realise that not everything you read in the papers is true?"

“Are you saying that the story is fabricated? That it didn’t happen?”

“No, that’s not what I’m saying. But there may have been certain embellishments, especially if it was in one of the tabloids...”

“Am I wasting my time being here, then? Are you saying you can’t help me?”

“Not necessarily. Wait, I’m thinking...”

There’s a long, tense silence. Under the table, my knees are knocking. Holy Mother. Have I royally fucked this up?

“Are you really a virgin?” Jane asks.

“Yes.”

“You’ve never done anything with a boy?”

“No.”

“Not even a kiss?”

“No, not even a kiss, nothing,” I say. “It’s just never happened for me.”

“Oh, come on. There must have been some near misses.”

“No, I’m telling you, I haven’t done anything. My mother has been sick for a long time, so I had to grow up fast. I had so much on my plate, taking care of the house, looking after my little brother, I just never really had the time for boys. Plus, I just never found anyone I liked enough to want to sleep with.”

“All right, you’ve convinced me. Goodness gracious. A virgin in this business is something of a rarity these days...” Jane scratches the side of her mouth. “Okay, look, I’ll be frank with you. What you’re asking for is unheard of. 750,000 is an extraordinary sum of money to pay for one night, even for our well-heeled clientele, and far, far higher than what my regular girls command, so I can’t make any promises.” She pauses and taps her fingers on the table. “Having said that, you, my girl, are stunning, so there’s no question your offer will attract a considerable amount of interest. Without a doubt, you are drop-dead gorgeous—a little rough around the edges, perhaps, but nothing we couldn’t fix with the right clothes. With my help, I could easily make you the Belle of the Ball.”

My heart starts to sing. “Um, wow. Thank you for the compliment...”

“There’s no need to be coy, Jessica. You’re beautiful and I think you know it. You have the face of an angel. Your body is breath-taking. But I also like your honesty, your sweet and unassuming air, and I think many of our clients will too. A word of advice. Never change your personality. It’s one of the things that adds to your charm and places you head-and-shoulders above the rest.”

“Thanks, I don’t know what to say.”

“Then say nothing at all. As the adage goes, better to remain silent and be thought a fool than to speak and remove all doubt.”

I laugh nervously. I’m not quite sure what to make of that comment.

“All right,” Jane says, pulling out a leather-bound diary. “Leave this with me. Right up front, I’ll tell you that I take a twenty-per-cent cut of everything you earn, okay?” I nod silently. She continues: “So listen, I have a few lines of inquiry I’d like to explore. Give me two days and I’ll call you as soon as I have an update. By the way, can I have your telephone number for my records?”

“No, wait! I’m sorry, but you can’t call my house phone. I don’t want my mother to know about any of this. If it’s okay, can I call you instead? Could we arrange a day and time and I’ll make contact with you?”

Her mouth quirks upwards. “Of course, whatever works for you, I’m happy to accommodate. Call me at six pm on Wednesday evening and we’ll take it from there.”

“Brilliant!” Beaming, I get to my feet in preparation to leave.

“Hold it.” Jane opens the desk drawer and produces a Polaroid camera. “Are you okay for me to take some pictures of you? You didn’t bring a portfolio, and in this business, photos are so important. It will help speed things up if I’ve got something to show our clients.”

“Sure! You can take some pictures, no problem.”

Briskly, she snaps a couple of headshots, and then finally, we shake hands and say our goodbyes. As I walk to the door, Jane puts her hand on my shoulder, and I see a subtle softness in her eyes.

“I’m sorry to hear about your mother, by the way. Sorry to hear she’s sick. Your motive for wanting this money is truly commendable and I want you to know that I will do everything in my power to find a suitable match.”

“Thanks, that means a lot,” I murmur, touched by her sudden show of warmth. Perhaps she’s not such an Ice Queen after all. With a final wave, I leave the building and head for the bus stop and home. It starts to rain, and I curse myself for forgetting my umbrella.

I spend the next two days on pins and needles, counting down the hours until I can

make contact with Jane again to find out my fate. I've never felt so nervous about anything in my life, and I keep playing out different scenarios in my head over and over. First off, I wonder if there will be any takers. Have I asked for too much money? Will this all be a huge waste of time and come to a big fat nothing?

Then, assuming she does find someone, I wonder what kind of person he will be. Will he be kind and patient, or will he be a plonker? What will he look like? Will I find him remotely attractive, or will he be physically repellent?

What age will he be? Will he be someone much older, someone with lots of sexual experience or will he be a virginal, trainspotting, anorak-wearing weirdo? Will he be married? Single? Will he have children? What sort of job would he do? A banker? A film producer? A wealthy sheikh? A member of the British aristocracy? My mind boggles with the possibilities and by the time Wednesday comes, my brain is completely fried.

"Just popping to the shops for a carton of orange juice," I call to Cynthia as I sneak out the front door. "Do you need anything?"

"Ooh, could you pick me up some bananas? Freddie says he'd like bananas and custard for pudding tonight."

"Sure, no problem. I won't be long. See you guys soon."

It's approaching ten to six as I walk through the gathering shadows towards a phone booth located around the corner from my estate. As I draw near, I'm irritated to find it's already in use and the girl inside doesn't show any signs of hanging up anytime soon. Pacing up and down outside, I try to remain calm, glancing at my watch every so often as the seconds tick by. Come on, come on, I haven't got all day...

At last, the girl puts down the receiver and vacates at one minute to six.

Thank God!

Hastily, I jump inside the phone booth and dial Jane's number. My throat feels dry. I have butterflies in my tummy. Please pick up, please pick up...

After four rings, Jane's husky voice comes on the line and my feelings of tension melt away. "Hello, Premiere Ladies..."

"Hello, Miss Waters," I say. "It's Jessica Gardner here. You told me to phone?"

"Ah, yes, Jessica! So glad you called. I have good news. We have had some interest and you, my girl, have a date this coming Saturday."

"Really? Oh. My. God. Thank you, thank you!" I punch the air in victory. I simply cannot believe it. Somebody has agreed to pay the \$50,000. This doesn't seem real. Could my problems really be over so quickly? My next few sentences come out in a flurry. "So who is he? Where am I meeting him? How does this thing work?"

"I'm afraid I'm not at liberty to discuss that over the phone. I would much rather see you in person. Come to my office at three pm on Saturday and we'll take it from there. Oh, and bring an overnight bag, pack your toothbrush, a change of clothes, that sort of thing."

"Can't you tell me anything at all?" I ask excitedly. "I'm dying to know more!"

"I'm sorry, but it wouldn't be appropriate to speak about it over the phone. Our clients cherish their privacy, and I would never do anything to compromise our impeccable reputation. However, I promise all will be revealed very soon. Now are we on for Saturday, or what?"

"Yes! A hundred per cent!"

“Good. See you at three pm then. Don’t be late.” The line goes dead.

Flustered, I put the receiver back in the cradle and run my fingers through my hair. I grin stupidly. Shit. I can’t fucking believe it. She actually found someone willing to pay half the price of a house to spend the night with me. Oh my gosh!

This is too good to be true.

## Page 4

*Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 3:31 am*

Jessica

At three o'clock on Saturday afternoon, I arrive outside 66 Troubadour Street carrying an overnight bag and some homemade peanut butter sandwiches to tide me over until this evening. Never expect a free lunch, Cynthia always says, so I've ensured I have enough to eat to quell my grumbling tummy. When I enter Jane's office, I find her sitting behind her desk sifting through stacks of important looking documents. She flashes a half smile and gestures for me to be seated.

"Hello Jessica, how are you?"

"I'm good. A little nervous, perhaps."

"Don't be. Everything will be fine, I promise."

"So, um..." I brush a stray hair out my face. "Are you able to tell me more about my date tonight?"

Jane peers at her watch. "Yes. In about an hour, a lady called Beatrix Kingswood will be coming to pick you up. You will then be chauffeur-driven to her son Alex's 21st birthday party. The plan is for you to spend the night in Claremont Hall, their fabulous home in Surrey. I haven't personally been there, but I've seen pictures of it and the place looks amazing."

I raise my eyebrows. "Wait, you say I'm being taken to her son's birthday party?"

"Yes. For want of a better word, you are his birthday present. Oh, and you are under

strict instructions from Mrs Kingswood not to let on to Alex that you are being paid to be there. Under no circumstances must her son know that your presence there is anything other than by chance. You must behave as naturally as you can and whatever happens between the two of you after dinner must appear to be genuine.”

For a moment, I’m struck dumb. I can’t believe what I’m hearing.

On the one hand, I’m relieved my first sexual experience is going to be with someone closer to my own age. At twenty-one, Alex Kingswood is only a little older than me, so that is at least some consolation. However, I find it deeply disturbing that a mother would behave in this way towards her child. When I think of my own mother’s circle of friends, I can’t imagine a single one that would be happy to pay for their son to take a girl’s virginity as some sort of bizarre birthday gift. It just seems plain weird and more than a bit creepy. What sort of a parent is Mrs Kingswood? Who in their right mind would hire a prostitute for their son’s birthday? A complete weirdo, that’s who. Ah well, Amina always said the wealthy are not like the rest of us, and I think she’s right. In the words of Jim Morrison, (rich) people are strange.

“Who am I supposed to be then?” I ask.

“Come again?” Jane frowns.

“Well, you said you want me to behave naturally, Alex mustn’t know that I’m an escort. When I get to this party, who am I supposed to be exactly? I don’t exactly talk posh, do I?”

“Mrs Kingswood says you must pretend to be the daughter of her old friend Douglas. Don’t worry, she will give you all the details when you see her. But Jessica, there’s something else I need to discuss with you.” She pushes a contract towards me.

“What’s this?”

“It’s a Confidentiality Agreement. It was drafted by Mrs Kingswood’s lawyers. Before you meet Alex this evening, she has insisted you sign it so that she can be assured you will not speak a word to anyone about what happens tonight.”

“Sure,” I say. “I have no problem signing it. I mean, who would I want to tell anyway? I’m as keen as she is to keep this thing private. It’s not exactly something I want to broadcast to the world.” Briefly, I scan the legal jargon and then happily put my signature at the bottom. I also fill out a separate form with my bank details so that the money can be transferred accordingly.

“Okay, all set,” I smile, putting down my pen. “What happens now?”

Jane grins mysteriously. Silently, she leaves the room and returns carrying a tight black Versace dress made of silk and lycra with a plunging neckline and a pair of high-heeled Louboutins.

I cover my mouth. I have never seen such beautiful clothing. “Oh my goodness, do you really want me to wear that?”

“Yes, didn’t I tell you I was going to make you the Belle of the Ball?” She points to a vintage tri-folding divider in the corner of the room. “You can get dressed over there. Now hurry, we haven’t got long before Mrs Kingswood gets here. I want everything to be perfect for her arrival.”

Hastily, I gather up the clothes and race behind the divider to get changed. Ten minutes later, I emerge feeling stiff and a little unsure of myself. The Versace dress clings to my curves like a second skin and I’m not used to wearing something so tight and revealing. However, I’ve got to admit the Louboutins are surprisingly comfortable to wear, considering how high the heels are.

“Ravishing, simply ravishing,” Jane gushes. “You look even better than I thought you

would. You could pass for a princess. That dress is simply divine on you.”

Lowering my lashes, I bow my head and smile shyly. I find her flattery hard to take but it helps my confidence to grow. Opening her desk drawer, she produces a black jewellery case and walks over to me. I watch with bated breath as she flips open the case to reveal a delicate diamond necklace with a matching pair of earrings inside.

“These are on loan,” she says sternly, “but you can wear them just for tonight. Guard them with your life. They are worth a fortune, and I need you to return them. I’ll send over a courier to pick them up from you tomorrow afternoon.”

I nod dumbly.

Carefully, Jane slips on the necklace and earrings and then gathers my hair into a chignon, securing it with an antique diamond pin. The transformation is complete.

“Are you ready to see yourself now?” she whispers.

“Y-yes,” I reply.

“Close your eyes and don’t open them until I tell you to.” Gently, she takes my hand and leads me over to the full-length mirror propped against the wall. “Okay, you can open them now.”

I gasp when I see my reflection. Wow, I look like a completely different person, so cool, so sophisticated. I can’t believe that’s me. Oh my God, I feel like Audrey Hepburn in *My Fair Lady*.

“Do you like what you see?” Jane purrs.

“Yes,” I nod. “I like it very much! These clothes are so lovely, I can’t believe that’s

actually me.”

“Good, now put this on, we need to be quick, the car will be here soon.” Carefully, she helps me into a pale pink cape made of finest cashmere and then finally, passes me a pretty black handbag to complete the fabulous ensemble. Suddenly, the doorbell rings. “That will be Hobbs, Mrs Kingswood’s chauffeur. Come on, time to go.”

My pulse is thudding like a machine gun as I follow Jane downstairs to the hall. Jesus Christ, this is it. She unlatches the door, and we are greeted by a tall, sallow-faced man dressed in a black chauffeur’s uniform. His eyes look strangely haunted, like a soldier just returned from war who has witnessed horrendous atrocities on the battlefield. I wonder fleetingly what happened in his past to make him look that way.

“I’m here to collect Miss Gardner,” he says quietly. “Mrs Kingswood is waiting in the car.”

“This is she,” Jane replies, gesturing to me.

“Very good. Walk this way, ma’am.”

“Remember what I said. Be natural.” She gives my arm a little squeeze. “Good luck.”

“Thanks, I think I’ll need it,” I whisper back. Hesitantly, I follow the chauffeur outside to a waiting black Rolls Royce. Politely, he opens the car door for me to get in and I find myself sitting next to an elegantly dressed woman in her mid-fifties. She has short black hair, deathly white skin and a careworn face that looks prematurely aged. Her expensive clothes hang loosely on her body which is so painfully thin I wonder if she is afflicted by some sort of eating disorder.

Forcing a smile, I put out my hand. “Hi, I’m Jessica.”

“How do you do,” she replies, giving me a limp handshake, “I’m Beatrix Kingswood.”

“Pleased to meet you.”

The car starts moving and the sudden jolt reminds me to clip on my seatbelt. For a long time neither of us says anything. Mrs Kingswood remains rigid, staring straight ahead as if in a trance. This, together with the total lack of interaction between her and the driver Hobbs, leaves me feeling nervous. Just what have I gotten myself into?

Gripped with unease, I stare out the window and watch as Kensington’s museums, embassies and elegant Victorian terraces transform into non-descript high rise estates as we move towards the outer London suburbs.

Sometime later, the view gives way to a picturesque landscape of woods and meadows. It truly is a marvel. The Surrey countryside is a jubilee of natural beauty filled with old churches, stately homes and quaint little hamlets that give one the sense of entering a world from days gone by.

As nice as the view is, I can’t help feeling a little nauseous. I often get travel sick plus my stomach keeps growling as I haven’t eaten since this morning and forgot to bring my sandwiches when I switched handbags. Worst of all, the chilly vibes coming from Mrs Kingswood are growing unbearable and I cannot wait to reach our destination, if only to break the sombre atmosphere. I just don’t get it. We’re supposed to be going to her son Alex’s birthday party, which should be a cause for celebration, but she acts as if someone’s died. It’s so peculiar. This is a birthday party not a funeral for God’s sake.

After what seems forever, we finally pass a sign that reads: ‘Welcome to Grimschurch.’ Hobbs takes us off the main road and we enter a charming village comprised of cobbled streets, independent shops and pretty chocolate-box cottages.

Then we ascend a hill and after about ten minutes, cruise through a pair of tall entrance gates and up a sweeping driveway, where a beautiful eighteenth-century manor house set in rolling Surrey parkland comes into view.

“Just to let you know, Jessica,” Mrs Kingswood says suddenly, breaking the deadlock. “If Alex asks, you are the daughter of my old friend Douglas who works for a large oil company. For the past few years, you have been living abroad and only recently returned to the U.K. having spent time travelling around Africa. If Alex asks about your education, tell him you went to various international schools because your family moved around a lot. Do you understand?”

“Oh, yes of course,” I reply. “I lived in Africa, went to international school, father is called Douglas. Got it.” Fuck, I hope I’ll be able to remember all of this. I hate telling lies and this all just seems so...so shady. Poor Alex. What kind of a mother would do this to her son? For a moment, I contemplate turning back and going home. This is all so weird, I am not sure I want to be part of this deception anymore; it seems so cruel. If you’re going to hire a working girl for your son’s pleasure at least have the decency to tell him the truth so that he knows what he’s getting into. Why all the secrecy?

I have so many questions I want to ask but know it wouldn’t be appropriate. So I just stay bitterly silent with my arms folded. My head is telling me something isn’t right, to get out this car right now and run for the hills. But then I think of my mother and how great it will be to have that ?50,000 for her medical treatment, and I force myself to go on.

Five minutes later, Hobbs pulls up in front of the grand main entrance and we get out. As I follow Mrs Kingswood up the magnificent stone steps, I gaze upwards at the sprawling property and marvel at its size and the beauty of the architecture. It’s so big, my God, you could fit three Terrapin Road estates in there. I can’t believe this is home to just one family or that they own this much land. Rich people certainly live in a different world, requiring enormous rooms and huge swathes of space whilst

consigning the rest of us to live in matchboxes by comparison.

And then an odd thing strikes me.

From the second I stepped out the Rolls, something didn't sit right with me, but I couldn't put my finger on it. Now I realise what it is. Everywhere is oddly silent. No sound of life anywhere. We are in the middle of the countryside, surrounded by a thick belt of trees, yet there are no rustling leaves, no wind, no nothing. There's not even birdsong, let alone the patter of a rabbit or squirrel. It's like someone has turned down the volume on everything, like we have vacated the world of the living and entered some bizarre parallel universe of silence. It's an eerie sensation, almost uncanny, and I'm not sure I like it.

Nevertheless, against my better judgement, I continue following Mrs Kingswood up the steps into the house where we are met in the hall by an old woman who is introduced to me as Mrs Bullivant, the housekeeper. With her gaunt face and hunted eyes, she too has the peculiar air of one who has survived some cataclysmic event that has left its indelible mark on her. It's as if Mrs Kingswood and her staff are living in purgatory, or like they are in constant fear of some hidden, unnameable foe.

After taking our coats, the housekeeper leads us silently through the house towards the dining room and I take the opportunity to admire the stunning interiors. Gold leaf adorns every high doorway; crystal chandeliers hang from the ceilings and the walls are covered with High Renaissance art that must be worth a fortune. Each room is enormous and contain exquisite, oversized furniture covered with sculptures of gilded bronze, reminding me of the sort of thing you might find in the palace of King Louis XIV. Claremont Hall is without doubt the loveliest house I have ever seen, yet just below the surface, I sense a dark atmosphere, like a shark waiting to strike beneath a sea of tranquil waters.

At last, we enter a spectacular dining room and the housekeeper seats Mrs

Kingswood and I together at one end of a long table. Staring down the never-ending expanse of oak, I notice far at the head is an empty high-backed chair. I wonder briefly if this is meant for the Birthday Boy to give him a sense of being king for the day.

“Are you hungry?” Mrs Kingswood asks.

“Yes,” I reply.

“Mrs Bullivant, please could we have some soup?”

“Yes ma’am.”

Once the old woman has gone, the two of us slip into the uncomfortable silence of strangers. My mind goes completely blank, and I struggle to strike up a conversation. It doesn’t help that Mrs Kingswood seems totally disinterested in me. She doesn’t want to make small talk or get to know me. Clearly, this is strictly about business and very little else.

“What time are the other guests getting here?” I venture. “What time does the party start?”

She cocks an eyebrow. “What other guests?”

“Jane, that is, Miss Waters from the agency told me that this is your son Alex’s 21st birthday party, so I assumed there would be other people coming.”

“No, there are no other guests,” Mrs Kingswood clarifies brusquely. “It’s just you and me and Alex. That’s it. No one else is coming unless you want to include the domestic help.”

“Oh. Okay.”

“Does that bother you?”

“Er, no, not really. It’s just I was told one thing and it’s turned out not to be what I thought. But like I said, it’s fine.”

There’s an uncomfortable pause. I can hear a distant clock ticking somewhere in the house. Jesus, I can’t wait for this night to be over. Everything is just so weird and creepy, the truth is I really don’t want to be here anymore. I mean, who has a birthday party with three people in attendance, one of whom is paid to be here? Dammit, I thought I was strange but even I can see how odd this set-up is.

And that’s when I feel it. A sudden drop in temperature; an icy burst of air that seems to come out of nowhere and soon the room is so cold my breath is visible. It’s like someone has opened a massive fridge and let all the heat out.

Then I notice Mrs Kingswood’s hands are shaking. Nervously, she glances up and I follow her gaze to where an enormous man dressed in black is standing in the doorway. The blood freezes in my veins. Every hair on my neck stands up. My jaw drops and for a moment, my body is gripped by almost indescribable terror.

He is extremely tall and powerfully built, with tanned skin, black, shoulder-length hair and designer clothes that are well-tailored and clearly expensive. But his face—my God, his face is absolutely terrifying. I’ve never seen anything like it. It’s hard to put your finger on one specific thing that’s wrong, because it’s pretty much everything. I can only describe it as the personification of evil.

His forehead is deeply furrowed and etched in a constant frown, punctuated by thick, bushy eyebrows. He has high cheekbones, an imposing hooked nose with large nostrils and a chiselled angular chin textured with dry, leathery skin. His thick

extruding lips barely contain a mouthful of discoloured teeth and his eyes—Jesus, his eyes are the most chilling—an intense blue-green that seem to glow with malevolent intensity, reaching into the depths of your soul. Ostensibly he’s hideous, yet at the same time his features possess a certain brutal ruggedness that I find bizarrely fascinating. It’s not a face you can stare at for long. No. One glimpse is like a shock to the system; a sucker punch that makes your heart seize up and sends you reeling.

Almost instantly, I’m forced to avert my gaze and focus back on the table, so violent is my reaction to him. It’s not just his physical appearance that disturbs me, it’s the dark atmosphere that follows him, sucking all the air from the room. It’s overwhelming to the point of being almost suffocating.

Mrs Kingswood clears her throat. “Happy birthday, Alex. I want you to meet the daughter of a good friend of mine, Jessica. She’s going to be having dinner with us tonight. Isn’t that nice?”

Wait, hold on a minute. This is Alex? No, no, no! No way!

There’s a short, seething silence. I can sense her son’s eyes burning into me, looking me up and down, drinking me in. Then...

“How much did my mother pay you to be here?” he demands. Flabbergasted by the directness of his question, I’m struck mute, not knowing what to say.

Mrs Kingswood gives a shrill laugh. “What are you talking about? Jessica is the daughter of my old friend Douglas Winters. You do remember Dougie, don’t you? The one who lives in Kenya and works for the oil company.”

“Yes, I dimly remember you mentioning someone called Douglas,” Alex concedes. “But you haven’t seen him in years, and I don’t recall him having a daughter. Let’s cut the crap, shall we? Mother, you’re so transparent it’s laughable. This is very

clearly a call girl you have paid to be here.”

“No, she’s not,” Beatrix Kingswood splutters. “You’ve got this all wrong, I would never, ever hire a call girl. I can’t believe you think I would ever do such a thing...” Her sentence dies, her protestations diminishing to nothing. The game is up. We both know she’s been busted.

Still with my eyes fixed on the table, I listen to the heavy thud of Alex’s footsteps as he moves across the room to the head of the table and sits down. He sighs audibly.

“There’s no point denying it,” he continues. “Come on! What girl in her right mind would come anywhere near this house unless she’d been paid to? Please don’t insult my intelligence. Let’s just be honest with each other and get this out in the open, shall we?”

As he speaks, I’m struck by his voice: deep, seductive and velvety as chocolate. It’s hands-down the sexiest voice I’ve ever heard and with my eyes closed, I would never imagine he looks the way he does.

“Why do you think I would hire a call girl?” his mother stammers, attempting to dig herself out of the ditch. “What possible reason would I have to do something like that?”

“Simple,” he replies. “We haven’t been getting along lately. I’ve been moody, we’re at each other’s throats and you think it’s because I’m sexually frustrated. You think I have all this pent-up tension that needs to be released. You think all I need is a good, hard fuck to get it out my system and then I won’t give you such a hard time. Well, I’ve got news for you. I’m not that easily bought and there’s no way I’m going to sleep with this girl as some kind of demented therapy session.”

My shoulders sag with relief. Thank fuck for that! Please can I go home now?

I've decided I need to get out of here fast. I no longer want to be part of this sordid set-up and most of all, I need to get as far away from Alex Kingswood as possible. He absolutely terrifies me and the sooner I can leave this place and forget any of this ever happened, the better. As far as I'm concerned, they can keep their money. Nothing is worth enduring this insanity.

Moistening my lips, I finally muster the courage to speak. "Listen guys, it looks like you have a lot going on and I wouldn't want to intrude in your private business. If I am no longer required to be here, then I'm happy to go. If I leave now, I could probably catch the last train home."

I stand up in preparation to exit stage left.

"Sit down!" Alex bellows. The fury in his voice makes the whole room shake.

Instantly, I return to my seat, quaking with fear. Fuck, fuck, fuck. That wasn't a request, it was an order and I dare not disobey him.

Closing my eyes, I let my breath out slowly and try to keep it together. Shit, I've never been so scared in my life. Do they plan to keep me captive here? If I try again to leave, what will they do? Restrain me? Dammit, I just want to get the hell out of this place.

Then an awful thought hits me. If I went missing, nobody but Jane Waters knows I'm here. Not my family, not Amina, no one. I could be kept a prisoner for days and nobody would know where to come looking for me. I am such a cretin. Why, why, why did I ever come to this crazy house with a woman who is clearly unhinged? If I make it out of here alive, it will be a miracle.

"So, Jessica," Alex drawls, addressing me directly for the first time. "Now we have established you are indeed a call girl, would you mind telling me how much my

mother is paying you to be here?”

I remain silent. Lord Jesus, I still can't look at him. I want to be brave and stare him straight in the eye, but my body won't let me. It's almost a reflex action. Fuck, how on earth did I end up in this situation? Someone please rescue me from this nightmare.

“Alex, stop it,” Mrs Kingswood admonishes sternly. “Leave the girl alone. This is all my doing. She is not answerable to you.”

“Then I repeat, how much did you pay her? I'm not going to let this matter drop until you've answered the question. What is the going rate for a woman to be forced to endure the night with me?”

“All right, I'll tell you. Excluding agency fees, I'm paying her ?50,000.”

“Are you serious? ?50,000?” Alex gives a bitter laugh that sounds more like a snarl. “Wow, am I really that repulsive? My God, I knew things were bad but this...this is on another level. You've got to pay that amount of money just to get a girl to come here and fuck me? I have no words.”

The room is now so cold I actually fear I might freeze to death. Yet at the same time, my heart goes out to Alex. I can understand why he is hurt. What Beatrix did is indefensible. What son wouldn't be distressed to learn his own mother had conspired to hoodwink him so deviously? This situation is so perverse it's unreal.

“The fee I agreed to pay Jessica has no bearing on your attractiveness,” Mrs Kingswood says quietly. “The high price I'm paying is because she's a virgin.”

“A virgin?” Alex sounds stunned. “Wow, what a birthday present. You've really outdone yourself this time. You've found me a good girl prepared to do naughty

things for money. What a supremely tantalising prospect...”

My cheeks flush and once more, I can sense his demonic eyes scorching into me. My muscles stiffen. I don't enjoy being the object of his attention at all. The very thought of him looking at my body or making any type of sexual advance makes my skin crawl. Fuck, this feels so surreal, like something out of a horror movie. I can't actually believe I'm sitting here with these people, discussing my virginity like it's the most normal thing in the world. It's like some weird Gothic nightmare from an Edgar Allan Poe story. Please someone pinch me and wake me up.

At that moment, the door opens, and Hobbs and Mrs Bullivant enter the room carrying silver trays of French onion soup. So much has happened, I totally forgot about the starters Mrs Kingswood ordered earlier. It looks delicious but sadly, my nerves are so jangled, I have completely lost my appetite and doubt I'll be able to eat much. Right now, food is the last thing on my mind. All I want is to go home.

And then a funny thing happens. The freezing cold air suddenly melts away and the room begins to heat up, as if all the radiators in the house have been turned on. It's an uncanny sensation, almost like a swift changing of seasons, and for some reason, as crazy as it sounds, I am convinced Alex is responsible.

A bowl of soup is placed before me in a delicate silver bowl, but all I do is stare at it. My limbs are rigid with fear. My head is all over the place and I don't know whether I'm coming or going.

When Alex next speaks, his tone has softened, and I sense he's now trying to appease me. “Jessica, I would like it very much if you stayed for dinner. You've taken the trouble to come all this way so you might as well stay.”

“I'm not sure,” I mumble. “I really think I should be getting back. I've got some stuff to do tomorrow and must be up early so—”

“I’m prepared to pay half the money. That is ?25,000 for you just to spend a couple of hours here with me. It’s my birthday and I could do with the company, plus it will be nice spending some time with someone around my own age. How sad will it be if I end up spending my 21st birthday alone with just my mother? Stay until ten, and I promise I’ll arrange for Hobbs to drive you home safely. What do you say?”

Tentatively, I glance across at Mrs Kingswood. Her face has a strained expression, but she doesn’t say anything. The decision is clearly mine to make. My mind races. Of course, I’d been bluffing when I mentioned catching the last train home. The nearest train station is miles away and without a car, I’m pretty much stuck in the middle of nowhere. I realise the best way to get out of this house in one piece is just to play along. Plus, there’s his amazingly generous offer of ?25,000 just to stay for dinner. Who could pass up that kind of money? With Mum’s medical treatment hanging in the balance, I decide it’s too good an opportunity to miss.

“All right, I’ll stay,” I whisper.

“Fantastic.” Alex sounds genuinely thrilled. I still can’t look at him.

An uncomfortable hush descends. After we finish eating our soup, Mrs Bullivant serves up a superb fillet steak in mushroom and whiskey sauce with vegetables for mains and peaches and cream for dessert, all washed down with bottles of expensive red wine. For the next hour, the three of us barely speak. We just sit around the table, eating our dinner, and as I suspected, Mrs Kingswood barely touches anything, continuously pushing the food around her plate to give the illusion of participating. Something is definitely wrong there. Having said that, I too have very little appetite but force myself to eat every scrap out of politeness.

All throughout the meal, I can feel Alex staring at me constantly. It’s like he’s obsessed, and I find his relentless attention deeply unnerving but do my best not to let it get to me. In my mind, this is just a job, so I need to behave like a professional. If

he wants to pay ?25,000 to look at me all evening, then why not? It's a small price to pay and certainly better than having to sleep with him.

As the wine continues to flow, the room starts to spin and my head gets woozy. Never much of an alcohol drinker, it takes very little to get me tipsy, and midway through my second glass, the booze begins to loosen my tongue and I gain enough confidence to strike up a conversation.

"You have a really beautiful house," I slur. "I've never been anywhere so grand. It's like a palace."

"Yes, I suppose it is," Alex replies. "Although, after spending 21 years locked up here, I now see it more as a beautiful prison."

Mrs Kingswood squirms but continues to stay silent, her eyes fixed resolutely on her plate.

"You've spent your whole life locked up here?" I gasp. "Are you joking?"

"No, I wish I was. As soon as I was born, my parents decided I was too hideous for the world to see me, so they locked me away and had me home schooled for my own protection. Children can be so cruel, and I was constantly picked on, so I think my parents thought they were doing the right thing. Also, it was the '80s, people did things differently then. Plus, I think it saved them from embarrassment, they didn't want me around to spoil their image."

"That is not true, and you know it," his mother says quietly. "Your father and I only ever did what we thought was in your best interests, Alex. Home schooling you was never anything to do with saving face. We never hid you from our inner circle of friends and you know that."

“Perhaps that’s true,” Alex agrees. “All I know is, throughout my childhood, I barely went out, barely had any contact with anyone. It’s been a lonely existence.”

My heart breaks for him. I can’t believe any parent would be so heartless to do that to their child. How can Mrs Kingswood live with herself every day, knowing she has locked her son away in this prison? Once more, I ask what kind of a person is she? It’s like she wants him to be apologetic for even existing, and that’s not on in my book. He didn’t ask for the card life dealt him, so why the hell should he be kept hidden from the world? No matter what, Alex deserves the same shot in life as everyone else. He deserves to be able to live his life freely, see the world, make the most of every opportunity, and to hell with what people think. How dare she lock her son away to please others? How dare she?

“Oh my gosh, that’s awful,” I say. “It must have been so hard for you being so isolated from everything.”

“I thought so too, at first,” he replies. “But you know, Jessica, as the years go by, I think it might have been a blessing in disguise. When I was younger, I used to long to go out and be part of society, I thought I was missing out on something. But every time I come into contact with people, I’m thoroughly disappointed. More often than not, I find that they are cruel and prejudiced, unwilling to accept anything that challenges their narrow perception of the world. With a few exceptions, they are a scourge on this planet and if I’m honest, I much prefer the company of animals. Animals never judge you, are loyal to you, love you unconditionally and never let you down in the way humans do.” He pauses. “You have gone silent. Tell me, am I wrong?”

I think of all the years of torment Georgina Wickham subjected me to at school, all the pain and misery she put me through, and I’ve got to admit I agree with him.

“No, you’re not wrong,” I say. “A lot of people are the way you have described.

Cruel. Prejudiced. But not everyone is like that, there are some good ones, so you shouldn't tar everyone with the same brush."

"How old are you, Jessica?" Alex asks, changing the subject.

"Nineteen," I reply.

"Where do you live?"

"London."

"Where specifically?"

"Clapham Common. I live on a council estate."

"Who do you live with?"

"My mum and my brother Freddie. It's just the three of us."

"And your father, what about him?"

I shrug my shoulders. "I never knew him. All I know is his name is Carlos, he was an art student and he scarpered back to Spain pretty quick when he found out my mother was pregnant. He hasn't been part of my life for 19 years, never tried to make contact, never sent a birthday card, so I don't really think about him, to be honest. As far as I'm concerned, he doesn't exist."

"Then we are both fatherless. My dad died when I was ten."

"Oh, I'm so sorry to hear that."

“Don’t be,” Alex says coldly. “He wasn’t a very nice person.”

There’s a short, uncomfortable pause. I take a large swig of wine to calm my nerves.

“Was it hard for your mother bringing up two children on her own?” Mrs Kingswood asks, suddenly finding her voice. “Growing up without a father must have been difficult.”

“Yeah, sometimes it was hard,” I admit. “We struggled financially, and there were times we had to go without, but I can’t complain. Where it counted, I always felt I had everything I needed. You know, there’s a lot of love in my house, my mother always supported me and that’s what’s important.”

There’s another short pause. Then Alex resumes: “Tell me about your mother and your brother. What are they like?”

My face instantly brightens. “Oh, my mum, Cynthia, she’s great. She’s an artist, really, really talented. A bit of a feminist, loves Tracey Emin. She’s sort of crazy but in a good way. She has such a cool sense of humour, makes her own clothes, would do anything for anyone, everyone loves her. Let’s see, what else...she likes salsa dancing, oh, and world music, she does yoga every Tuesday...”

“And your brother, Freddie?”

“Oh, Freddie’s such a great kid. He’s my whole world. So intelligent, so funny, just amazing. He loves his numbers, loves architecture, collects toy cars. He can write backwards, oh, and he recently learnt how to swim, which he loves. So um, yeah, just a wonderful little guy. I don’t know what I’d do without him.”

For a split-second, I glance up and my gaze settles on Alex’s terrifying face. Despite my fear, I see something warm in those blue-green eyes. A trace of kindness and

humanity. I look away hurriedly.

“When you’re not with family, what else do you do? Are you at college? Do you work?”

“Yes, I work at a burger bar on Clapham High Street. It’s cool. I like the people I work with, we always have a laugh, so um, yeah, it’s great...” My sentence peters out. I take another swig of wine. The room begins to rock and sway. Nervously, I check my watch and notice it’s almost a quarter to ten.

Not long to go, thank goodness.

“Do you have any hobbies?” Alex asks. “What are your interests?”

“I like old musicals,” I reply. “You know, My Fair Lady, West Side Story, Gigi, that sort of thing. And I love to read.”

“I love to read too,” he says eagerly. “Who are your favourite authors?”

“Got to be Edgar Allan Poe.”

“I love Poe! The Raven is one of my all-time favourites.”

“Mine too! Have you read The Tell-Tale Heart?”

“Of course. An absolute masterpiece.”

“I agree! Oh my gosh, you’re the only other person I’ve met who’s read it. I just love it. One of the best short stories ever. Some of the passages were so creepy I had to keep the lights on for weeks! But the writing is just beautiful, so poetic, so vivid...” Finally, the conversation dies. I have nothing more to give.

Hastily, I finish up the last of my dessert and place the spoon to one side. I am now literally on pins and needles waiting for the opportunity to broach the subject of my departure.

“Mother, can you leave us for five minutes?” Alex asks suddenly. “I want to speak to Jessica alone.”

At first, she seems surprised by his request. Then, wordlessly, Mrs Kingswood wipes her mouth on her napkin, stands up and abruptly leaves the room. My heart skips a beat. Flipping hell, what does he want to talk to me about? I don’t like the sound of this...

Slowly, Alex rises from his seat, strides down the length of the table and stops beside my chair. I draw in a sharp breath. At over 6ft 5in, he completely towers over me, and I find his size extremely intimidating. Once more it feels as if all the air has been sucked out the room.

Jittery with nerves, I cast my gaze downwards as he rests one large, powerful hand on the table in front of me. I study it out the corner of my eye. His fingers are long and elegant and covered with solid gold rings that look antique. His nails are immaculately clean and polished but curiously, sharpened into points that give his hand a frighteningly devilish quality. As he continues to close in, I get a whiff of his cologne: a smoky mixture of chocolate, vanilla and tobacco and something else I can’t quite place. Whatever it is, I find it strangely intoxicating.

“I’ve changed my mind,” he says softly. “I’ve decided that I do want you to stay after all. For another ?25,000, I want you to spend the night with me.”

“Spend the night with you? You don’t mean...?”

“Yes. I want to revert back to the original agreement with your agency. For the full ?

50,000, I want you to spend the whole night. I want to go through with it.”

Oh, dear God, no!

“Please, Jessica, I want you to stay. We’re getting along so well and...I think you’d enjoy it.”

When he says the word ‘enjoy,’ my pussy starts to throb. I can’t help it. His voice is like a sensual caress, stroking my clit and casting a spell over me to make my body do things it shouldn’t. This shit needs to stop!

Awkwardly, I scratch the side of my neck, trying to think of a way to let him down gently. “I’m so sorry.” My voice breaks a little. “But I can’t. I’ve had a lovely evening with you, the dinner was wonderful, it’s been great, but I just...I can’t. I’m sorry.”

“Why not?”

“Because...because...”

“It’s because of the way I look, isn’t it? You find me disgusting. If I looked normal, you’d want to spend the night with me in a heartbeat. Don’t deny it. You’ve shown that you can be bought. Money is clearly a motivation for you. For 50,000 you were prepared to sleep with a stranger, regardless of who that person turned out to be. You want money, I’m more than willing to pay, yet still you refuse me. It can only be that.”

“Well, I, that is...” I break off and run my fingers through my hair. I’m so flustered, I don’t know where to look. The truth is, there’s much more to it than that. If only it were that simple. It’s not just his physical appearance that turns me off—no, there’s something else too. A dark aura that is hard to fathom; something malevolent and

corrupt, something almost supernatural that consumes everything he touches and makes it difficult to breathe. A violently unstable energy that suffocates and terrifies me, causing my whole body to recoil.

Sleep with him?

I would have to be out of my mind. But the last thing I want is to upset him and risk changing his mind about paying me what he already owes, so this situation will need to be handled with the utmost delicacy. If I fuck this up, there goes my mother's medical treatment, and I simply cannot allow that to happen.

Stay strong, you can do this.

Hugging my shoulders, I try to buy myself some time. "Please don't take this the wrong way," I say. "But you've got to understand it took a lot to psych myself up and come here. I'm so nervous, I've never done this kind of thing before and when you said you didn't want it to happen, well, I sort of got used to the idea. Now you're saying you've changed your mind...I'm sorry, but my head just isn't with it anymore. I hope that makes sense. It's not you, it's me. This is my issue, not yours."

Mentally, I facepalm. It's not you, it's me? How corny is that?

For what seems forever, Alex continues to stand over me, silently processing my words. I can hear the heavy rise and fall of his breathing. Can almost feel the disappointment rushing through his veins. But my mind is made up. I simply cannot go through with it. There's just no way I can sleep with him.

When he speaks again, his voice is low and icy. "Fine. Okay. I respect your decision. I'll arrange for Hobbs to drive you back home. Thank you for coming, Jessica. Also, I just wanted to say, I really enjoyed our time together and wish you a safe journey home. I'll see to it that the \$25,000 is paid into your bank account by Monday

morning latest. Have a good evening.”

Without another word, Alex sweeps out of the room, and I start breathing again. Jesus, did that actually just happen?

## Page 5

*Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 3:31 am*

Alex

The moment Jessica leaves the house with Hobbs, I throw on my hooded cloak and race downstairs into the courtyard where my Range Rover is parked. Jumping in the driver's seat, I turn the ignition and within minutes I've steered the car out of the drive, in hot pursuit of the Rolls. No way in hell am I letting her get away from me. No. Fucking. Way.

My throat is dry. My dick is on fire. Every part of my body burns with longing.

All I can think about is her.

It's like I'm in the grip of a mad fever, or like I'm on drugs. My whole world has been turned upside down. The moment I saw Jessica I was completely knocked for six. I couldn't take my eyes off her. At first, I couldn't even speak, so stunned was I by her appearance. She is without doubt the most beautiful woman I have ever seen in my life. Hair the colour of chestnut, the darkest, loveliest eyes imaginable, exquisite olive skin, full lips that were just made for kissing. A face, so mesmerizingly gorgeous it looks as if it was carved by wood nymphs or forest fairies. And that body—fuck! Don't get me started. Just the thought of those mouth-watering curves and my dick begins to throb again. And when she smiled—just once, when she spoke about her family—all I wanted to do was tear her clothes off, throw her down on the table and fuck her till she begged for me to stop.

Lord of darkness! I need, I need, I need.

I have got to have her. I have got to have her. There is no way this is over. Never,

never, never...

Shifting gears, I grip the steering wheel tightly and loosen my collar, trying my best to stay calm. My heart thuds erratically. My palms are all sweaty. My God, she drives me so crazy it feels like I'm drowning. I've never felt such longing, never been so hungry for sex. My reaction to her is unlike anything I've ever experienced, and it took all my strength to behave myself and keep my hands off.

Since hitting puberty seven years ago, I've ached to taste the body of a woman but accepted this was not meant to be. For seven years I've had to make do with cold showers, watching pornos and wanking myself to sleep at nights, but not anymore. No. This girl, this Jessica, has awoken the beast and now I'm ready to go on the rampage. I will not rest until she is mine. I will not sleep until I've bathed my cock deep within that furnace of sweet, fiery heat between her thighs.

I glance in the rear-view. The eyes staring back burn wildly like a mad dog. I smile as memories from the dinner return. Fuck, she turned me on so much I had a constant erection the whole time. So hard it was painful. Everything she did excited me. Every breath she took, every move, every flinch, every flick of her hair. I loved everything. The way she spoke—that sweet sultry voice with the south London accent. Jesus, I loved every word she uttered, her unique enunciations, her obvious intellect. Her elegance, her grace, her empathy, her smell, her realness, her love for her family. She is perfection personified, and I cannot, will not let her go.

My mind returns to those lips—so hot they made my balls ache at the thought of what they could do. Her skin, so soft looking, so delectably smooth. All I wanted was to taste it, run my tongue all over it.

I have got to see her again.

Biting one knuckle, I once more reminisce about the events of earlier in the evening.

The moment my mother introduced Jessica as the daughter of Douglas Winters, I was instantly suspicious. Beatrix suspects I'm telepathic (I'm not). She thinks I can read her mind, but this wasn't the case. I merely made a couple of educated guesses based on the information that was at my disposal. First and foremost, there was no way in hell anyone that attractive could be related to that old scoundrel Douglas. Slimy as a politician, I was certain his dirty criminal genes could never have produced such an ethereal being as Jessica. Not only is she drop-dead gorgeous, but she also has an inner quality of goodness that no daughter of Douglas would ever possess.

Secondly, and this was the clincher, I overheard my mother speaking to her lawyer on the phone about a Non-Disclosure Agreement. Putting two and two together, I knew that something was up. Beatrix's plans and schemes usually have a way of backfiring, but on this occasion, I've got to hand it to her. When it comes to women, she's got impeccable taste. If you could draw a picture of my perfect girl, Jessica would be it.

And she's a virgin. Fuck, that information was too much to handle. Almost sent me over the edge. Someone that beautiful, that sophisticated. How could she still be a virgin? The thought that I might be the first man to taste the sweetness of that body made me almost sick with lust.

My eyes shoot down to my crotch. Shit, I'm getting an erection again...

Gritting my teeth, I beg my dick to cool off. To distract myself, my mind drifts again to earlier in the evening. At first, I had pretended to be outraged by the idea of Beatrix hiring me a prostitute for my birthday. I made out I was shocked, but the truth is, this is not the first time she's pulled a stunt like this. Jessica is merely the latest in a long line of call girls my mother has brought to the house, but I declined every single one of them because I have high standards.

Deep down, I crave the warmth of pussy in the worst way possible, and Beatrix knows it. She knows how long I've been locked up for, deprived of the normal

pleasures other men get to enjoy. She knows how much I need to get laid and in a strange way, hiring me a prostitute could be seen as her way of showing tenderness.

No doubt, some people would be outraged by her behaviour and judge her harshly, but not me. As unorthodox as it is, at least it shows she cares. But I won't settle for just anyone and until today, none of the other girls have ever made the cut.

No, I wasn't angry because she engaged the services a prostitute. I was angry because I saw the look of revulsion on Jessica's face, knew how repulsive she found me, and the pain of her rejection hurt like hell. This accursed face has long been the bane of my existence, and seeing her reaction brought back so many bad memories. When I saw how scared she was of me, how her hands trembled, how she refused to meet my gaze, I instantly put up the barriers and switched into 'confident bastard' mode.

Looking the way I do, my cocky self-assurance is often my only defence against the cruel hostilities of the world. When I speak openly about my ugliness, even sometimes joke about it, I do so as a coping mechanism because somewhere deep inside, I'm still that frightened little boy who cried his heart out over his dead cat. Back when I was a child, I used to show my emotions, I wore my heart on my sleeve but not anymore. Now whenever I suspect an oncoming attack, I pull up the drawbridge and give as good as I get. Fight fire with fire. I've learnt the hard way that it doesn't pay to be weak and feeble in this world. It's not wise to show your vulnerability and allow people to take advantage. It's happened too many times in the past and I'll be damned if I let it happen again.

But Jessica is different. She's not like the other girls who were clearly just in it for the money. She's had such a drastic effect on me she forced me to do something I never do. She got me to beg. She's made me go against my principles and show a little vulnerability, something I hate to do. As our evening together ended, I realised I couldn't let go of this one chance to make love to her. How could I? Only a fool would let this opportunity slip through his fingers. She got me so hot all I could think

about was making her moan and scream. I wanted her so badly I was willing to do anything to take her to bed and that included paying far more than the ?50,000 price tag for her affections. If she'd been up for it, I would have given her any amount of money she asked for.

But then I saw the terror and revulsion in her face, and I knew it was no use. No matter how much money was on offer, I knew she didn't want me to touch her, didn't want to have sex with me, which I suppose is understandable given the circumstances. I know how hideous I am and by rights, a woman of her calibre will always be out of reach to someone like me. But I still crave her regardless and plan to make it my life's mission to get her to change her mind. If she could only see beyond my appearance, she would find I have so much to offer, so much to give, I just need to bide my time and wait for the right opportunity to make my move.

Driving like a man possessed, I tail the Rolls Royce relentlessly all the way back to London, jumping red lights, careful to always keep at a safe enough distance not to arouse suspicion. I'm so taken with Jessica she's got me doing something else I rarely ever do: venture into the outside world. I hate the company of most people and under normal circumstances, wild horses couldn't drag me beyond the gates of my home, but for her, I'll make the exception.

Finally, around midnight, the Rolls turns a corner into a dark residential street that leads to the Clapham council estate where my beauty lives with her family. Stealthily, I park up, kill the engine and lean against the car seat, watching intently as Jessica gets out and waves goodbye to Hobbs. For a few seconds, she lingers on the curb watching him go, looking the picture of Amazonian perfection in that tight black dress that nearly gives me heart failure. Once he's gone, she glances nervously left and right, then walks towards a low-rise block of flats made of yellow brick. A large sign on the communal entry door reads: 'Terrapin House.'

She's unsteady on her feet, stumbles on the gravel, suggesting she's still a bit tipsy

from the wine earlier. Reaching inside her handbag, she fumbles for her keys and after a short delay, lets herself into the block. As she turns, she blesses me with another eyeful of that glorious backside, and it takes all my willpower not to fantasise about what it would be like to push my tongue deep up there. Fuck, how good would that be? I bet she tastes divine. The mere thought of rimming her buttohole gets me so excited I have to take short, sharp breaths to control myself. Lord of darkness, there are so many things I want to do to her, if only she'd let me...

A moment later, I see a light go on in one of the ground floor windows and get a full view of her tiny, sparsely furnished kitchen. There are no curtains. Whether this is because her family can't afford them or they simply choose not to have them, I don't know, but either way I'm delighted as it allows me to see everything.

For an interminable time, I watch my beauty fumbling around, opening and closing cupboards, rummaging in the fridge, until finally, she runs herself a glass of tap water and downs it in one gulp. After wiping her mouth, she switches off the kitchen light and disappears out of view. I presume she has moved to the back of the flat where her bedroom is located. Hopefully, when I return tomorrow, I will find that her bedroom window is visible from the garden and just as easily accessible...

So, this is where Jessica lives...It looks just the way I imagined it would. Modest and perhaps a little run-down but clean and well-kept nonetheless, a sign that those who live here take pride in their homes.

Exhaling softly, I sit for a moment in the darkness of the car, staring at the block of flats, hand on the steering wheel, marvelling at how quiet and peaceful everything is. Her street is pretty much deserted at this time of night and very few of the neighbours' lights are on, so I have no fear of discovery. Plus, with the dark tinted windows of the Range and my face concealed by a thick black hooded cloak, my presence is near impossible to detect.

Content that I now know where to come back to, I start my car and steer out of Terrapin Road to make the long journey home. In some ways, this has been the best birthday I've had in years (the other being my tenth birthday when I was gifted my darling Trinity). For the first time ever, I see a glimpse of light at the end of the tunnel. I now have a goal, a purpose, and that is to win over the girl of my dreams and make her mine forever. No matter what it takes, no matter what the cost, I will not stop until I achieve my ambition to possess her completely.

The next morning, I awake flooded with positive energy. For a long while, I lie in bed, staring up at the ceiling and immerse myself once more in thoughts from last night. It felt like a dream, a beautiful dream. Can somebody so perfect really exist? Once I have cast off the throes of sleep, I take a shower and masturbate furiously to thoughts of Jessica. Then I get dressed and go for a walk around the estate on this gloriously cold and crisp Sunday morning.

Breathing in the fresh air, I survey the magnificent vista of my ancestors' land that now belongs to me and am warmed to hear that the birds are singing in the trees once more. Of late, my rampant mood swings scared them all away, but now they know that I am happy again they have returned to serenade me. My hope is now I am in a better place emotionally, more of the forest animals will gradually return to grace me with their presence. Now that she has come into my life and brought a sense of hope for the future, I pray all my friends from the animal kingdom will accept my forgiveness and return to the fold.

After a pleasant stroll around the estate, I return inside to have breakfast with my mother. As always, Mrs Bullivant has laid on a delicious spread of tea, toast, bacon, sausages, preserves, ham, egg and freshly baked rolls. As per usual, Beatrix barely touches anything, surviving on a perpetual diet of black coffee and cigarettes. She eats so little I sometimes wonder how she manages to maintain the strength to go to battle with me every day. Normally, I eat like a horse, but not today. Today I can barely hold anything down because all I can think about is Jessica. Desire has robbed

me of my appetite and the one and only thing I crave is a taste of the sweetness between her thighs.

All throughout breakfast, Beatrix says very little to me. For the most part, the room is filled with stony silence, and we barely make eye contact with each other. I can tell she's in a foul mood. She is perfectly aware that I followed Jessica back home last night but knows better than to ask questions. She knows she's opened Pandora's Box and now things are accelerating at a rate beyond her control. She thought she was so clever, thought she could keep me on a leash, but as always, my mother's plans have had unintended consequences. Too late, the seeds of obsession have been planted and my fixation on my object of lust will only continue to grow and flourish.

After a period of insufferable stillness, Beatrix puts down her butter knife and shoots me a death stare. Evidently, she has something to get off her chest and I just wish she'd come out with it. I hate being kept in suspense.

"Well," she says. "Now that you are clearly in a better mood, can I ask for you to please stop controlling the weather and let us have some peace, at least for a few days?"

I take a large bite of toast. "What do you mean? I'm sorry, but I don't know what you're talking about."

"Oh, come on Alex, you know precisely what I mean. Every time you're in a bad mood, we have everything from torrential rain to mini hurricanes. It took me a while to work it out and make the connection, but I do believe it is you who is responsible for our recent bout of storms."

"That's crazy talk," I laugh. "You're living in cloud cuckoo land. Nobody can control the weather. I think you're getting a little deluded in your old age."

“No, I’m not,” she shoots back. “Just last week, when we had that sudden torrential downpour after we argued, I spoke with some farmers from the neighbouring village, and they had no knowledge of a storm of any kind. It would seem it only occurred over this patch of land, and this, I believe, has been happening for years. I am convinced you are behind it. So, I repeat, now that this girl has taken your fancy and given you something to do other than torment me, will we at last have some peace?”

Folding my arms, I smile wickedly, taking great pleasure from toying with her. “That is the most ludicrous thing I’ve ever heard. Do you seriously think I can control the weather? With what? Telekinesis? I’m sorry, but I think you’ve been reading too many Stephen King novels. I won’t bother to answer your question because what you are suggesting is so absurd it doesn’t merit a response.”

We argue about it for a while, but in the end, as always, she gives up and admits defeat. It’s a game we’ve been playing since I was ten years old: Beatrix trying to prise information from me to prove Erasmus’ existence, me calmly deflecting every attack to ensure there is always enough doubt to leave the truth just out of reach.

After Mrs Bullivant has cleared away the plates, I instruct my mother to make arrangements for the £25,000 to be transferred to my beauty’s bank account first thing tomorrow morning. Once more, Beatrix says nothing. She can sense where this is all heading but is powerless to stop it. Too late. The horse has already bolted.

The rest of the day drags and all I seem to do is pace up and down, counting down the seconds until I can see her again. I try to distract myself—read a book, compose a new piano concerto, pay a visit to my stables—but it’s no use. Jessica has completely and utterly captured me, and I crave our next encounter like a drug addict craves heroin.

Around five pm, I jump in my car and drive back to London. As it’s a Sunday, the roads are relatively clear. By the time I arrive in Clapham, the sky is pitch-black. As I

pull up in front of Jessica's block of flats, I am delighted to find all the ground floor lights are on and I am presented with a perfect, curtainless view into her sitting room. The place is alive with joy and laughter. I can see Jessica holding hands with her mother and brother, dancing wildly around the room.

From my position in the car with the windows down, I can hear the faint sound of trumpets and drums. Her mum, Cynthia, has a warm, kind face and her brother Freddie looks like a nice kid with a cheeky-chappie smile. With their pale skin and bright, red hair, neither of them looks very much like Jessica, but they all share many of the same mannerisms. For example, Cynthia has a way of tilting her head to one side in the exact same way her daughter does, which clearly indicates their close relation.

As I watch them dancing, I'm flooded with bittersweet emotions. Jessica was right when she said there was more to life than money. The wallpaper in their sitting room is peeling. They have hardly any furniture. They appear to eat their meals on the floor. Yet, none of that matters in the bigger scheme of things. What Jessica has here with her little family is worth more than gold and is something I've always found unattainable: the sweet embrace of a loving family who are not afraid to show their feelings. I am particularly struck by how tactile they are with one another, how they kiss and hug each other, how much they laugh, all those little shows of affection that were sadly missing from my life growing up.

Watching them together almost brings tears to my eyes, as I wonder, with a somewhat envious heart, if I could ever be welcomed into their circle. Could they ever embrace me like that? Could they ever look at me like that? Could Jessica? I grew up in a household where money was no object, was given the best of everything by my parents, but when it came to emotional wealth, we were poor as church mice. What I really needed; money could not buy. The tender touch of a kind human being is what I've yearned for all these years and witnessing these special, private moments in Jessica's life makes me realise just how much I have been missing.

And I want a piece of it. Fuck, do I want a piece of it.

For the rest of the evening, I sit concealed in the darkness of my car, watching them go about their business, taking small joys in the most trivial things: Jessica and Freddie playing Jenga, Cynthia painting, Cynthia cooking dinner, Freddie dressing up as a policeman, Jessica filing her nails. For the most part, I'm so enraptured, I have a big, goofy grin perpetually plastered to my face. They're so cute and adorable it makes me want to cry. The more I see of this happy little family, the more I want to be part of it, and by the time they switch the lights out to go to sleep, my mind is made up.

I want it all. Now, I not only want Jessica's body, but I also want to be accepted into her world, into her family. I want the three of them to embrace me and I want their warmth to be genuine. I want them to love me. This isn't just a sexual thing anymore. No, I want to possess my beauty entirely and be a part of every single facet of her life with no exceptions.

Once I am satisfied everyone is asleep, I sneak around the back of the flats, climb over a high crumbling wall and drop down into the large communal garden. From there, I creep over to Jessica's bedroom window on the ground floor but find she has sensibly put up curtains. I'm a tad disappointed but pleased when I notice the lock on the window is old and rusty, meaning should I ever need to force an entry, it will be a piece of cake. Closing my eyes, I imagine what she would be like undressing. I salivate over the thought of her succulent naked body, just waiting for me to devour, piece by piece. There are so many things I want to, need to do to her, if only she would let me. Whilst it's true I've never made love to a woman, I know with the power of Erasmus flowing through my veins, I'll have thousands of years of sexual experience at my disposal.

Despite being a novice, I know that when the time comes, the secret knowledge I am privy to will ensure I am more than able to satisfy Jessica. I know I will be able to

make her come, over and over again, and take her to levels of unimaginable pleasure that will have her begging for more. I will start by being gentle, take my time to see how she responds, and once she opens up to me, there is nothing I would not do to please her. She'll be eating out the palm of my hand.

One night. One night is all I need to fuck her senseless, and my beauty won't ever want any other man but me. Once she's had a taste of the demon dick, there will be no going back. I know she will become addicted, and once that happens, she will be mine forever, body and soul. I just need to be patient and bide my time...

Returning to the Range Rover, I stay parked in her street until daybreak, never once taking my eyes off the target. Then at six-thirty am, Jessica emerges from the glass communal doors, dressed in an old grey duffel coat, black skirt and tights. She carries a knitted bag over her shoulder and from her smart clothing I presume she's going to work. My heart beats faster. The morning light filtering through the trees reveal Jessica to look even more gorgeous with no make-up, so fresh, so innocent. Also, she appears much younger without it and in the cold light of day, it's easy to see she is barely out of girlhood. With lipstick and powder, she could easily pass for twenty-five, but not today. Today, she looks every one of her nineteen years.

Patiently, I wait until she has walked a good distance towards the bus stop at the end of the road, then, revving my engine, I start the car and follow her to work. Fifteen minutes later, we arrive outside a slightly ramshackle eatery on the high street named Sloppy Joe's American Diner. So, this is where she works...

Parking directly outside, I put myself in position to get a full view through the window of all the comings and goings of the restaurant. In a state of bliss, I spend the next couple of hours just watching her work. I watch her sweep the floor, serve the customers, ring up orders on the till, laugh and joke around with her pretty shaven-headed female friend. The more I see of her, the more enchanted I am. She is everything I could want in a woman and more. So fun, so vivacious, so hardworking.

She has it all. During her coffee break, she goes to the local cashpoint to check her balance and I witness her joy when she finds I have deposited the money as promised.

Then, sometime around two-thirty, Jessica finishes her shift and makes her way hurriedly down a network of residential streets to pick up Freddie from school. Parking across the road from an old Victorian building that houses Ravensbourne Primary, I watch my beauty mingle at the gates with the other parents who are keen to catch up on gossip as they wait for three o'clock to arrive and reunite them with their precious offspring. After enduring what is clearly excruciating small talk, she says her goodbyes and heads into the playground.

A short time later, the bell rings and a steady stream of parents and children flood out onto the pavement. Their energy is contagious, and I wonder fleetingly, what it would have been like for me to attend a school like this. Very soon, I spy the object of my affection emerging from the gates, holding hands with Freddie who is chattering excitedly about his day.

My heart melts at the sight of them. Already I am daydreaming about a time when I could join hands with them and spend a day fooling around in the park. From what I've observed of his behaviour, I strongly suspect Freddie is autistic, and I admire how kind and patient Jessica is with him. How she takes the time to answer every one of his questions, never showing exasperation. She truly is an angel.

As they continue walking down the street, I'm about to follow, when suddenly I hear the low beep of a car horn. Turning my head, I spy a red Lotus Esprit parked a short distance from the school with two men sitting in the front. Jessica and Freddie are heading straight for it, and at first, my beauty pays it no mind, but when the car beeps again, she cranes her neck and looks towards the driver's seat. In no time at all, one of the men gets out and jogs over to her.

Blonde, tall and nauseatingly good-looking, he has the confidence and swagger of

one who has never been told no in his life. He has the athletic build of a track star and the kind of face you would never tire of punching.

Hastily, I wind my window down so that I can hear and lip read every snippet of conversation.

“Hey Jessica, how you doing?”

“Oh, hi Jack!”

Jack? Who the fuck is Jack?

There’s an awkward pause.

“Me and Tom were just driving around the area killing time before football practice...”

He gestures towards the Lotus, where the guy sitting in the passenger seat waves to Jessica. She gives a limp wave back. While her attention is diverted, I notice Jack’s gaze travelling down her body, giving her the discreet once-over. My fists clench and jealousy gets me in a stranglehold. He’s playing the game that certain types of men play. Acting like butter wouldn’t melt. Pretending to be all sweetness and light when all the time he’s entertaining the filthiest thoughts imaginable.

From the look in his eyes, I can tell exactly what he’s thinking. When he stares at Jessica’s lips, he’s imaging how good they would feel around his cock. When he stares at her arse, he’s imaging how good it would look bouncing and rippling as he fucks her from behind. And when he stares at her chest, he’s fantasising about what it would be like to wank over her tits and cover them with his semen. Trust me, I know how men think, and the thought of him getting anywhere near my beauty tortures me to distraction.

“What are we standing around for?” Freddie begins to grow restless. “Why are we still here? Can we please go home now? I’m hungry, I want some Jammie Dodgers.”

Rocking back on his heels, Mr Adonis ignores the child’s whines and flashes a killer smile that he hopes will ingratiate him to my beauty. “So, you just picked your brother up from school, huh?”

“Y-yes,” Jessica stammers. “We’re just about to go home.”

“My sister used to go to Ravensbourne Primary. It’s a nice school.”

“Yes. Freddie likes it.”

“Hey little buddy, how are you doing?” Crouching down, he finally tries to engage with Freddie. “Did you have a good day at school?”

“No. It was shit.”

“Freddie! What have I told you about using naughty words?”

Jack laughs. “It’s fine. Most kids his age swear. My little brother does it all the time.” Straightening up, he locks eyes with Jessica again and gives her a look that he thinks is seductive. “Listen, I can see you’re in a hurry, so I won’t keep you. But you know, I was just wondering if you’re doing anything tonight?”

At first, my beauty looks too shocked to speak, and then she fiddles with her hair, looks at the ground and replies in a scarcely audible voice: “No, nothing. Why?”

He pretends to be coy. “I was wondering if you’d like to go to the cinema with me. Have you seen Titanic yet?”

Jessica's cheeks flush. "Um, no, actually I haven't."

"You and me both. We must be the only two people in the world who haven't. I've seen clips on TV and the special effects look amazing. And I love that Celine Dion song, whatever it's called, My Heart Will something. Anyway, I'll get to the point. There's a showing at the Streatham Odeon at six o'clock this evening and I was wondering if you'd like to come with me?"

"You mean like a date?"

"Yes, a date. I'm asking you out."

"Oh my gosh, I-I'd love to but..." Jessica bites her lip, hesitates. "What about...what about Georgina? Wouldn't she mind?"

"We broke up. We're not together anymore."

"Really?" Her face lights up like a happy child. "Wow, I didn't know."

"Yeah, well, our relationship just ran its course. Thing is Jessica, I've always liked you. I mean like, really liked you. I just never had the opportunity to ask you out, but I always wanted to."

"Please can we go now?" Freddie howls. "I want my Jammie Dodgers!"

Turning on his heel, Jack begins walking back towards his car. Flashing a final megawatt smile, he points directly at Jessica and drawls, "Six o' clock, Streatham Odeon. Meet you outside?"

"All right, yes!"

“It’s a date then. Is that a smile I see? Yes—yes, it is, keep doing it, you’re so pretty when you smile. Look forward to seeing you later. Remember, six o’ clock, outside Streatham Odeon.”

“Yes, um, see you later.” As my beauty watches the Lotus drive off, she rolls her eyes and quietly mouths, “Oh my fucking God. Jack Parker just asked me out on a date!”

“Jess! You just said a naughty word,” Freddie scowls.

“Sorry. In my defence, I’m a grown-up and grown-ups are allowed to swear.”

“That isn’t fair. How old will I be when I’m allowed to swear?”

“Eighteen?”

“Not fair. That will take years!”

Laughing, she puts her arm around her brother’s shoulder and ruffles his hair. “Come on Kiddo, let’s go home and get you those Jammie Dodgers.”

For a long moment, I sit frozen in my car. Inside, she’s killing me. I can tell how hot she is for this prick. It’s written all over her face. I can see how excited she is, how much she wants him. Oh, my beauty, my beauty, how you disappoint me. Those were some of the cheesiest chat-up lines I’ve ever heard, and yet you’ve fallen for it hook, line and sinker. My God, I thought she had better taste, I thought she was intelligent.

There’s something about that guy I don’t trust. Something smarmy and disingenuous. And I don’t believe for one second that his girlfriend, this Georgina person, is out of the picture. The fact that he was lying through his teeth was obvious to anyone with half a brain, but apparently not to Jessica. It’s nauseating how easily women fall for his type of bullshit, but it’s obvious she just wants to fuck him, so is willing to

overlook his shortcomings. Mesmerised by his good looks, she would drop her knickers for him in a heartbeat yet wouldn't let me get within six feet of her. Someone like me would have to pay a fortune to even touch her hand while this little cocksucker gets it all for free. She'd probably screw him right here and now on the pavement if he asked her to. Fuck, I'm so mad I could punch something.

Gripping the steering wheel so tightly my knuckles ache, I exhale slowly, trying to hold it together. Count to ten, count to ten. I'm so fucking mad I could scream. Jessica, what are you doing to me? Are you really going to go on a date with this imbecile?

## Page 6

*Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 3:31 am*

Jessica

“Well, someone looks very pleased with themselves,” Cynthia smiles, opening the fridge and pulling out a bottle of Aqua Libra. “What are you so happy about? Have you won the National Lottery or what? Come on, spill the beans!”

“Better than winning the lottery,” I reply. “I have a date with Jack Parker tonight!”

She cocks a brow. “Jack Parker? You don’t mean the Jack Parker from school whose name you used to write all over your exercise books? The same Jack Parker you’ve had a crush on for years but always denied it?”

“Yep. The one and only.”

“Woah! Celebration time, my baby’s going out on her first date tonight!”

I flush with pride, my head so light I feel as if I’m walking on air. I still can’t believe it. All throughout the journey home from Freddie’s school, I’ve been feeling sort of intoxicated. I can’t believe Jack finally asked me out! After all these years of wishing and hoping, this feels like a dream come true.

Opening the kitchen cupboard, my mum takes down two mis-matched glasses and places them on the sideboard. “Sorry, forgot to ask, would you prefer a coffee or are you okay with Aqua Libra.”

“Aqua Libra’s fine.”

She pours us both a glass of the flavoursome sparkling water. “So, where are the two of you going tonight for this date?”

“We’re going to see Titanic at the Odeon in Streatham.”

“Ah, Titanic. That film with Leonardo DiCaprio? Erin said she saw it for the second time last week. Says it’s fantastic even though it’s about three hours long. It’s so good apparently the time just flies by and you don’t even notice.”

“Great! I can’t wait, it looks bloody amazing.”

Cynthia takes a sip of her drink and stares into the middle distance. “Have you decided what you’re going to wear tonight?”

“No. It’s such short notice, I just hope I can find something in the wardrobe that’s clean.”

“If not, you can always borrow something of mine.”

I roll my eyes. “Thanks, but I’m not sure ‘70s Glam Rock is quite the look I’m going for.”

“Cheeky!”

We both laugh and for a moment, I study her face intently. All at once, I notice how pale and tired she looks today, how drained of energy. She appears older somehow, and the little frown line between her brows seems more pronounced than usual. Suddenly, I’m wracked with guilt. I’m so bloody selfish. Here I am, so wrapped up in the excitement of my date tonight, I’ve totally forgotten to check if she’s okay with me going out and leaving her alone with Freddie. I love my brother to bits, but he can be a handful at the best of times, and I worry she doesn’t have the energy to be

running around after him all evening. Should I even be going out, given the circumstances?

I put down my glass. “Mum, listen, are you sure you’re okay to look after Freddie tonight? You look tired, so if it’s going to put you to too much trouble, I’m happy to stay in and cancel.”

She seems appalled at the idea. “Cancel your date with Jack Parker? Over my dead body! Darling, you’ve already put too much of your life on hold for me, there’s no way I’m going to allow you to screw up your first date. Don’t worry about me and Freddie, we’ll be fine. You go out and enjoy yourself. Don’t you dare even think about cancelling.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yes!”

On the verge of tears, I throw my arms around her and hug her with all my might. I love her so much sometimes it’s hard to breathe. There’s nothing better in this world than being in the warm, comforting embrace of my mother and it tears me up inside to think we may not have much longer together.

In this moment of guilt-induced weakness, I decide now is the time to deliver some good news that I hope will help to lift her spirits. It’s not something I’d planned on doing, but seeing how she looks tonight, I realise the sooner I break it to her, the better. I decide I’m going to let the cat out the bag and tell her about the ?25,000.

It’s been playing on my mind constantly these past couple of days, trying to work out what cover story to use to explain where the heck I got this kind of money. My mum isn’t stupid, so I know whatever it is has got to sound convincing. Plus, if I’m being honest, I don’t like to think too much about it because inevitably it leads back to

memories of Alex Kingswood and my horrific evening at Claremont Hall last Saturday. The experience had such a negative impact on me, the only way I can cope with it is by pretending it never happened. By compartmentalising the events of that night and pushing it into the dark recesses of my mind, I have been able to carry on as normal and not have a complete breakdown.

So many things were wrong about that night, so many disturbing, unexplainable things happened in that house, the only way to function has been to write it off as a figment of my imagination. I've never believed in black magic or the supernatural before, but the vibes coming from that house, from Alex, were unlike anything I've ever experienced, and it scared the living shit out of me. If there is a devil incarnate on this earth, then I am convinced he would be it.

Of course, deep down, I know everything that happened was real—the enormous cash deposit in my bank account this morning is testament to that—but I still like to treat the whole sorry saga as some distant bad dream that is better best forgotten.

In a strange way, I see this date with Jack tonight as my reward for choosing the righteous path. I feel like it's the universe's way of telling me I made the right decision not to continue down the path I was headed—a path that came dangerously close to selling my body to a stranger for money. No, not a stranger, to a monster from some sort of nightmarish fairy tale. When I think about how close I came to making the biggest mistake of my life, I almost cry with relief to have averted danger.

“What time are you meeting Jack?” Cynthia asks, bringing me back to the current moment.

“Six o'clock.”

She glances at the digital clock on the kitchen wall. “You'd better start thinking about getting ready soon then.”

“Before I do, there’s something I need to tell you.”

“What is it darling?”

I look at the ceiling and take a deep breath. My heart thuds in my ears. “A couple of weeks ago I was stopped in the street by a talent scout from Storm Modelling Agency.”

“Storm?” Mum frowns. “Isn’t that the agency who first discovered Kate Moss?”

“Yeah, I think so. I’m not sure. Anyway, I went to their offices in the West End and signed up with them to do some modelling work.”

Cynthia claps her hands. “Oh, my goodness. That’s wonderful news!”

“Really? It’s just...I know modelling isn’t a very academic career choice, so I didn’t say anything because I thought you might not approve. I know how you want me to get a degree, go to university...”

She takes my hand and smiles, her eyes shining with love. “Darling, don’t be silly. Of course I’ll support you in whatever career choice you make. And modelling is not so bad. If it’s catwalk modelling, then some of that can be the very pinnacle of high art. Honestly, I think this is amazing news. I’m so proud of you!”

“That’s great, because the reason I’m telling you this is...well, the thing is...” I avert my gaze to the floor. God, I hate telling lies... “I went on my first modelling assignment last week at this big old house in the countryside. A photo shoot for an Italian fashion magazine. I didn’t tell you because I wanted it to be a surprise. But anyway, they paid me ?25,000.”

Her jaw drops. “No way! Are you kidding?”

“I want you to have all of the money, Mum. I want you to take it all and put it towards your treatment in Germany.”

“Sweetheart, I can’t.” She wipes away a tear. “It’s your money, you earned it. I couldn’t. It would feel like raiding your piggy bank.”

“Please take it. What else would I spend it on?”

“You could invest in your future, get an education. Twenty-five grand would be more than enough to cover your university fees.”

“No, Mum. There’s nothing’s in this world more important than getting you well again, so please, just take the money. Do it for me. Don’t worry about my education, it will take care of itself, I promise. Right now, you’re all that matters to me. You and Freddie.”

She hugs me again and soon we’re both crying and fanning our faces. “What did I do to deserve such a wonderful daughter?” Cynthia whispers. “Jess, honestly, I’m speechless. I don’t know what to say other than thank you, thank you so much! I love you.”

“I love you too. So, so much.”

For what seems eternity, we stand in the middle of the kitchen, holding each other like we never want to let go. Bathed in the warmth of my mother’s arms, I feel a sense of peace I haven’t experienced in ages. It’s like I’m six years old again, and it’s just me and her against the world. Then, swiftly, my sense of calm is replaced by a dull ache in my heart. I can’t afford to be complacent. Yes, it’s great that I managed to get my hands on £25,000, but what now? That was only half the money required for the trip to Germany, so I’ll still need to find a way to get hold of the rest, and I haven’t a clue where from. It’s going to take nothing short of a miracle to find that

sort of cash, but one thing's for sure, I'm done with the sex business and working as an escort. Never, ever again. It just wasn't worth it.

"What's going on? Why are you both crying? What made you sad?" We look down to see Freddie standing in the doorway clutching one of his treasured Matchbox cars.

"It's all right, Kiddo," I laugh. "Mummy and I are both fine. Don't worry your little head about us. Hey, that's a cool car you're holding. What type is that?"

"It's a Range Rover," he declares proudly. "There was a black one following us today as we walked home from school."

I raise my eyebrows. "What? Oh, don't be daft. Nobody was following us."

"There was! I saw it. A black Range Rover. Each time we stopped, it stopped and each time we started walking, it started moving. It was so funny. I think the driver is playing peekaboo with us."

For a second, I fall silent, realising I shouldn't be so quick to dismiss Freddie's razor-sharp observation. He does, after all, have a photographic memory. And now that my little brother has mentioned it, I do seem to remember being vaguely aware of a black car across the road from the school as we talked to Jack. A black car that looked suspiciously similar to one I saw parked outside my workplace earlier today...

Could there really be someone following us or am I just being paranoid?

"You'd better start getting a move on," Cynthia smiles, stroking my arm. "We don't want you to be late for this date of yours."

"Good point. All right Kiddo, let's go." Taking Freddie's hand, I lead Little Columbo back to the living room and quickly help him set up the playmat for his rows of toy

cars. Then I head for my bedroom in search of something suitable to wear tonight.

Opening the bottom drawers, I curse under my breath as I remember the ironing board is broken, meaning anything crinkled will have to be ironed on the floor using a towel to protect the carpet. God, getting anything done in this house always feels like such a chore! After much toing and froing, I eventually settle on a pair of brown, slightly flared leather trousers and a white strappy top that shows just a hint of my diamante bellybutton piercing. Finally, I straighten my hair and style it into a sleek, centre-parting and finish off the ensemble with a pair of wooden parrot earrings. When I stare at my reflection, I've got to admit I'm quite pleased with what I see. Hopefully Jack will be too.

At last, at ten to five, I wave goodbye to Mum and Freddie and, throwing on my studded leather jacket, head for the bus stop on the high street that will take me to Streatham Hill. When the bus arrives, it's completely packed and I end up standing for most of the journey, but nothing can dampen my spirits. I feel on top of the world and can't stop smiling. I keep laughing to myself. People on the bus stare at me like I'm a crazy woman, but I don't care.

This date with Jack is something I've spent half my life dreaming about, and I can't believe tonight it's really going to happen. I can't believe I'm going on a date with the sexiest guy on the planet. Jesus, what will I say to him? How will I keep myself from blushing the whole time? I think of his voice, his smile. Those gorgeous, dreamy blue eyes. His beautiful golden hair. Just imaging kissing those sweet, perfect lips turns my insides to mush. I've never had a crush like this before and finally getting to enact my girlhood fantasy feels so surreal, but in a good way. I'm not particularly religious, but I must say that if God exists, the heavens are truly smiling on me today. Good things like this rarely happen to people like me and I promise myself never to take it for granted.

At five minutes to six, the bus pulls into Streatham High Street, and I'm hit by a rush

of butterflies as I spy the long queue of couples spilling out onto the pavement outside the Odeon cinema, presumably waiting to see Titanic. The novelty of the moment is not lost on me. For the first time ever, I'm going to be a part of something.

After spending so many years feeling like an outcast, I'm finally stepping out from the shadows and going on a date with a gorgeous guy, just like all these other girls. For once, I'll experience what it's like to be normal and blend in with everyone else and not be treated like a pariah. I find the moment strangely moving and struggle to keep my emotions in check as I step off the bus onto the pavement.

Glancing at my wristwatch, I see it's fast approaching six o'clock. Okay, no sign of Jack yet. A cold wind blows, and I tighten my scarf for warmth. Hugging my arms, I climb the stone steps to the front entrance doors of the cinema and stand off to one side, facing the high street so I can get a good view of Jack's Lotus when it arrives (presuming he's driving, of course).

Ten minutes pass.

Fifteen.

I'm starting to get a bit agitated. Where the heck is he? In my estimation, the adverts and trailers only usually last for about 20 minutes, so if Jack is any later than this, we risk missing the start of the movie. And we've still got to buy drinks and popcorn.

Running my fingers through my hair, I step inside the foyer to check that he definitely isn't waiting for me inside. But no—there's no sign of him anywhere.

What the hell, Jack, you're scaring me. Where on earth are you?

With mounting concern, I return outside to the front of the cinema and look at my watch again. It's now half past six. My God, the film will almost definitely be starting

now, but where is my date? What could possibly have happened? Could he be stuck in traffic? Did something happen to him on the way? God forbid, did he have an accident and is right now lying somewhere in a hospital bed?

Biting my thumbnail, I begin pacing up and down the street erratically. Fuck, if only I could call him, but he didn't give me his telephone number. In any case, calling his landline would be of little help as once he's left the house, I would have no way of knowing what might have happened en route. Still, it would have been good to at least know if he left the house and was on his way.

And then I really start to panic. Perhaps I misheard him. Perhaps I got the day wrong. Did Jack definitely say six o'clock this evening? My head is so messed up I can't think straight. This is complete torture! Come on Jack, where are you, where are you? Please don't say you've stood me up. Please!

For the next hour, I stand outside the cinema in the freezing cold, holding the line, clinging to the hope that my knight in shining armour will finally put in an appearance. But he doesn't. Every couple of minutes, I see someone approach who I think could be Jack, and my heart skips a beat, only to be disappointed when I find that it isn't. It's no use. I'm all alone out here while everyone else is inside enjoying the highs of Leo and Kate's epic romance. Jesus, I've never felt so shit. I can't believe he would do this to me, yet at the same time, part of me is holding onto the hope that there is an innocent explanation for him standing me up like this. Perhaps he did have an accident. It's certainly possible. I mean, how would I know? I can't exactly call him to check on his wellbeing.

Eventually, after I've stood in the punishing cold for a grand total of an hour and a half, I throw in the towel and cross the road to catch a bus that will take me home. Inside, I feel heartsick and on the verge of tears. This is so unfair. How can this be happening? This was supposed to be the most perfect night ever, but now it's become memorable for all the wrong reasons. But even after all that's happened, I refuse to

give up on Jack and pray that when I next see him, he will be able to explain what happened. I mean, I can't imagine he would do something like this to me on purpose—would he?

At just gone nine pm, I arrive back home in a malaise of misery. My head aches and all I want to do is go to bed. I can't bear speaking to anyone, least of all Cynthia, who I know is going to want to know all the details about the date that never happened. Why do bad things like this keep happening to me? Life is so unfair.

"Hey, how did your date go?" Mum calls from the living room as soon as she hears the front door closing.

"Don't ask!" I mutter. "I just had the worst night ever."

"What was that you said? The best night ever? Oh, Jess, before we discuss your date, I forgot to say, your friend Amina keeps calling. She says it's really important that you phone her back. The last time she called was about five minutes ago. She seems desperate to get hold of you but wouldn't tell me anything. Sounds like a bit of an emergency."

Amina? Wow, I wonder what she wants? She rarely ever calls me at home unless it's to discuss swapping shifts at work. Calling at this time of night feels so out of character, and something doesn't sit right with me. And what's all this about an emergency?

Throwing down my coat, I rush into the hall and pick up the phone to dial Amina's number. As the call connects, my body is wracked with tension. Something tells me I'm not going to like this...

"Hello, Amina, it's Jessica. My mum said you called?"

“Oh my gosh, where have you been? I’ve been trying to get hold of you for ages!” Briefly, I hold the receiver away from my ear. Her voice is so shrill she sounds almost hysterical. “Tell me, did you go on a date with Jack Parker tonight?”

“Um, yeah.” I get a sickish feeling in my throat. “Well, I say it was a date, but he never showed. I just got home from the cinema now.”

There’s a long, painful silence on the other end of the line. “I don’t know how to tell you this, but you were set-up tonight.”

“What do you mean set-up?”

“Georgina and her crew came into the diner this evening and I overheard them talking about it. She said she got Jack to pretend to like you so he could stand you up at the cinema. How fucking sick is that?”

I rub my temples, feeling the onset of the mother of all headaches. “Oh my God...”

“I know. That Georgina is such a fucking bitch. And Jack is a complete melt. I mean, does he own a pair of balls or what? How can he just do everything his girlfriend tells him to? You see? I told you he was a tosser. But Jess, it gets worse.”

“Jesus, can it get any worse?”

“I’m sorry, but it does. Apparently, Georgina and her mates were parked around the corner from the Odeon watching you stand outside. They were there the whole time, and they took pictures of you on a Polaroid. Can you fucking believe it? That bitch took pictures to prove you were there, and she had all the shots laid out on the table in the diner. It’s like she’s obsessed with you. They were all laughing about it, taking the utter piss. I’m telling you, if I ever get that girl alone, she’s going to get the thrashing of her life. Seriously, I wanted to smash her teeth in, but Brian was there,

and, you know, I didn't want to make a scene. But trust me, that bitch is just angling for a fight. Someone needs to rearrange her face so it might as well be me." She hesitates. "Jess? Are you still there?"

"Yes, I'm still here," I croak. My throat is in agony. "Sorry, Amina, I-I've got to go. This is a lot for me to take in, and I need some time to process everything."

"Jess! Please don't go. Speak to me. Are you okay?"

"No...no, I'm not. How can I be? I'm sorry, but I've got to go."

"Please, Jess, don't let those bastards get to you. You were always too good for Jack Parker and you know it."

"I'll speak to you soon. Take care."

As soon as I hang up, my legs buckle from under me, and I crumple to the floor, sobbing hysterically. Pulling myself into a ball, I rock back and forth, crying so hard I get hiccups. The pain of Jack's betrayal is so immense it feels as if someone punched me in the stomach and gave me internal bleeding. Stupid little fool! Did you seriously think he would go for someone like you? How could you have been so stupid?

And it's not only what happened tonight. It's everything. The constant years of bullying. The stress of Mum's illness. Fears for mine and Freddie's future. Everything looks so dark and bleak, I can't see any way out, and it feels like I'm wallowing in quicksand. Like there's a whole heap of shit raining down on me, coming together to create the perfect storm.

I can't take this anymore. I just...can't...take it. I don't want to live on this planet anymore. I hate everything and everyone in it.

The next day, I awake fired up and ready to face the world again. Yes, last night was one of the worst in recent memory, but as I distance myself from what took place, I refuse to let it get me down for long. A good cry has got it out of my system, and I decide it's time to pull myself together and stop feeling sorry for myself. I can't spend the rest of my life wallowing in misery, not when my mum and Freddie need me. I need to have a clear head to face whatever's coming our way and I need to be strong. Nothing is ever hopeless, there is always a solution to everything, you've just got to believe it will happen.

Last night, after I put down the phone to Amina, my mother saw how upset I was and kept pestering me to find out what was wrong. After a painful heart-to-heart, I told her Jack had stood me up, simple as that, but didn't give her the bigger picture about Georgina Wickham and her cronies. I didn't tell her it had all been a set-up and was just the latest in a vicious hate campaign Georgina had waged on me since our school days. Cynthia called Jack a prat and that was kind of the end of it, which suits me fine as I just want to put the whole sorry affair behind me.

After washing myself at the bathroom sink (the bloody shower is broken again) I get dressed and tell my reflection it's time to toughen up, be brave and address each of my problems head-on. First and foremost is the issue of getting hold of another ? 25,000 to pay Mum's medical bills. All night I tossed and turned, trying to think of a solution until finally, I came up with an idea so nuts, even I can't believe I'm actually planning to go through with it. I keep telling myself I must be out of my mind, but desperation can make a girl do crazy things.

I'm planning to contact Jane Waters today to see if she can get a message to Alex Kingswood. I want to see him again and when I do, I'm going to ask him to loan me the remaining twenty-five grand. I plan to appeal to his better nature, come clean about everything and fully explain to him exactly why I need the rest of that money. If Alex agrees to the loan, then I intend to pay him back every single penny legitimately. Even if it takes years, even if I have to work four cleaning jobs and wash

cars all summer, so be it. I'll do whatever it takes to pay him back just as long as it doesn't involve anything sexual. This time around, my audience with Alex Kingswood is to be purely platonic.

It's a shot in the dark, but he's the only person I know who's in a position to help me. I don't exactly have a lot of wealthy friends, plus I have bad credit and was already turned down twice in the past for a bank loan.

Yes, I barely know him, and the likelihood is he'll probably say no. And yes, the thought of going back to that house and seeing him again scares the living crap out of me, but what choice do I have? The way I see it, I've wasted far too much time already. The clock is ticking, and my mother doesn't have forever to wait for this treatment. It's now or never so I just need to suck it up and do what needs to be done.

Swallowing down a quick breakfast of black coffee and scrambled eggs, I grab my bag and keys and head out the door for work. The day is cold and bright but, in the distance, I see dark storm clouds, suggesting there will be rain yet again.

The morning shift at Sloppy Joe's seems to drag but on the plus side, I'm glad to have something to keep me busy as it means I don't have to think too much. I'm also relieved Amina's not working the same shift as me as I couldn't bear to revisit the events of last night again. What Jack did to me is still far too raw and I'm in no fit state to talk about it.

During my tea break, I go to the local phone box and dial Jane Waters' number. Waiting for the call to connect, my hands begin to tremble as I prepare to get my story straight. This has got to sound convincing; I can't afford to screw this up.

"Hello, Premiere Ladies Escort Agency," answers a familiarly plummy voice.

"Jane, it's me."

“Who’s me?”

“Jessica Gardner.”

There’s a short, frosty silence. “Yes, what do you want?”

“Jane, Miss Waters, I have a favour to ask.” I close my eyes, trying to find the right words. “Please could you pass a message to Mrs Kingswood? Please could you tell her that if the offer is still open, I would be more than happy to accept the original terms of our agreement.”

“What cryptic nonsense is that? What on earth are you talking about?”

“Please just tell her. She’ll know what I mean.”

“You do realise that under the terms of the Confidentiality Agreement you signed, we are not even supposed to be discussing this.”

“I know, I know, but this is important. You must understand my situation. With my mother, I mean. I badly need this job.”

Jane’s tone darkens. “Yes, I do understand. But I also remember receiving far less commission than I was expecting. You disappointed me, Jessica. I thought we had a deal, but you broke your side of the bargain. You failed to deliver and the feedback I received from Mrs Kingswood about that night was far from satisfactory.”

“For heaven’s sake!” I cry, tears rolling down my cheeks. “It wasn’t my fault I only received half the money. It was her son Alex who said he didn’t want to go through with it. He kept on changing his mind.” I pause and take a deep breath. “Can you please just pass on that message to Mrs Kingswood? If she agrees to give me a second chance, I promise you’ll get the rest of the money you are owed. Just please,

Miss Waters...I'm desperate."

There's another pause.

"All right," she says quietly. "Leave this with me and I'll see what I can do. Call me back tomorrow around lunchtime and I'll let you know the outcome."

"Oh, thank you, thank you! I promise not to let you down this time."

The line goes dead. For a couple of seconds, I stand in the phone booth with the receiver pressed to my chest. Droplets of rain drum against the windowpanes.

Well, that's it, I've done the best I can. It's in the hands of the universe now. What happens next is anybody's guess.

## Page 7

*Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 3:31 am*

Alex

A deep bass rocks every floor of 50 Hermitage Road as I pull up to the curb opposite. It's approaching two in the morning and a rowdy party is in full swing at the smart three-storey detached house. Through the half-open windows there is the sound of raucous laughter and the heavy dark smell of marijuana drifts out into the night air.

Swaggering through the litter-strewn garden, six youths holding cans of lager go to join the party. They cheer as they watch a drunken girl stumble onto the street and throw up on the pavement. Another partygoer smashes a bottle and waves it menacingly at a passer-by. And all the while, the drum and bass grows louder and louder, shaking the house to its foundations.

For a couple of minutes, I sit in my car studying the house, concealed by the tinted windscreen like a deadly assassin.

So, this is where the bitch lives. She's having a party. She'd better enjoy it while she can because she won't be in a partying mood by the time I've finished with her...

The weather is cool and dry; perfect for what I have planned.

With rising emotions, I think back to the events of the previous evening. I had followed Jessica to the cinema to spy on her date with Mr Adonis. Consumed by jealousy, I couldn't accept that this was the end for us, so I forced myself to drive to Streatham Hill and park on a street corner that provided a full view of the cinema entrance. I watched my beauty step off the bus and was so blown away I could barely breathe.

All dolled up to impress the little cocksucker, she looked good enough to eat in a black leather jacket, white crop top and brown leather trousers. She glowed like a star in the sky, was almost too perfect to be real. I was literally drooling. Her tight clothes clung to every curve of that stunning body, and I got an erection fantasising about what it would be like to see her naked. Damn, that face, those eyes, those lips. Those breasts—so huge and ripe, so succulent, all I wanted was to suck on them. Watch them bounce up and down as I licked her clit and finger fucked her to orgasm. Then, swiftly, my desire turned to anger when I realised that somebody else would be getting to enjoy what should be mine. It wasn't me she had dressed up for. No, it was for that two-timing clown who I just knew was going to let her down.

It was sickening to witness. The excitement on her face as she stood outside the cinema, looking expectantly towards the traffic for any sign of her hot date. The way she chewed her lip, the way she paced up and down, so desperate to see him it was nauseating. The whole thing was like a train wreck. I kept wanting to look away but couldn't. It was like I enjoyed torturing myself.

And then...a miracle happened. Fifteen minutes in and there was still no sign of Mr Adonis. I was jubilant at first, but Jessica looked so crestfallen, I couldn't help but feel sorry for her. Yes, I wanted to fend off the competition but not to the detriment of her wellbeing.

More time passed and the clown still hadn't appeared. She ran inside the cinema to search for him. He wasn't there. Checked the traffic for signs of his Lotus. Nope. She looked so agitated. Kept glancing at her watch. I couldn't help but feel for her as it soon became clear her date wasn't coming. Jack had stood her up, though for the life of me, I could not think why. Was he out of his mind? What man would forgo the chance to be seen on the arm of so perfect an angel? His ingratitude was mind-blowing to me. The fool had her in the palm of his hand and he blew it. Too bad. His loss will be my gain.

As the seconds ticked by, I could see the pain in Jessica's face as she stood outside that cinema in the freezing cold. I could see her confidence erode to nothing. I could see it in her body language. The sense of defeat. The creeping sense of demoralisation that rejection brings. I felt for her, I really did. More than anyone, I know what it is like to be rejected; to be treated like a leper and cast aside.

All I wanted was to jump out of my car and take her in my arms. Kiss away her tears, hold her tightly and let her know that she was very much wanted by someone. And that someone was willing to offer her the Earth. Willing to do anything, travel to Hell and back to be with her. I wanted to tend to her every need, provide her with everything both emotionally and financially. If she were my girlfriend, Jessica would never want for anything. I would treat her like a queen. I would never treat her the way Jack did. Not in a million years.

But it was not the right time to declare my feelings. Much as I longed to run across the street and rescue her from herself, I knew she would only rebuff me. No, I needed to continue to bide my time and wait for the right opportunity to present itself. So, I continued sitting in my Range Rover, watching and waiting, nursing all my pent-up feelings and dreaming of a time when she would one day be mine.

Funny. It turns out the two of us have more in common than I first thought. Though we are polar opposites—she the beauty and I the beast—we have both experienced the agony of rejection and for the first time, I realised that she and I were kindred spirits. Not only do I connect with Jessica sexually, but I also bond with her on a spiritual level. We are soulmates. The stars have aligned, and we are meant to be. All I need to do is convince her.

And then, around thirty minutes in, something unexpected happened. Out of the corner of my eye, I noticed an attractive blonde girl crouching behind a row of parked cars. In her hand she held a Polaroid camera. Every so often, she stood to her full height and looked in the direction of the cinema, before ducking down out of view

again. It was such odd behaviour, I decided to watch her to determine what she was up to. She repeated the strange behaviour a couple of times more before finally, she aimed the camera in Jessica's direction, took a sneaky snapshot and then, sniggering like a hyena, hurried off down a side street.

What was that all about?

My curiosity piqued, I started my car and quietly followed the mysterious blonde up the road to where an old turquoise Mini was parked. Giggling hysterically, she jumped into the driver's seat and shared the photograph with a group of girls sitting in the vehicle. Through the half-open windows, I could hear every word of their conversation as clear as day.

"Shit, how sad is that? Can you believe she's actually still standing there, waiting for him? How long's it been now?"

"Coming up to forty minutes!"

"Georgina, you are so bad. How long's it going to take before the dumb bitch gets the message that Loverboy isn't coming?"

"She's so thirsty she'll probably be there all night."

"Ha! I can't believe she fell for it. This picture you took is sooo funny. Look at her face. She looks like she's going to cry!"

"Oh my God and look at those clothes. She's such a bloody slut."

"More like homeless tramp. I bet she smells. She looks like she smells."

"Of course, she smells. I don't think the Devil's Daughter ever washed at school, did

she? Remember in P.E. how she always used to hide in the changing room while the rest of us showered?”

“Dirty whore was after your man, George. Can you believe it?”

“I know. The audacity!”

The girls exploded with laughter and rage as intense as fire gripped me. God Almighty, so the whole thing had been a set-up from the start to humiliate Jessica and the main instigator was this Georgina person, Jack’s so-called ex-girlfriend. How dare they? How could they be so cruel? How could they do that to another human being? The answer, of course, is jealousy. When it comes to women, it’s a tale as old as time. Jealousy and envy are most often the key to why there are so many fractured female friendships.

I only had to observe Georgina for a short period to get what she was about—the joy on her face as her friends stuck the knife in, the obvious pleasure she took from torturing her victim—and I knew she had bullied Jessica all throughout her teen years. By sheer intuition together with an acute understanding of the foul nature of most human beings, I could tell that she envied Jessica because she was everything Georgina was not: a natural beauty with style, grace and elegance and most of all, class. Something Georgina wouldn’t even know how to spell. On this basis alone, I decided very quickly that these girls needed to be taught a lesson, one they would never forget. Nobody fucks with my beauty.

Nobody.

For the next ten minutes or so, I eavesdropped on their conversation and soon discovered that the following night, Georgina’s parents were going to be away, and she planned to throw a raucous party. That was all I needed to hear. I now had the perfect opportunity to settle the score.

A loud shriek of laughter pulls me back to the current moment. I stare up at Georgina's house. It's an extremely nice period building with a freshly rendered exterior. It will be such a shame to destroy it...

Ah well. Time to make a move.

Silently, I reach in the back seat and wrestle out a black sports bag. Calmly, I unzip it and pull out a glass bottle and a can of petrol. I get out the car and stand at a safe distance. With cool precision, I pour the petrol into the glass bottle, stuff a grubby rag down its neck and set it alight. Adrenaline rushes through my veins. I smile in anticipation of what is to come.

Mustering all my strength, I throw the petrol bomb through the second-floor window and watch it explode into flames. Red and yellow lights up the night sky. Thick charcoal smoke billows out through the windows as the whole floor is engulfed. The pungent smell of charred wood and debris fills the air. I watch the carnage unfold for a couple of seconds, and then I return to my Range Rover and sit behind the wheel, basking in the glory of my act of vengeance.

I hear terrified screams from within but feel nothing; absolutely nothing. No remorse, no sympathy. Nothing. I am completely numb. Their terror is like music to my ears, and I have no qualms whatsoever about the brutality of my actions. I could not care less whether these bastards live or die. They are nasty people who deserve everything that is coming to them. Perhaps Georgina and her friends will think twice the next time they decide to destroy a person's life, especially when that person is someone I regard so highly.

With a mirthless smile, I rev the engine and drive off into the night. Mission complete. Retribution is a bitch.

The next day, as I'm sitting at the piano in the drawing room, playing a little melody I

composed for my own personal amusement, my mother appears in the doorway, her face pale and drawn. As always, she looks like she's dressed for a funeral (I wish she'd start wearing bright colours again), and for a few moments, my fingers continue to dance over the piano keys, lost in a world of symphonic bliss.

"I just received a call from that lady at the escort agency." Her voice strikes a note of discord.

Instantly, I stop playing and turn around to face her. "What did she want?"

"She said Jessica Gardner wants to see you again. Apparently, she wants to proceed with the original terms of our agreement and 'go through with it.' Her words not mine."

Excitement rises in my chest. I can't believe what I'm hearing. "Did she really say that?"

"Yes. Well? What do you want me to tell her?"

"Tell her yes, of course I want to see Jessica again. I want her brought here tonight. See to it that it happens."

Beatrix hesitates and I can tell she has something else she wants to say.

"Yes, Mother, what is it? You have something on your mind, just say it."

"Once you've slept with Jessica; once you've got this fascination with her out of your system, will that be an end to it?"

"What do you mean?"

“I mean, I don’t think it would be wise to continue seeing her again after tonight. By all means fuck her, but after tonight I need you to promise me you will not try to see her again.”

I’m incensed. How dare she dictate to me? “I’ll make no such promise. I’m a grown man and I can make my own decisions.”

“But you must sever all ties with her. You know you must!”

“Why?”

“You know very well why.”

“No, actually I don’t. Please enlighten me.”

She falls silent. I’m toying with her mind again and it’s driving her insane. Good. Let her sweat a bit.

“Just see to it that Jessica is here tonight,” I growl. “Bring her to me for eighty-three...if you know what’s good for you.”

“Is that supposed to be a threat?” my mother asks, and I can hear the hurt in her voice.

I make no response, leaving her to fill in the gaps. The fear on her face is hilarious. I absolutely love torturing her. Satisfied I’ve won this battle, I return to the piano and resume playing. Quietly, Beatrix leaves the room.

As soon as she’s gone, everything goes into free fall. Music continues to pervade the room, but the melody goes a tad offkey, a reflection of my chaotic inner state. My throat constricts and my heart is beating so fast it feels like it will explode. My God,

Jessica wants to see me? Not only that, but she says she is now prepared to sleep with me. This doesn't seem real.

How can all my dreams be coming true at once? I simply don't believe it. There's no way this can be happening. Nothing in life is ever this easy, and I suspect there must be a catch somewhere. There just has to be. Why would she suddenly change her mind? There's got to be a reason. Of course, I desperately want to see her, but I'm not a fool. There has got to be more to this than meets the eye, so I am going to have to keep myself on high alert.

In the meantime, I can savour the excitement of preparing for our date tonight. In a haze of anticipation, I spend the day fantasising about what the night will bring. In the afternoon, I follow my usual exercise routine and go for an hour's run around the estate. Then sometime around six pm, I head upstairs to my bedroom and enter my enormous walk-in wardrobe to find something suitable to wear.

Most of my clothes are bespoke designs made in Europe by the finest tailors and everything is hung meticulously by order of colour. It takes me forever to decide what to wear but eventually I settle on a white shirt, black trousers, an embroidered waistcoat and smart leather brogues. Despite my obvious physical shortcomings, I still like to dress to impress and make the most of myself. To finish up, I search through my collection of vintage watches and select one which matches my ensemble.

Once I'm satisfied with my selections, I take a long hot shower and then, at just before eight pm, I get dressed and give Mrs Bullivant instructions to send Jessica straight to my bedroom as soon as she arrives. Tonight, there will be no dinner, no long-drawn-out conversations, no pussy footing around. Tonight, I want to cut the bullshit, get straight down to business, and find out exactly what Jessica wants from me. I am willing to do anything she asks, prepared to pay any price to get her to consent to the unspeakable acts of carnal pleasure I have planned for her tonight. No

more delays, no more games, no more excuses. Tonight, no matter what happens, I am going to fuck the living shit out of her. And she's going to enjoy it, she's going to beg for more. That I can promise.

As eight-thirty approaches, I get flustered and begin marching up and down my room, scarcely able to contain my eagerness. Every part of my body is on fire. My God, I can't wait for her to get here. I can't wait to see her. The time is passing so bloody slowly, this feels like absolute torture. Collapsing in a high-backed armchair, I survey my surroundings with a critical eye. I've got to admit that my bedroom is the perfect romantic setting: a roaring fire, an enormous four-poster bed fitted with the finest silk-sheets and a view which looks out onto the most beautiful vista of British countryside imaginable. It could not possibly fail to impress.

Finally, at precisely eight-thirty, I hear movement in the hall below, a murmur of voices, followed swiftly by ascending footsteps on the stairs. She's here! Weak with nerves, I run my fingers through my hair and straighten up my clothing in preparation to meet my bewitching enchantress. Even before she enters the room, she's piercing my senses. The hold she has over me is something almost mystical.

Slowly, the bedroom door creaks open, and Jessica enters timidly looking so gorgeous it's a struggle for me to think. Without a scrap of make-up and dressed in old jeans and a T-shirt, she has that sexy 'just rolled out of bed' look that I'm certain was contrived to play down her attractiveness but has quite the opposite effect. If anything, her casual clothes and slightly dishevelled appearance only serve to enhance her natural beauty. Purity radiates from every pore of her being, and it only makes me want her even more. It makes me want to corrupt her...

Briefly, Mrs Bullivant announces her and then inquires if we would both like anything to drink.

"We'll have some red wine," I say authoritatively. "And after that, Mrs Bullivant,

please see to it that we are not disturbed for the rest of the night.”

“Very good, sir. I shall bring the wine up directly.” The housekeeper scuttles off, leaving the two of us alone to face the uncomfortable silence.

Jessica keeps her eyes fixed on the floor and I notice her hands are trembling. My penis stirs. God, everything about her arouses me to near paralytic levels. I can’t stop staring at her lips. I long to bite and suck on them. I yearn to feel their softness against mine.

“How was the drive up?” I ask at last. “Was there a lot of traffic driving up from London?”

“No, it was fine,” she replies, tucking a hair behind her ear. “The journey seemed a lot quicker this time around. I guess that happens when you visit a place for the second time.”

“Yes. It’s just one of those things. Although time is relative, is it not?”

She nods and doesn’t seem to know what to do with her hands. The fear and revulsion on her face are all too apparent, but I pay it no mind. I am far too excited to care.

“Why don’t you sit down?” I purr. “You must be tired after your journey.”

Jessica shakes her head. “I’d rather keep standing, if that’s okay.”

She really needs to loosen up. Perhaps some wine will help take the edge off things...

There’s an awkward pause. The only sound in the room is the fire crackling in the hearth. Discreetly, my gaze travels over her body, absorbing every delectable

curvature. Fuck, I need to touch her so badly.

At that moment, Mrs Bullivant returns and places an ornamental tray of drinks on the cabinet. Turning to face me, she bows her head slightly in reverence. “If that will be all, sir, then I’ll bid you goodnight.”

“Thank you, Mrs Bullivant. Yes, that will be all. Let Hobbs know the two of you can both retire early tonight. Your services will not be required.”

“Very good, sir. Goodnight.” As always, our housekeeper makes very little eye contact with me and almost acts as if Jessica is not here. Good. I have trained her well. Over the years, this once boisterous and outgoing old lady has learnt to mind her own business. It took a while but eventually she got with the programme. She knows my house rules are ‘hear no evil, see no evil’ and she would do well to abide by them, if she wants to keep her job and the cosy home that comes with it.

Once she’s gone and we are alone again, I get up and walk across to the cabinet and pour us both a drink. After handing her a glass, I return to my chair and decide to cut to the chase. “So, tell me, Jessica, what brings you here tonight?”

She takes a large gulp of wine. “I thought you knew? Didn’t the agency tell you?”

“Yes, they gave my mother some inane spiel about you changing your mind and wanting a second chance. But I want to hear it from you. Why did you come back really? I know damn well it was not for love of me.”

Jessica licks her lips and looks so lovely I forget to breathe. “I, that is...I came here to make a deal with you.”

“That’s more like it. Now we are finally getting somewhere.” I drink deeply from my wineglass and watch her intently over the rim. “I’m all ears. Tell me what it is that

you want.”

“I came to ask if you could please loan me the other ?25,000. You see, the thing is Alex...” She breaks off. Scratches the side of her neck. The next few sentences come out in a rush. “Okay, it’s like this. My mother is sick. She has cancer and the doctors have said there’s nothing more they can do for her. Well, not in this country anyway. And there’s this really great clinic in Germany that we think could help her, but it’s going to cost ?50,000.”

There’s a long, dark silence. Her bottom lip trembles. I am moved beyond words and long to take her in my arms and kiss her. Jesus, I had no idea. Now so many things are beginning to fall into place...

“I am so sorry to hear about your mother,” I say softly. “It must be so hard for you and your brother, but especially you. As the eldest, I imagine you’ve probably taken a lot onto your shoulders to help support your mum.”

“Yes...yes, I have.” She takes another swig and then puts down her glass. “But the thing is, Alex, I want you to know that this whole being an escort thing just really isn’t me. You know, I only did it because I was desperate. Under normal circumstances, I would never have considered doing anything like this. I tried so hard to find other ways of raising the money. Up until recently, I worked two jobs, tried to save every penny I could lay my hands on, but it was taking too long. I did everything I could to raise funds legitimately and joining the escort agency was a last resort. Before I knew it, I was in way over my head.” She wipes her nose with her forearm, momentarily lifting her T-shirt and giving me a tantalising glimpse of her beautifully toned stomach and belly button piercing. Goddamn. I want her so badly my bones ache.

“Take your time,” I soothe, trying my best to think pure thoughts. “Take as long as you need.”

“Thank you,” she replies, smiling slightly. “I appreciate it.” After a minute, she has composed herself enough to continue. “Alex, look. If you loan me the money, I promise to pay you back every single penny. Even if it takes years, I am happy to set up a monthly installment plan, whatever works for you. But I really need this money now, you know? I love my mum so much and I’ll do anything for her. Time is of the essence, and I can’t afford to delay getting her treatment any longer. That’s why I’ve come to you today to ask for your help.”

For a long time, I don’t say anything. I just sit in the armchair, staring at her, my mind ticking over the possibilities. Of course, I want to help my beauty. I am appalled to hear what she and her family have been going through and I want her mother to get well again. Without doubt, I will do everything in my power to see to it that Cynthia gets all the help she needs and pray that the treatment in Germany is a success. After all, I want Jessica to be happy. Only a cold-hearted bastard would wish for anything else. However, when it comes to the loan she has asked for, I find myself in something of a dilemma.

Part of me wants to be good and give Jessica all the money with no strings attached. That would be the right and honourable thing to do. But the darkness in me badly wants to throw her down on the bed and break in that sweet, tight virgin pussy. My desire for her is all consuming and I’m fighting a losing battle with the demon within. It’s like I’m burning up with a fever and the only cure is to ravage every single inch of her. I simply cannot allow her to leave this house without at least getting a taste.

“I will give you all the money, no problem,” I say. “And you don’t have to pay me back a penny. I will gift you the whole £25,000. I’ll even throw in a first-class plane ticket to Germany for your mother and pay for her to stay at a five-star hotel for the entire duration of her treatment.”

For the first time since she arrived, Jessica forces herself to look at me. Every part of her body trembles but I commend her bravery. “Are you serious? Would you really

do that?”

“Yes. I can have the money deposited to your bank account first thing tomorrow morning.”

“Oh my gosh, thank you! I-I can’t believe it. I don’t know what to say...”

“Now will you be nice to me?”

“Sure, I can be nice to you.”

“Good. Then let me go down on you.”

Jessica freezes. “W-what?”

“Ever since we met, licking your pussy is all I can think about. You’ve got to let me do it.”

“No, you cannot be serious!”

“I am deadly serious.”

“And if I refuse? What then? You won’t give me the money?”

“Of course I’ll still give you the money. Come on, I’m not heartless. I want to help your mother in any way I can. Jessica, you know how much I like you and I want you to know that you can always come to me for help. I don’t want this to seem like blackmail but...” I hesitate. “I just need to taste you. I need it and I need it now.”

She shuts her eyes and pinches the bridge of her nose. “I-I’m sorry Alex, I can’t do it. It doesn’t feel right. I told you already, I’m not into that sort of thing. I don’t do

sexual favours.”

Come now, my sweet. We both know that isn't strictly true. If it was Jack begging to give you oral sex, you'd be on your back in a heartbeat.

“Now Jessica,” I say sternly. “Be reasonable. I am a man of my word. Have I broken any promises I've made to you so far? I'm going to be straight with you. I'm prepared to do whatever you ask of me. Whatever financial help you need, my door is always open to you. But I have needs too. Looking the way I do, I rarely get the opportunity to be close to someone as divine as you. Is it too much to ask for you to do this one little favour for me? Something that will give me great pleasure?”

“But I can't! I just can't, I'm sorry...”

“You have no idea what it's like to be me. What it's like to be locked up for most of your life away from everyone, deprived of the gentle touch of another living being. Longing to be caressed, longing to be held by someone. Do you know how hard it is to look at someone like you and know you wouldn't allow me to touch you in a million years under normal circumstances. Well, I'll tell you what it's like. It's pure agony. Walk a mile in my shoes and then tell me you'd judge me for wanting and needing something I hardly ever get.”

For a few seconds she goes quiet, apparently moved by my words. Then, she says softly, “I feel for you Alex, I really do. I can't begin to imagine what you've been through and how difficult your life is, but I'm adamant that I don't want to do it. I'm sorry. It wouldn't feel right.”

Her rejection is like a slap in the face, but still, I manage to retain my composure. “I am perfectly aware that you find me physically abhorrent. You think I'm a monster, I get that. But even so, you must understand that I can't pass up this opportunity to do something I've only ever dreamed about. I know it's wrong, but I just can't help

myself. I want you too badly Jessica, and the part of me that wants you must be satisfied. So, I need you to go over to that bed right now, lie down, close your eyes and spread your legs. Let me do the rest. Give me a chance to show you what I can do. You never know, you might even like it.”

Jessica lapses into gloomy silence. The distress on her face is heartrending, and the good boy in me badly wants to leave her be. Let her have the money and stay out of her life for good. But the raging beast within will not be kept at bay. It wants her in the worst way possible and is violently pulling on its leash, ready to destroy everything in its path.

Finally, with a heavy sigh, my beauty turns around and walks towards the bed, her shoulders slumped in defeat.

Before she sits down, I say, “No wait. Dim the lights first. And then...take off all your clothes.” Am I pushing my luck?

“You didn’t mention anything about me taking everything off,” she fires back.

“No...but if we’re going to do this, then I want to do it properly.”

Scowling, she storms across to the dimmer switch on the wall, lowers the lights and casts the room in shadow, the only illumination now coming from the red and yellow flames of the fire. We now have the perfect mood lighting that conveniently still allows me to see everything.

Nervously, she turns to face me, her lashes lowered in shame. Sluggishly, she kicks off her blue ballet pumps. I smile inwardly. Then, slowly, she lifts her T-shirt, pulls it over her head and tosses it to the floor. Her long dark hair cascades around her shoulders like an exquisite waterfall. I catch my breath. Lord Jesus, her breasts are enormous, made all the more prominent by the snow-white Wonderbra cupping each

of those glorious olive-coloured peaks. I'm literally gagging to dive into them.

Breathless with longing, I watch transfixed as she slides down each strap, then reaches behind her back and unclasps her bra. Free from restriction, it drops to the floor, leaving me with an eyeful of unparalleled magnificence: her buck-naked cleavage. Desire ripples through my blood and my cock is so hard it wants to spontaneously combust. I've never seen a naked woman in the flesh and find the experience both arousing and emotional. That I might at last get to touch that which has always been so cruelly out of reach is thoroughly overwhelming.

With maddening slowness, Jessica unzips her jeans and peels them down, past her thighs, past her knees until finally, she steps out of them completely. Throws them across the room. I wipe the corners of my mouth. Loosen up my collar. She has the greatest pair of legs I've ever seen, so endlessly toned and sculpted. I imagine them locked around my waist in the throes of passion.

And then, finally, her pièce de résistance: she rolls down her pretty white thong and throws it to the ground. Jessica is now completely naked.

Taking ragged breaths, I struggle not to keep staring at the glorious, cleanly shaven slit between her thighs. Her cunt looks so delicious I begin to salivate at the prospect of attending to its every need. Briefly, I close my eyes and murmur a silent 'thank you' to the gods. Never in my wildest dreams did I imagine the naked female form could be so beautiful: a light, lyrical composition of sugar and honey, silky soft with a fragrant charm that cannot be surpassed.

My throat goes dry. I am completely and utterly under her spell.

For long moments, my beauty stands before me in all her glory, her eyes to the ground, clearly at a loss for what she is expected to do next.

“Lie down on the bed,” I command. “I’ll take it from here...”

## Page 8

*Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 3:31 am*

Jessica

My body shakes with fear as I lay on the mattress to await my next instructions. Red and gold flames light up Alex's dark bedroom, giving everything a strange, surreal quality. My chest is tight, and I feel slightly nauseous. I can't believe this is happening. How the hell did I end up in this crazy situation?

Quivering, I rest my head against the pillows and squeeze my eyes shut. Despite the heat of the room, my skin feels cold as ice and every one of my limbs is frozen. I decide the only way to get through the next couple of minutes is to pretend it isn't happening; cocoon myself in a bubble of denial and just wait for it to be over so that I can leave this accursed place never to return.

In the darkness of my mind, I once more conjure up the image of Alex's terrifying face. Those demonic blue-green eyes. Those twisted, deformed, almost other-worldly features. And his smile. Fuck, when he smiles, he looks worse than ever: an unpleasant pulling back of the mouth that's more of a leer with rows of teeth that are almost canine in appearance.

And that's the mouth that is about to go down on me...

Holy Mother.

Keeping my eyes tightly closed, I try not to think too much as I sense his approach. For a few seconds, I feel him towering over me, taking time to deliberate, as if sizing up his prey. Then out of nowhere, two strong hands grip my hips and slide my body further down the mattress towards the end of the bed. I gasp with surprise at the

sudden intrusion but still dare not open my eyes.

Then the large, hot hands move from my waist, all the way up my thighs to the tops of my knees and then gently but firmly spread my legs apart, leaving me wide open for what is to come. I'm so scared I feel like crying. I've never been kissed down below before. Never been given oral sex and the thought of it terrifies me, even more so because of who is going to do it. I'm also worried from a hygiene perspective. Am I thoroughly fresh down there? Do I smell? Am I ready for someone to put their tongue in a place I'm not sure they should be?

And then it happens. A cluster of gentle kisses on my inner thighs. Soft, hot lips against my skin that feel so damn good I'm almost paralysed with shock. My God, this cannot be real. Those lips simply cannot belong to Alex Kingswood. No way. I refuse to believe it.

Slowly, the warm, wet mouth continues to travel up my thighs in sweet, sensual exploration, teasing, caressing, planting a trail of fire over all my erogenous zones. My crotch throbs with excitement and an explosion of love juices trickle onto the bed covers. I've never felt so aroused in my life. Jesus, this wasn't supposed to happen. What witchcraft is this?

Gradually, Alex's smooth, full lips move from my thighs to my pussy and with one careful, almost hesitant flick of his tongue, he begins making slow swirls over my clitoris.

"Mmm..." I moan.

"Does that feel good?" he whispers. "Do you like what I'm doing?"

"Y-yes..."

“Do you want more?”

“Yes.”

He needs no further encouragement.

With rising confidence, the gentle swirls and licks transition into intense, confident strokes that probe deep within my soaking wet hole, touching all my soft, sensitive areas, making me whimper with delight. Shockwaves of euphoria zip through my system and I feel like I never want this to end. It feels so divine, so beautiful having his mouth and tongue down there, and oh my gosh, the heat from his breath. Then he ups the intensity. With puckered lips, Alex hungrily sucks my clit in and out of his mouth, creating a glorious sense of friction that makes my knees tremble.

Lord God, the things this man can do with his tongue...

“Your pussy tastes delicious,” he whispers from between my thighs. “So sweet and creamy. I can’t get enough. It tastes better than I ever dreamed it would.”

I only manage a whimper in response. Desire has robbed me of speech.

For what seems forever, I lie pinned to the bed with my eyes closed and my legs spread, Alex devouring my vagina with a passion and expertise that convinces me this boy is no virgin. No. He knows how to bring the most exquisite pleasure to a woman. Only someone with extensive sexual experience would know how to bring me to my knees, quite literally.

Soon, a satisfying warmth rises throughout my body, infusing every nerve ending with little sparks of electricity and I let out a small cry of joy as I orgasm. Rapidly, Alex’s tongue continues to lap and glide up and down my wet slit to ensure the feeling lasts for as long as possible. Then abruptly, he stops licking and moves up my

body to claim my mouth in his, delivering a mind-blowing kiss that makes my head swoon.

His lips are so soft, so warm, the taste of my juices on his mouth exciting me more than words can say. After Jack's cruel rebuff, my confidence was at an all-time low, but the force of Alex's hunger for me makes me feel loved and wanted in a way I've never felt before. Jesus, he's such a fantastic kisser. Not that I'm an expert of course, my experience limited to the couple of times Midge French-kissed me behind the bike shed at school as part of a game of Truth or Dare. Alex's lips feel different from a girl's but I've got to say they are just as addictively soft, and oh my goodness, the things he can do with his tongue are indescribable.

As our kiss intensifies, his hand travels down to my boobs. Assertively, he cups and gropes them, making me groan for more. In answer to my prayers, he breaks off kissing me, moves down to my breasts and gently bites and sucks on each nipple, pulling and tugging on them to deliver just the right amount of pain. My pussy gushes, and my body is just crying out for further exploration. Slowly, he runs his long, hot tongue up and down my lower abdomen before licking and caressing my bellybutton piercing. My head is telling me not to want this, but the truth is I do.

"Turn around for me..." Alex breathes. "I want to taste every inch of you."

Obediently, I allow him to flip me over onto my front. Starting at the soles of my feet, he slowly works his way up my body, licking and kissing every dip and contour, taking his time to savour every last morsel of flesh. Stifling a moan, I bury my face in the pillow and try to stay quiet as he runs his tongue all over the backs of my calves, my thighs, my spine, my shoulders, my neck, before moving back down towards my buttocks.

Softly, gently, he glides his tongue all over each rump, sensually tracing the letters of the alphabet with his saliva. Then, flattening his tongue, he plunges deep inside my

anus, licking me out like he's licking Nutella from a spoon.

Feeling light-headed, I sink my teeth into the pillow to stop myself from screaming. Fuck, I've never felt anything so good. I had no idea people did things like this to each other. It feels sort of nasty but a good sort of nasty if that makes sense. A wonderfully new experience, the most intimate, exquisite feeling imaginable.

"You like that, don't you?"

"Y-yes..."

"Do you want more?"

"Yes."

"Spread your legs a little so I can go deeper."

Submissively, I follow his instructions and gasp as he turns up the intensity, probing my buttocks so deep I can't feel my legs. My God, I don't know how much longer I can take this...

A long period of time passes where I almost lose consciousness. My mind goes totally blank and all I can focus on is the delicious heat of his tongue exploring my darkest regions. It's so good I never want it to stop. I want it to go on forever.

Finally, after he's finished feasting, Alex carefully turns me onto my back, causing me to whimper with excitement. Every part of me is burning and I'm desperate to feel a new kind of penetration, one I haven't experienced before...

"I'm sorry, but I'm going to have to fuck you," he says softly. "You turn me on so much...I need to be inside you now. Is that going to be a problem?"

Lust trickles between my thighs. For a moment, we touch foreheads. The heat of his sweat sears my skin.

“Answer me, my beauty. I know you want it, but I need your consent. Say you want me to fuck you.”

“Yes,” I gasp, unable to control my desire any longer. “I want you to fuck me. Do it, do it now...”

Instantly, Alex releases me and gets up from the bed with an eagerness that’s almost frightening. I hear the rustle of clothing. For the first time since the foreplay began, I finally open my eyes and almost have a heart attack. Even in a dimly lit room, he looks far worse than I remembered, and I’m consumed with fear as the full realisation of what I’ve just agreed to hits me. I’m about to give my virginity to the devil incarnate.

With my eyes closed, it was easy to forget who was making me feel this good. It was easy to pretend it was someone else making me come harder than I ever could through masturbation. In the sweet safety of darkness, I could imagine it was another man doing all those wonderful things to me. But now I’m jolted back to reality with a resounding thud.

What the hell have I signed up for?

I’m left with little to no time to contemplate.

Very quickly, Alex sheds his waistcoat and shirt and I’m shocked by what I see beneath. The man may have a face that could give Satan nightmares, but he has a body to die for. There’s not an ounce of fat on him. His stomach is flat as a washboard, his biceps are huge and every single inch of him is toned to absolute perfection.

And then he does that awful smile again with those canine teeth, and I'm forced to look away, not wanting him to think for one second that I'm ogling him.

With my gaze averted to the wall, I focus for a while on the strange shapes cast by the fire. Then I hear the sound of him stepping out of his trousers and my sense of alarm rises to fever pitch. Trembling, I turn my head discreetly in Alex's direction and every muscle in my body freezes.

Holy Mother of God!

My eyes shoot straight to his nether regions and what I see makes me go light-headed. He's hung like a fucking horse. His penis is so huge it's borderline abnormal—so big and thick and long it's obscene. I don't pretend to be an expert on penises, but what I do know is that thing absolutely terrifies me. Instinctively, I snap my legs shut. No way. No way in hell is that thing coming anywhere near me. It will tear me apart—if I could even get it to fit up there in the first place. This is a non-starter. It's time to call an end to this madness. No way is he putting that thing up inside me. No, no, no.

"I-I'm sorry, I can't do this."

"What do you mean?"

"I think I made a mistake. Can I go home please?"

"Wait, just calm down," Alex says gently. "Take it easy, my beauty. We're not going to rush anything. I promise we can take things as slowly as you like."

Shaking my head vehemently, I say, "No, I really need to go. I don't want to do this anymore...I'm not ready. Keep the money, I don't care anymore. I just want to go home."

“Is that what you truly want? Tell me truthfully now.”

In answer to his question, I jump up from the bed and make a desperate run for the door, but he’s far too quick for me. In one lightning-quick move, Alex catches me around the waist and within seconds, we’re locked in another embrace, kissing each other hard, our mouths bonded together in a dance of wild abandon. My head is screaming for me to get out of here and run for the hills, but my body has taken on a mind of its own. My pussy is pounding and has a hankering for something only his mammoth cock can satisfy.

The harsh truth is I now want Alex so much it scares me. Try as I might to deny it, from the moment we met there has been a magnetic connection between us that is hard to fathom; an insane dichotomy where he both excites and terrifies me, attracts and repels me, and the part that is attracted to him has reigned victorious. His relentless pursuit has finally paid off and I’m now under some sort of spell that has me doing things against my better judgement.

After laying me on the bed, Alex leaves the room and returns a moment later carrying a large white towel. Gently, he raises my hips, places the towel and a pillow beneath me, then he lifts both my legs onto his shoulders and slowly lowers himself on top of me. My breath hitches. His monstrous eyes scorch down into the depths of my soul, and I’m so terrified it’s like I’m paralysed.

“There’s going to be some pain and a little bit of bleeding,” he says. “But I promise you that when I’m done, it’s going to feel so good. Tonight, I’m going to make you a woman and teach you how to take dick, and you’re going to love it, trust me.”

For the hundredth time, I ask myself how I got into this crazy situation.

Slowly, Alex begins to push the big chunky head of his penis into my tight hole, and almost immediately, I let out a loud cry of pain. Right away, he places one hand over

my mouth and tells me to shush. Whispers for me to calm down and says if I can just hold on for a minute, it will start to feel good. Then, tenderly, he wraps my arms around his shoulders and continues gently thrusting. I bite the inside of my cheek to smother another scream. Fuck, that bloody hurts!

It's at this point I suddenly realise I forgot to ask him to put on a condom. I've been so caught up in the moment, so consumed with lust, it didn't once cross my mind to ask him to use protection. I'm on birth control but still would have preferred to double up. After all, how do I know where this dick has been? How many women has Alex slept with? Jesus, does he make using prostitutes a regular thing? What if I catch something nasty? Fleetinglly, I think of the unopened packet of Durex lying in my handbag downstairs, but somehow, my mouth refuses to formulate a sentence. It's like I'm frozen or in the grip of a spell.

Little by little, Alex continues nudging his enormous shaft deeper, deeper up my dark cavity, expanding my tight hole with ever increasing thrusts, making my blood and juices flow, tearing through my sacred veils of Womanhood. Deeper and deeper he pounds, bumping and touching all my most sensitive spots, filling me up until I can't take any more. The pain is so excruciating I feel like passing out, but somehow, I manage to hold my nerve. On and on it goes until at last, he's all the way to the hilt, and his soft grunts and groans of enjoyment turn me on so much that despite the soreness, I find myself wanting him to go deeper.

"Shit, your pussy is so tight," Alex moans. "Open up more, baby, so I can get inside you properly."

Obediently, I spread my legs wider for him and gasp as his cock suddenly slams in full throttle, taking me to new heights of euphoria I didn't dream possible. It's like he's a wild animal, fucking me fast and hard with deep, unrelenting strokes that send me completely crazy. I open my eyes to see my breasts bouncing up and down in time to each of his savage thrusts. The bedframe bangs loudly against the wall. My

God, the sensation of pleasure and pain is incredible and nothing I've ever experienced can compare.

"Your cunt is so sweet," he whispers in my ear. "Never did I dream you would feel this beautiful around my dick. It's like bathing in hot sticky syrup."

Desire consumes every pore of my being and the feel of his mammoth cock between my thighs is just too good for me to stop. I need him to keep going. I need him to go deeper and by God, I need him to make me come. The thrill is just too much to handle. Back and forth he slams, pushing the bed to breaking point, until finally, big, joyful bursts of delight ricochet through me, sending high voltage jolts of ecstasy from the tips of my fingers to the ends of my toes.

As I yell loud enough to wake the people in the next village, Alex increases his violent strokes and very soon, he too is roaring with elation. I feel an enormous fountain of hot semen shoot up inside me. Panting hard, he collapses on top of me dripping with sweat, the two of us a mass of tangled limbs. For a long time, we just lie there, and then slowly, I attempt to extricate myself, but Alex refuses to budge, not wanting to let me go.

"No," he breathes against my neck. "Don't you dare move. I want every single drop of my cum inside you. I want you to take it all in and savour it."

My breathing grows shallow, and I can feel his heart beating against mine. Then at last, he releases me, gets up and goes into the bathroom, returning shortly with a flannel and a bowl of water. Kneeling beside the bed, he proceeds to gently wipe all the blood from my private parts, the cool water a welcome relief from the stinging soreness down below.

"I'm sorry if I hurt you...but you enjoyed it, didn't you?"

“Y-yes,” I whisper.

“Good. I love making you come. Do you think you can take more? I think I’m ready to go again.”

I squeeze my thighs tightly together. “I-I don’t think I can take more right now. It was mind-blowing but once was enough. I’m much too sore.”

“Okay,” he says softly. “If you change your mind, let me know.”

Silently, Alex finishes cleaning me up and then, placing the wash things on the dresser, throws back the duvet covers, climbs into bed, and pulls me into a vice-like embrace it’s impossible to escape. It’s like I’m his property now and he has no intention of ever letting go.

Locked in his frighteningly powerful arms, I feel so hot and stifled I can barely breathe but dare not complain in case I upset him. We just had the most explosive sex ever, but at the same time, in the back of my mind, I know I still need to work to keep him sweet. I can’t do anything to sabotage getting that final twenty-five grand to my mother, so I’ll need to play nice for as long as it takes to get out of here. Her life depends on it.

“What are you thinking about?” Alex whispers, stroking my cheek. “Are you okay? Talk to me.”

“No, it’s nothing,” I reply. “I-I’m fine.”

“You sure?”

“Yes.”

“I can’t tell you how privileged I feel to be your first. That you opened up and gave your body to me so freely will be something I treasure forever. What we just did was so...so magical, I can’t even describe it. This has truly been the best night of my life.”

I have no words. I am too choked up with emotion to speak.

Lovingly, he kisses my forehead and I’m so exhausted, before long I fall into a deep, slightly troubled sleep. Lord knows what tomorrow will bring.

The next morning when I wake up, the space beside me on the bed is empty. Alex is nowhere to be seen. The curtains are drawn but thin rays of sunlight peak through to reveal a magnificent room of opulence and splendour. For a few minutes, I lie in a daze, buried beneath the quilt, not wanting to leave the warmth and sanctity of the four-poster bed. The mattress is the most comfortable I’ve ever slept on and highlights just how hard and springy my one is at home. I try to turn sideways and wince as a sharp twinge of pain shoots through me. Every part of me is still so sore from last night, especially between my legs. Holy fuck, last night...

Closing my eyes, I momentarily cast my mind back to the wild sex I had with Alex. Him going down on me. Touching and caressing every inch of my body with his lips. The delicious feeling of his monster cock tearing through me. I get wet just thinking about it and instinctively, reach down to stroke my clit. Without him inside me, it feels as if a part of me is missing.

And then I snap out of it and desperately push salacious thoughts from my mind. Shit, what time is it? Turning, I glance at the clock on the dresser and see that it’s just gone ten am. I begin to panic as I realise I’m stark naked in a strange house with no idea how long it’s going to take for me to be allowed to leave this place.

Then I start to notice other things. On a chair by the wall is a fluffy white dressing

gown and a bath towel. On the cabinet, lies a single red rose. Beside it, propped against a table lamp, is a large, laminated card with William Morris' The Strawberry Thief printed on it. Reaching out, I pick up the card, flip it over and read an inscription written in the most beautiful, old-fashioned handwriting: Dear Jessica, thanks so much for a wonderful evening. You have given me memories that will stay with me forever. Yours, Alex.

My throat closes up. A rose and a card. How beautifully romantic. Nobody has ever done something like this for me before and under different circumstances, I would be over the moon. Unfortunately, because it's coming from Alex Kingswood, the cute gesture leaves me feeling sick and more than a little guilty. I don't want him having these kinds of thoughts about me. No way do I want him getting attached. What we did last night must never happen again and after today, we must both go our separate ways.

Still, it was awfully sweet of him...

Suddenly, there's a timid knock on the door. Christ, who can that be? In a panic, I grab the quilt and pull it up to my chin to preserve my modesty. Then, clearing my throat, I tell the person to come in. Tentatively, the door opens, and Mrs Bullivant enters the room carrying a tray laden with tea, toast and jam plus a full English fry up of bacon, eggs and sausages. At the sight of it, my stomach begins to rumble. The scent of freshly fried bacon makes me realise how hungry I am, having not eaten since yesterday afternoon.

"Good morning," the old woman greets politely, placing the tray before me. "I hope you slept well."

"Um, yes I did, thanks," I reply, blushing at my nakedness. My God, what must she think of me? But Mrs Bullivant doesn't bat an eyelid. In fact, she can barely bring herself to look at me. Something about her evasiveness makes me uneasy, like she's

privy to some dark secret I'm not in on.

"I wasn't sure what food you wanted," she continues, "so I brought you a little of everything. If there is anything you don't like, please let me know and I can get you something else."

"No, no, this looks great, thank you. I love a full English." I crack a smile, but it's not reciprocated.

She gestures to the towel and dressing gown on the chair. "Once you have finished your breakfast, please feel free to take a shower in the en suite. Everything is laid out for you. After you've finished washing and dressing, Mr Kingswood has requested that you stay in this room until he comes to get you. Is that understood?"

"Yes," I whisper. "Loud and clear."

Crikey, these people are so weird and creepy, I just want to get out of here. It feels like I am constantly being talked down to. What is this place? Alcatraz? After she's gone, I hurriedly drink my tea and wolf down my breakfast then, throwing on the dressing gown, go to the bathroom to clean my teeth and take a quick shower. I find the steaming hot jets of water purifying and come out of the cubicle feeling refreshed.

Patting my hair dry with a towel, I return to the bedroom to find a gorgeous green dress laid out for me on the bed. Another gift from Alex. But where the heck are my clothes from yesterday? Crouching, I look down the side of the bed and see my old ballet pumps, but my jeans, T-shirt, bra and knickers are nowhere to be seen. Straightening up, I put my hands on my hips and scan the entire room, but there's definitely no sign of them.

My brows snap together.

What on earth have these people done with my stuff?

Perhaps Mrs Bullivant put them in the wash, which is fine, but it means I'll have to travel home wearing no underwear. Too bad, I don't plan on hanging around waiting for clothes to dry. Whatever happens, I refuse to allow anything to slow me down, I just need to get home as soon as possible.

After I've finished drying my hair, I slip into the dress which fits perfectly and is made of the most wonderfully soft material. With a scooped neckline and slightly tailored waist, it reminds me of something vintage from the 1950s and I absolutely love it.

Smoothing down my hair, I sit for a moment on the freshly made bed (Mrs Bullivant must have done a little housekeeping while I was in the shower) and gaze around Alex's bedroom. It's a truly amazing space full of antique furniture and ornaments on the mantelpiece which look as if they cost a fortune. Despite its splendour however, the room is tinged with a dark atmosphere like everything in this house, and I remember Alex's comment about this place being a beautiful prison. Just how many years did he spend locked up in this place? Magnificent as it is, I could see how monotonous and dull it could become if this were my only living space.

After a while, I get up from the bed and walk across to the large sash windows that look out over the extensive grounds of Claremont Hall. It is truly a breath-taking sight filled with a patchwork of perfectly maintained flower gardens, a boating lake and never-ending hills of green.

Out of nowhere, my body switches to high alert as the bedroom door opens and I hear the sound of soft footfalls on the carpet. Even before he approaches, I can feel Alex's dark aura seeping in, engulfing me with a mixture of both excitement and fear. My shoulders stiffen and I flinch inwardly at the prospect of what is to come.

Refusing to turn around, I continue to gaze out of the window at the panoramic views of the estate, willing myself to stop trembling. I utter a gasp as he places two strong hands on my shoulders.

“That dress looks stunning on you,” he murmurs. “It fits so perfectly. Do you like it?”

“Y-yes,” I whisper. “I love it. Thank you.”

Slowly, his hands travel from my shoulders down to the sides of my arms before gently but firmly gripping hold of my waist. Then, with a low growl, Alex presses himself up hard against me, and my knees go weak as I feel the enormity of his erection. For long moments, he strokes his wood up and down my bottom, touching, teasing, the thin material of my dress the only barrier to us making direct skin-to-skin contact.

With a quiet moan, I throw my head back and close my eyes as sticky juices trickle down my thighs. Once more, my body has taken on a mind of its own and I’m like putty in his hands. Then, mercifully, Alex releases me, and his voice resumes a business-like tone.

“Just so you know, Jessica, I spoke to my bank this morning and arranged for the funds to be deposited to your account today. The next time you check your balance, you should see it in there.”

“That’s wonderful news, I can’t thank you enough. You’ve been so good to me.” Flustered, I bite my thumbnail and continue staring out the window. My mind has gone blank and I can’t think of anything else to say. Much as I want to, I still can’t bring myself to look at him.

“You’re going to need to give me your telephone number,” he says suddenly.

“W-what?”

“I’m going to need a number to contact you on to discuss the dates your mother is due to fly out to Germany. Remember, I’ve still got to buy those plane tickets and make arrangements for the hotel. It makes sense for us to swap numbers now, so we don’t have to keep passing messages through the escort agency.”

Oh, my goodness. He’s right, but Jesus, I can’t have him calling my house phone. What if my mother picks up?

Tucking a hair behind my ear, I try desperately to think of an excuse. “I, um, that is...” Shit, I can’t think of anything. There’s no way out of this. “Can’t I just take your number and I’ll call you instead? If you tell me when a good time would be to call you...”

Alex’s tone darkens. “Why? Is there a problem with me having your phone number? Don’t you want me to be able to contact you?”

“No, no, there’s not a problem, of course you can call me...”

“Good. There’s a notepad and pen on the cabinet over there. Write it down now.”

Obediently, I do as I’m told while inwardly cursing myself for not having prepared better for this conversation. I thought I was so smart. I’d assumed that after today, we would have no need to ever speak to each other again, but of course, we still have outstanding business to settle that conveniently allows Alex to have access to my personal contact details. I’m such a fool.

After I’ve written down the number, I say, “Listen, if you call and my mother answers the phone, please can you tell her you’re from Storm Models Management.”

“Let me guess. Cynthia doesn’t know about the escort work.”

“No, she doesn’t, and she’d go completely ballistic if she did, so please, when you do call, be discreet, okay? I need to keep this just between the two of us. She thinks I earned this money through modelling jobs, and I want to keep it that way.”

“No problem. I promise not to upset the applecart.” Then suddenly I’m in his arms again and my head starts to spin. Alex’s lips find mine, covering them with a savage kiss and all my silent protests drain away to be replaced by a wild beating of my heart. His hands travel down my spine and roughly grope my backside, making me moan inadvertently. For an interminable time, I remain locked in his arms enjoying this sweet surrender, until finally, he releases me.

“Don’t go home yet. Can’t you at least stay for the afternoon? I could show you around the grounds of the estate, show you my orange groves. Then we can have lunch alfresco style on the terrace. I just want some more time with you. What do you say?”

I lower my lashes. “I-I’m sorry Alex, that sounds lovely, but I really must be getting back. It’s a long drive to London and my mum will be wondering where I am.”

“Where does she think you are right now?”

“I told her I’m on another modelling assignment. Honestly, I need to be getting back to help look after Freddie. He can be a real handful at times, and I’ve been gone too long already.”

“All right, fine,” Alex says. “I don’t want to keep you here if you have other things that need attending to with your family. But tell me, when do I get to see you again?”

“I don’t understand. I thought this was it. What do you mean when will we see each

other again?”

“Isn’t it obvious?”

“No, I’m sorry, you’ve lost me.”

“I’m crazy about you, Jessica. You must know that by now. You’re in my head all the time, I think about you 24/7. Last night was incredible. What we shared was the most beautiful, most intimate experience of my entire life and I worship the ground you walk on.”

“Please...” I whisper. “I don’t want to hear this.” Biting my lip, I keep my eyes fixed on the carpet, refusing to meet his gaze.

“You’re going to hear this, because it’s true,” he says, his voice cracking with emotion. “I want you to be my girlfriend, simple as that. I want to take care of you. I want to be the only man in your life that will always be there for you, be loyal to you, provide you with everything you need both emotionally and financially.”

No, no, no, this wasn’t supposed to happen.

This was supposed to only be a one-night thing, not the start of a full-blown relationship. I can’t agree to this, no way. We are complete opposites, our worlds are too different, it would never work, plus, Jesus, how could I ever introduce him to my family? What would Cynthia say? How would I even begin to explain how we know each other or the seedy circumstances under which our relationship was forged?

In a daze of anxiety, I turn around and stare back out of the window, trying to play for time. It feels like I’m trapped in a recurring nightmare.

“I’m sorry Alex, this is nothing personal, but I can’t be in a relationship with anyone

right now.”

“Why not?” he demands. “Is it because of the way I look? Are you ashamed to be seen with me?”

“No, it’s not that. Do you seriously think I’m that shallow? Of course, it’s not that. No, it’s because I’ve got far too much on my plate right now. I just don’t have the time. I’m busy with my part-time job and any other free time I have I must focus on my mother and looking after Freddie...”

“And who looks after you, huh? Tell me that? Who do you turn to when you need emotional support? You need a proper man in your life, and I’m more than ready, willing, and able to be that man, Jessica. You’re everything I ever wanted in a woman, and I know I can make you happy, if you’d just give me the chance. I want to take care of you, and I want to take care of your family, so let’s stop playing games. It’s time for us to be open and honest with each other. Don’t deny your feelings. You might not care to admit it, but I know you’re crazy for me too.”

“What?! My goodness, what makes you think I’m crazy about you?”

“Well, I know you’re crazy about my dick.” His voice lowers an octave. “I know you think about it all the time—how big and thick and long it is. How it fills you up. How it stretches you out. Now you’ve had a taste for it, you can’t get enough, can you? I bet you’re gagging for it right now.”

I shake my head, yet every single word he said is true, but I’ll be damned if I give him the satisfaction of knowing it.

“You’re insane,” I mutter unconvincingly. “All right, I’ll admit the sex was good. Better than good, in fact. Mind-blowing. But I can live without it. If you think you can control me just because you’ve got a big dick and made me orgasm a few

times...” The sentence dies.

Who the hell am I kidding?

I hear the rustle of clothing, the sound of trousers hitting the floor and even without looking, I know that he’s naked. Oh, fuck. What is he going to do now? For a long time, I remain frozen by the window with my back to him, my arms folded protectively across my chest. Inside a battle is raging. Part of me desperately wants to turn around and see what he’s up to but the other part of me wants to flee. I’m locked in perpetual ‘fight or flight’ mode, and I’m torn between the two. Then, as if pulled by an invisible force, I give into temptation and sneak a glance behind me.

Alex is lying on the bed slowly masturbating, watching me intently with what appear to be yellow animal eyes. He has the face of a demon but the body of a Greek god. Nestled between powerful thighs sits a cock as erect as Nelson’s Column and about twice as thick. My jaw drops. I can’t stop staring at it. It’s like I’m in the presence of something sacred or mystical or like I’ve been hypnotised.

“I maybe ugly as sin but I can make you come more times than you can count. I know you love what I do to you and right now you’re completely gushing for me. Come on, let me give you one more for the road. This cock is right here waiting for you. Your name is written all over it. Now, let’s make a deal...”

“I don’t do deals,” I say. “Like I said, you’re insane.”

“All right, a challenge, then. I challenge you to walk out of this house right now without sitting on this dick. If you can do that, then we’ll call it quits. We can forget this ever happened and I promise to leave you alone for good. But...” He breaks off, his grip on his penis growing more intense. “If my suspicions are proved to be correct and you can’t resist fucking me, then I’ll take that as a ‘yes’ to you being my girlfriend. Do you agree to those terms?”

“Yes! Oh my gosh, yes! That will be so easy.”

“Good. Let’s see you do it then.”

“All right, I will.” Mustering all my strength, I turn on my heel and begin boldly taking steps towards the door, but just as I reach the threshold, I find myself slowing down. What the heck? It’s such an odd sensation, like invisible hands holding my feet down, as if I’ve been glued to the spot. Squeezing my eyes shut, I try not to think about how good his penis feels, how big and thick and long it is, but the more I try to fight the impulse, the worse it gets. My pussy is yearning for a wrecking and juices flow down my legs like a tap that can’t be turned off.

Fuck, fuck, fuck. This is crazy. I need him inside me, I need him inside me...

Next thing I know, I’m hitching up my dress and running back towards the bed in the grip of some mad, feverish hunger. I’m so wild and out of control I can’t see straight, can’t think straight. The only thing I can feel is a frantic, almost painful throbbing down below that can only be sated by one thing...

In a trance-like state, I straddle Alex and roughly lower myself onto his enormous shaft, gasping as he quickly pushes through the tightness and starts impaling me with deep, delicious thrusts. Up and down I bounce, grinding his dick furiously, moaning with ecstasy as I relish the sensation of being completely and utterly owned by him.

“Good girl,” he breathes. “Take it all up there. Fuck, your cunt is so tight. You’re learning to handle my dick so well, aren’t you? Mmm...oh yeah, give it to me.” After a few moments of bumping and grinding, he pushes up my dress, grips hold of my backside and spreads my buttocks wide, opening me up so that he can get all the way to the hilt. I throw my head back. Let out a loud cry of delight. Shit, this is too good to stop. I want this to go on forever and ever.

“Don’t you dare look away from me,” Alex whispers. “Look at me and know whose cock is making you feel this good. No closing your eyes. No imagining you’re with some pretty boy. The reality is you’re getting fucked by a big ugly son of a bitch and you love it. Don’t you?”

“Y-yes...”

“Don’t you!”

“Yes, yes, yes!”

“Then open your fucking eyes and look at me.”

Bravely, I open my eyes and look down into his demonic face, holding his gaze without flinching. A sharp thrill of terror shoots up my spine. My heart races. My muscles tense. But still, I keep on going, intensifying my hip thrusts as I experience a deeply pleasurable adrenaline rush that increases all levels of sensitivity. Staring into Alex’s face is like watching a horror movie and getting fucked at the same time—it creates a delicious fusion of excitement and fear that greatly enhances the sexual experience and once I’ve got a taste for it, I can’t get enough.

“That’s it,” Alex rasps. “Keep riding it. Harder, my sweet, harder, give it all you’ve got. Fuck, I’ve never seen anything so beautiful. You’re sending me crazy...”

Suddenly, he grips hold of my waist, lifts me off him as if I weigh nothing and swiftly turns me over onto my hands and knees. Moving his fingers down to the small of my back, he roughly slaps my buttocks before positioning himself behind me, stroking his cock vigorously against my soaking wet slit. With one dynamite thrust, he pushes inside like a bullet and for a moment, I can’t move, the soreness is so acute. Then, as I start to get used to it, pain soon gives way to pleasure and I’m back to enjoying myself again.

Back and forth he slams, burrowing his monster cock deeper and deeper, hitting my womb each and every time. I whimper as if I'm being tortured but it's a glorious type of torture. Sliding forward onto my elbows, I raise my hips upwards to give him more leverage, and he gets so deep I can feel his ball sacks slapping against my clit.

Holy fucking shit, it hurts so good.

Very soon, a fire stirs in my belly and Alex speeds up his super-charged thrusts, pounding and pounding my pussy till at last I feel an explosion of fireworks. We cry out in unison as we reach an earth-shattering climax and Alex pulls out swiftly, spraying a jet of semen all over the bed covers.

Panting heavily, I collapse onto the mattress and bury my face in the pillow, the orgasm so intense it feels like an out of body experience. Meanwhile, Alex stands at the foot of the bed, towering over me in triumph.

“You belong to me now Jessica,” he growls. “There’s no going back. You accepted the challenge and now you must keep your side of the bargain. From this moment on, I consider us to be official. Seven pm next Saturday, I’m going to send Hobbs to pick you up from your house and bring you back to me. We’re going to have dinner and the most romantic evening you’ve ever experienced.”

“Okay...okay...” is all I can manage. “You win.”

In this moment of weakness and vulnerability, I'll pretty much agree to anything he says. I'm too exhausted to put up any further resistance. He's got me hooked and he damn well knows it. But you know what the worst part is? All I can think about is when I can next get under him.

Once I've finished recharging, Alex gets dressed and then helps me into the bathroom to assist cleaning me up. Then he leaves the room and returns a short time later

holding a stunning gold necklace featuring a winged scarab carved from a yellowish-green gemstone.

“Wow, that’s gorgeous,” I gasp.

“Come over here, let me put it on you.”

“No, no, I couldn’t...”

“That wasn’t a request, my sweet. It was an order. Now come over here.”

Meekly, I walk across to him and wait patiently as he secures it around my neck. Once in place, I gaze down and marvel at its weight and the beauty of the exquisite craftsmanship.

“This necklace was a gift from King Farouk I of Egypt to my great grandfather,” Alex explains. “That scarab is made from a piece of Libyan Desert Silica Glass. It is among the rarest minerals on Earth and is found only in the Great Sand Sea. Apparently, this necklace once belonged to a Pharaoh’s daughter and is supposed to bring the wearer good fortune. I want you to have it.”

My eyes widen. “Oh no, no! I can’t take this. It must be worth a fortune.”

“It’s not the cost that matters but the sentiment behind it. I want you to wear this as a token of my affection.”

“What?! No, please, Alex. I can’t take this. It wouldn’t be right. It’s a family heirloom, and we’ve only just met.”

“Jessica...I insist. Just humour me, okay? I’ll be very offended if you refuse my gift to you.”

“All right, okay, I’ll take it. Thank you so, so much. I have no words to convey just how much I love it.” And I mean it. Nobody has ever given me something so beautiful and the thought gets me all choked up.

For a few moments, Alex doesn’t say anything, just continues to stare at me like he’s scared I might run away if he takes his eyes off for a second. Then, tenderly, he takes hold of my hand and leads me downstairs to the hall where Mrs Bullivant is waiting with my bag and coat. Five minutes later, we’re out on the driveway where Hobbs and the Rolls are parked ready to take me home. Despite everything that’s happened, I can’t help but feel a sense of relief at finally being able to leave this place and return to normality.

As I step into the back seat, Alex gives my hand a final squeeze and says softly: “Remember, Jessica, seven pm Saturday, okay? Don’t forget.”

“I won’t,” I reply with a sinking feeling. “I-I look forward to it.”

“Me too. I’ll be counting down every second until then. I miss you so much already...”

Smiling thinly, I fold my arms and stare straight ahead, unable to bring myself to return the sentiment. Dammit. I feel like such a fraud. After we’ve said a final goodbye, Hobbs steers the car out of the drive, and we begin moving slowly towards the entrance gates. Glancing over my shoulder, I take one final look at Claremont Hall, and notice something that makes every hair on my neck stand up. Parked further down the driveway is a shiny black Range Rover. Oh my God. So, Freddie was right. Alex has been following me. No, not following. Stalking me. What the hell have I gotten myself into?

## Page 9

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Jessica

As soon as I get home, I burst into the living room to find Freddie playing with his toy cars and Cynthia putting the finishing touches to her latest creation—a painting of David Beckham holding an ethereal teddy bear. Before she can say anything, I blurt: “Mum, I’ve got the most amazing news. Guess what? I just got paid for my latest modelling job and we now have all the money for your medical treatment!”

For a second, she appears too stunned to speak. Then she puts down her paintbrush and lets out an almighty shriek of joy. “Oh my God, darling, that’s wonderful! I can’t believe it. I have no words. Is this...is this really happening?”

“It is,” I say, wiping away a tear. “You’re going to Germany and you’re going to get all the help you need to make you better, finally.”

In a daze of joy, Cynthia grabs my hand, and then she grabs Freddie’s, and we all dance around the room in a happy circle. It’s such an emotional moment and makes everything I’ve been through worth it. To see the look of relief on my mother’s face is the most beautiful thing in the world and I’ve never loved her more than I do right now.

After a whirlwind of jumping and prancing, we collapse to the floor in fits of laughter. Adding to the fun, Freddie rolls around on his back and pretends he’s a Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtle.

Sitting up, I smooth back my hair and strike a more serious tone. “So Mum, how soon do you think you can travel? I’ll need to know the dates so I can book your plane

tickets and organise accommodation.”

“Yes, of course,” she smiles, pulling Freddie onto her knee and kissing his cheek. “I’ll need to speak to Erin and get back to you, but it should be soon, I would think. Oh, I forgot to say, Erin has offered to accompany me to Frankfurt, isn’t that brilliant?”

“Ah, that’s great, so pleased for you,” I say, flooded with relief to hear that Mum’s best friend Erin will be travelling with her. This is good news because I didn’t like the thought of her going out there alone and not having someone to support her. In an ideal world, I would have gone with her, but Freddie can’t miss school and it’s unlikely Brian would allow me to take that much time off work. Besides, I’ve known Erin my whole life and trust her implicitly. Plus, she was the one who first recommended the clinic to us in the first place and will more than likely help Mum complete all the paperwork and everything else needed to facilitate it.

“Wow, there’s so much to think about,” Cynthia says, massaging her temples. “I’ll need to think about what to pack, check in with the housing office to make sure I’m up to date with the rent so you guys don’t have any problems while I’m gone. Oh my gosh, I haven’t been abroad in years, I’ll need to check my passport is even in date! When I discussed it with Erin, she said we’ll probably be out there for a month at least. That’s how long the course of treatment takes apparently. Oh, Jess, do you think you and Freddie will be okay on your own for that length of time?”

“Mum, of course we will!” I say fiercely. “I’m nineteen for goodness’ sake, a grown woman. That’s the last thing you should be worried about. Listen, everything will be fine. I can look after the flat no problem, take Freddie to and from school, cook all the meals. I’m doing most of this already, so all that is left to do is speak to my boss Brian and move around a couple of shifts at work and everything will be sorted. Now please, can you get on the phone to Erin right now and tell me the date you guys are leaving so I can get onto booking those tickets.”

“Okay, Little Miss Bossy,” Cynthia jokes, giving a mock hand salute. “I’ll get right onto it now.” She hesitates, her gaze dropping down to my necklace. “Good gracious, Jess, where on earth did you get that lovely piece of jewellery? It’s really quite extraordinary. I’ve never seen anything like it.”

Heat colours my cheeks.

“What, you mean this?” I give a nervous laugh, my fingers playing absently with the sacred Egyptian artefact. “Oh, it’s just a piece of costume jewellery I wore for the photoshoot. The director said I could keep it as a little memento for doing such a great job...” My voice trails off.

My mother’s eyes narrow. “Are you sure it isn’t real? That looks like real solid gold to me.”

“No, I’m telling you, it’s a fake. I mean, do you seriously think they would give me a priceless piece of Egyptian jewellery just to wear around the house? Not a chance.” I laugh again but detect a hint of suspicion in Cynthia’s gently probing stare.

“And that gorgeous green dress? Let me guess: another little ‘gift’ from the photoshoot?”

“Yep,” I nod eagerly. “That’s right. Another little memento from the director.”

“Tut, tut, the perks of being a top model, eh?” She rolls her eyes humorously and with relief, I can see that I’m off the hook for now. Carefully, she places Freddie back on the floor and gets to her feet. “Okay, let me go and make this phone call to Erin.”

After she’s left the room, I hastily take off the necklace and hide it under a pile of clothes at the bottom of my wardrobe for safe keeping. Then I fool around with my brother for a while, helping him to organise his precious coin collection into perfect

symmetrical rows on the carpet. Half an hour later, my mother returns from the phone call to Erin and tells me that they plan to fly to Frankfurt on the 16th—a date in two weeks' time. Jubilant that I now have all the information I need to get things moving, I take a lukewarm bath (Freddie used up most of the hot water) and then change into something more comfortable—jeans and an old baggy T-shirt. The rest of the evening passes pleasantly in a flurry of board games, wild flamenco dancing and an indoor picnic of tuna sandwiches and Mr Kipling's fondant fancies on the living room floor. By the time Mum and Freddie turn in for the night, I realise I've managed to keep myself so busy, I've hardly had time to think about Alex.

But I would be lying if I said he'd been totally forgotten. How could he be? Since we parted just a few short hours ago, a subtle part of him is with me always, like darkness clinging to the edges of sunshine, drawing me back into a nightmarish fairy tale that is better best forgotten.

Nothing that happened in Claremont Hall seems real. Looking back on the events in that house while sitting eating dinner with my family, I find it hard to believe that Alex Kingswood even exists. His world seems so drastically different from my day-to-day reality, so horrifically obscure, it's a struggle to accept I did not dream it all. Or perhaps that's just wishful thinking on my part.

Lying on my bed after everyone else has gone to sleep, I stare up at the cracked ceiling and wonder why I'm so against starting a relationship with Alex. Personality wise, he has many traits I would love in a boyfriend: he's kind and witty, cultured, super intelligent and the sex...goddamn the sex is out of this world. But aside from the most obvious—his terrifying appearance—there's something else bothering me.

It's almost as if Alex has two sides to his personality; like he is two different people, a Jekyll and Hyde character. There's the sweet and tender side that I like very much, but also a dominant and dangerous side that I constantly feel trying to rise to the surface. It's the side of him that pressured me into agreeing to exchange sexual

favours in return for the money, even after I told him I didn't want to. That's the part of him that scares me and the main reason I caution myself to tread very carefully. Then of course, there's that malevolent aura about him too...that strange sense of being in the presence of something otherworldly...I won't even go there trying to understand what that's all about.

Oh, and then there's the little matter of him potentially stalking me...

Jerking up from the bed, I grit my teeth as a violent ache suddenly shoots straight to my crotch. Fuck! Just thinking about Alex has triggered a chemical reaction and all at once, I'm soaked with feelings of uncontrollable lust. My whole body is on fire. Sparks of sexual desire ripple through my veins and my private parts feel in a constant state of arousal. What the heck is going on? Once more I fear for my sanity. It's like hidden hands are forcing me to get up and act on impulse to satisfy this wild burning from within.

Dazed and jittery, I stumble out of bed, make my way quietly up the dark corridor to the kitchen and switch on the lights. Opening the fridge, I rummage around frantically in search of something, anything I can use as a substitute.

A Coke bottle? Nope, too hard...

A banana? No, too squishy...

A bottle of ketchup? Not the right shape...

At last, I settle for a cucumber and hurriedly sneak it back to my bedroom, hoping and praying my mum doesn't find out what I'm up to. Throwing myself on the mattress, I peel down my soaking-wet knickers, spread my legs wide and insert the cucumber deep inside me. I gasp with delight at the cool, hard sensation and feverishly begin fingering my clit while pushing the makeshift dildo in and out of my

wet hole to mimic Alex's mind-blowing thrusts.

Back and forth it goes, each potent hit taking me one step closer to orgasm. Shit, it feels so good to be filled up again. Thrashing my head against the damp pillow, I envisage his demonic face, his hot, muscular body, imagine sweat dripping down the sculpted contours of his abdomen and release a silent cry of ecstasy. The cucumber is not nearly substantial enough, nowhere near long enough or thick enough, but it will have to do. Before long, I bring myself to a warm, pleasing climax that is not nearly as good as what I've felt with Alex but enough to satisfy my needs—for now. Jesus, what has the man done to me? It's like I'm insatiable, like I'm addicted to him...or addicted to his cock. If this thing doesn't let up soon, then I am in deep, deep trouble.

The second I arrive at work the next day, Amina grabs my arm, drags me into the ladies' toilets and securely locks the door behind us. Her face is alive with excitement, and I swear I've never seen her so happy. In fact, I'm not sure I've ever seen her crack a genuine smile until now.

"What's going on? Why have you pulled me in here?"

"Where the hell have you been?" Amina hisses. "You're so bloody hard to get hold of these days. Didn't your mother tell you I tried calling you yesterday?"

"No," I say. "What's up? Has something happened?"

"Haven't you heard?"

"Heard what?"

"Oh my gosh, what planet are you on? You're really out of the loop, aren't you?" Grinning broadly, she snatches another glance at the locked door, then pulls me in so close I can feel her breath on my face. "You won't believe this. Guess what?"

Somebody burned down Georgina Wickham's house."

"What? No! Are you kidding?"

"Hold on, you need to hear the rest. So apparently, she had some wild party last Tuesday and some fucking legend threw a petrol bomb and set the whole place alight. How crazy is that?"

My mouth drops open. "Oh. My. God. I can't believe it. Was anybody...was anybody hurt?"

"Actually no. Neighbours called the fire brigade and they managed to get everyone out in time. By some miracle, almost everyone got out okay. Well, all except for Georgina..."

My heart skips a beat. "What happened to her? Is she...is she...?"

"Dead?" Amina shakes her head. "No, sadly the bitch will live, but one of her arms is severely burnt, hallelujah. Apparently, she's going to need a skin graft. How fucking crazy is that? Oh, and my trusted source tells me her parents went completely apeshit when they got back to find their house burnt down. She is in so much trouble right now, it's unreal."

"Do they know who did it?" I ask, trying not to let my voice shake.

"No. But now that you mention it, one of the neighbours did say they saw a suspicious black car in the vicinity just after the explosion. They didn't get the license plate or anything and to be fair, it could be completely unrelated."

A black car? Alex drives a black Range Rover. Please, please don't tell me he is behind this...

“Jess, are you okay? You look a bit sick.”

“I-I’m fine. Just shocked, I guess. Wow, I can’t believe anyone would do something like that.”

She shoots me a look. “Oh, please! How many enemies does that bitch have? Nobody likes her. Half of south London can’t stand her and would quite cheerfully hire a hitman to take her out. So it could have been anyone. It could have been her drug dealer. Who knows? All I know is, the girl liked to play with matches and she got herself burned. I want to high-five whoever did it. As far as I’m concerned, they did us all a favour. That evil cow has had this coming to her for years. Do you know how many kids’ lives she destroyed in school? How many kids were made suicidal by her bullying? Maybe this experience will mellow her out and get her to reconsider being such a cold psychopathic bitch all the time. You never know, it could be the making of her...”

I nod my head absently. I can’t hear a word she’s saying. My insides feel like they are collapsing. Fuck! If Alex did do this, then I have got a serious problem on my hands. I admit to spending years fantasising about the many ways I’d like Georgina Wickham to die a slow and painful death, but now that she’s finally got her comeuppance, I don’t know how to feel about it.

Yes, the years of bullying were terrible and what she did to me recently was despicable. But committing arson...and attempted murder? That just takes things to a whole other level. And what about the other people at that party? Innocent people who might have been injured or even killed if things had turned out differently? What then? Whoever carried out the attack doesn’t seem to have been concerned by this. They acted indiscriminately, not caring who else might have been hurt in the process.

Then I tell myself to calm down. Get a grip. How could it have been Alex? I mean, what possible motive would he have to do something like that? He doesn’t have a

clue Georgina and I are mortal enemies or about the miserable history we share from school. But then, with a sinking feeling, I recall Freddie first mentioned seeing the black Range Rover the same day Jack asked me out on the 'date.' My brother had said the mysterious car followed us all the way home from school.

Is it possible that somehow, Alex was nearby when I was speaking to Jack, overheard my plans for the evening, and then followed me to the cinema, only to witness the humiliating trick Georgina pulled on me? It also seems oddly convenient that the arson attack happened the very day after, suggesting it was this that triggered it. Was burning down her parents' house an act of revenge on my behalf? It certainly seems plausible.

All I know is, only someone with a deeply unhinged mind would throw a petrol bomb and it makes me fear for my safety. And not only mine. I've got to think about my mum and Freddie's safety too. I can't believe how irresponsible and stupid I've been. How can I sleep peacefully knowing someone like that is out there lurking in the shadows, waiting to pounce? Jesus, if this is the type of craziness Alex is capable of, then what on earth would happen if I ever tried to break up with him?

The more I think about it, the more stressed I become. It feels like I can't breathe, like the walls are closing in on me with nowhere to escape. It's time to face the facts. If Alex did do this, then it means I've started a relationship with a dangerous psychopath with an unhealthy obsession.

And I've got a date with him this coming Saturday. He's sending Hobbs to pick me up from my house. Christ on a bike. What the hell am I going to do?

"What are you girls doing in there?" Brian's gravelly voice outside the toilets snaps me from my stupor. "I don't pay you to stand around gossiping. We have customers to serve, now get your lazy arses back to work."

“Shit!” Amina whispers. “We’ve been rumbled. We’d better get outside.” Rushing over to the basins, she turns on the taps and washes her hands. Then, pulling me by the arm, she unlocks the door and steps outside smiling sweetly to Brian, who doesn’t look in the least bit amused.

“You’re such a bad influence on Jess,” he growls, pushing his thick rimmed glasses up his nose. “She was so good when she first started working here but now all your bad habits are rubbing off on her. If I ever catch you two skiving again, I’ll dock it from your pay.”

“Sorry, boss,” she beams. “Got the message loud and clear. It won’t happen again. Come on, Jess, let’s go. Oh, and Brian?”

“What?”

“I think you might want to get those smoke alarms checked. I don’t think they’re working.”

“How would you know? Wait. For crying out loud, you’d better not have been smoking in the toilets again.”

“Just kidding! Jeez, you need to lighten up.”

I feel nauseous, faint and on the brink of tears for the rest of the morning. Barely able to function, I leave Amina to deal with the customers, preferring to keep myself hidden away in the kitchen most of the time. I’m also beginning to get paranoid. Every couple of minutes, I steal a quick glance out the restaurant window in search of Alex’s black Range Rover and sag with relief when I see no sign of it. It feels like he’s constantly watching me, even when I know he isn’t, and soon it gets so bad I lock myself in the toilets for ages just to get some peace.

Fuck, I've never been so scared in all my life. How on earth did I get myself into this situation and more importantly, how do I get out of it? There's no way I can go back to Claremont Hall on Saturday. No way can I endure another night of back-breaking sex with him. I can't be his girlfriend, I just can't. This isn't going to work, never in a million years. Somehow, I need to find a way to put an end to this madness once and for all. But how? It's highly unlikely Alex will go quietly.

By the time two-thirty comes and my shift is over, I've worked myself into such a state I can scarcely put one foot in front of the other. In a fog of anxiety, I grab my coat and bag and hurry out the diner, heading in the direction of Freddie's primary school. Everything is a blur. I can't think straight, can't see straight, like I'm carrying the weight of the world on my shoulders. Images of Georgina keep flashing up in my mind. I wonder just how badly she's been burnt. What must it have been like to be trapped in a burning building, fearing for your life? It must have been terrifying. And where was Jack when all this happened? Was he at the party too?

Jesus, my head is so messed up, I nearly get hit by a car because I'm not looking where I'm going. Alex Kingswood has completely hijacked my brain and it will be a miracle if I can get home in one piece. Finally, I reach the school gates and keep at a distance from the other parents, not wanting to engage in small talk today. Then the bell rings and the kids start piling out.

"Jess, Jess!" Freddie shouts, running into my arms dramatically. "Ollie's not speaking to me."

"Why not?" I ask, barely capable of stringing a coherent sentence. "Have the two of you fallen out again?"

"Yes," he replies. "Ollie says I keep copying everything he says. He says he's sick of it and now he doesn't want to be my friend anymore. Now he's friends with Charlie instead and I'm really, really sad."

“And is it true that you keep copying him?”

“Yes, but only because I like to learn new words. Ollie is so good at making up new words and that’s the only reason I copy him. But now he doesn’t want to be my friend anymore and won’t sit next to me and won’t play with me at lunchtime. I tried to give him a Kit-Kat to say sorry, but he doesn’t want it.”

“Well, if Ollie doesn’t want to be your friend, then it’s his loss not yours. Only be friends with people who want to be friends with you, darling. Tomorrow, play with some other children in your class, ignore him completely, and you never know, he might come crawling back.”

“On his hands and knees?” Freddie says hopefully.

“On his hands and knees. Now hold my hand and stay alert. We need to cross the road.”

Gingerly, I take my little brother’s hand and, checking the coast is clear, cross the street before turning left to take a different route home.

“Why are we going this way? I don’t want to go this way. I want to go through Ferndale Avenue so I can count all the tree numbers.”

“I know you do, Kiddo,” I say through clenched teeth. “But sometimes it’s nice to go home a different way. It makes things more fun. Variety is the spice of life.”

“Oh, all right then, but only if we can go through Ferndale Avenue tomorrow.”

“Yep. No problem.”

As Freddie continues to prattle on, I keep looking around us to check there’s

definitely no sign of Alex's Range Rover. The good news is that so far, he doesn't appear to be following us, but I still keep my wits about me as I can't afford to get complacent.

Once we get home safely, I double-check I've securely locked the front door and then discreetly check all the windows in every room are closed. I then spend the next couple of hours trying to behave as normally as I can for the sake of Freddie and my mother as I can't afford to arouse suspicion. Protecting them from danger is my number one priority, and I'll be damned if I allow them to get involved in this horrible mess.

At one point, as I stand in the kitchen stirring a steaming hot pan of mince in Ragu sauce, I ponder whether to call the police. Under normal circumstances, of course it would be the sane and sensible thing to do. I could tell them I suspect Alex is stalking me and tell them to investigate his whereabouts at the time of the fire at Georgina's house.

But then I would have to explain the circumstances under which we met. I would need to tell them that I have been working as an escort, that I sold sex for money (which I'm not entirely sure is legal) and the fact that I've accepted large sums of cash from Alex would only complicate matters. Plus, his family are rich—who are the police going to believe—the man who lives in a multi-million-pound mansion or the call girl from the council estate?

Worst of all, there's the possibility that Cynthia could find out everything, and goodness knows what that would do to her, especially as her health is so fragile. If she finds out the truth, she might even refuse to take the money and end up jeopardising everything I've worked so hard for. No, I decide, I can't involve the police. I'm in too deep and it's far too risky. Oh, sod it! What am I going to do? This is like an endless nightmare.

Then it happens. Sometime around seven pm, the house phone rings and after a briefly cordial exchange, my mum tells me that a man from Storm Models wants to speak to me. I freeze. The ground drops out from under me. No, no, no! What am I going to do?

Forcing a smile, I take the phone and cord from her and carry it into my bedroom to ensure I have complete privacy. Then, taking a deep, fortifying breath, I put the receiver to my ear.

“Hello?”

“I’m parked around the corner from your flats,” Alex purrs, his voice as sweet as chocolate. “Come down so we can talk.”

“Oh my God, what are you doing near my house?”

“I’ve been missing you like crazy. I need to see your face. Now please come down.”

I blow air through my cheeks. “Why can’t we just talk on the phone? Now is really not a good time for me to leave the house.”

“Now, my beauty, I’ll say this just once. Come downstairs to see me, or do you want me to knock on your front door and introduce myself to your family?”

My blood runs cold as I picture Cynthia’s reaction to seeing Alex Kingswood on her doorstep. She’d probably have a heart attack.

“Okay, fine, you win,” I snap. “Give me fifteen minutes and I’ll be right down.”

“Good girl. I’m parked on the corner of Bedford Terrace. See you soon.”

Heart thumping, I put the phone down and return it to the hall. I wait a minute or two before poking my head into the living room, where Cynthia is reading a Rupert Bear annual with Freddie.

“Is everything okay?” she asks.

“Yeah, everything’s great,” I lie. “The agency just phoned to tell me about another job they want me to do next week.”

“That’s wonderful, Jess. It sounds as if you’re in high demand.”

“Yes, so it would seem.” I swallow painfully. Freddie is staring at me with big, round eyes and I wonder what he’s thinking. Probably knows his sister is lying through her teeth...

“Listen,” I say, “I’m just going to pop to the shops to get some more butter. I think we’ve run out.”

“Have we?” my mum frowns. “Can you get some more washing-up liquid while you’re there? We’re running low on that too.”

“Sure, no worries. Okay, see you guys soon. Love you.”

“Love you too.”

Springing into action, I throw on my leather jacket and head out of the estate in the direction of Bedford Terrace, my limbs heavy with apprehension. I need this rendezvous with Alex like I need a bullet in the head, but what choice do I have? There’s no way I want my family to see him and my secret be revealed. The potential fallout simply doesn’t bear thinking about.

Five minutes later, I'm on Bedford Terrace and very quickly see a black Range Rover with tinted windows parked behind a white transit van. The windows are so dark it's impossible to see inside the vehicle, which is probably for the best. I don't want any of my neighbours snooping.

Nervously, I walk up to the passenger side, open the door and get in. As soon as I sit down, I'm hit by an uncontrollable wave of fear. Dressed in a long, black hooded cloak, Alex is ten times more frightening in the flesh than I remembered. Somehow, seeing him again, in surroundings that are so familiar to me, makes everything a thousand times worse. It's like the bogeyman has stepped out from a nightmare into my reality and is now running riot over my comfort zone.

For what seems forever, Alex's demonic gaze burns into me, setting my skin on fire with its intensity. Weak with nerves, I keep my eyes fixed on the dashboard, not knowing what to say or where to look. Then finally, he breaks the ice.

"So, what's the news on your Mum? Do you know her travel dates?"

My head snaps up. "Yes, she's leaving for Frankfurt on the 16th."

"And how long will she be staying there for?"

"About a month. Oh, and she's taking her best friend Erin, so I'll need two of everything." I reach into my pocket and pass him a piece of paper containing all the relevant details required for the bookings.

"Okay, fine. I'll make the necessary arrangements for flights and accommodation in Frankfurt and get those delivered to you by recorded mail within the next couple of days."

"Thanks so much. I'm so grateful for all your generosity." I pause, trying to think up

an escape plan. “Right, well now that’s sorted, I guess I’d better be going. I’ve got to go and buy some butter and washing-up liquid from the shop.”

“Wait. Don’t go. Stay a bit longer.” Alex slips his large, strong hand into mine and I realise it’s no use. I’m not going anywhere.

“Honestly, I can’t stay,” I bleat. “My mum will be wondering where I am.”

“I promise I won’t keep you any longer than is necessary. I just want to talk to you for a while, is that so terrible?”

“No, I guess not.”

“Now tell me, how is Cynthia doing?”

“She’s great. She’s looking forward to going to Germany and finally getting this all sorted.”

“And what about you? How are you feeling about everything? Are you okay? Are you pleased she’ll finally be getting the treatment she needs?”

“Yes, of course I’m happy....” I break off, suddenly emotional. “It’s just...well, I just hope it’s successful, you know? The treatment, I mean. I hope the doctors over there can make her well again. I love my mother so much and we’ve been living with this for so long now, I just hope...” My sentence dies. I find talking about this extremely hard.

With gentle tenderness, Alex squeezes my hand. His skin is warm and comforting. “Everything is going to be fine,” he says. “Don’t worry about a thing. I get a good feeling about this, and I’m positive your mother is going to be fine. Everything will work out so please, just try to stay calm. And if you ever need to talk about anything,

just know that I'm here for you always."

"Thank you, that's so sweet of you," I say, wiping my nose with my sleeve. "And thank you again for all your help. You've been so good to me and my family. I won't ever forget it."

"Hey, that's what boyfriends are for. To lean on in times of trouble."

There's an awkward pause. Discreetly, I try to pull my hand away, but he won't let go.

"I've missed you more than words can say," Alex whispers. "I think about you constantly." He hesitates. "Have you been thinking about me too?"

"Yes," I reply truthfully. Psyching myself up, I decide it's time to drop the bomb. "Hey, listen, have you been following me? Freddie said he saw a black Range Rover following us and I just wondered...well, I just wanted to know if that was you."

"Yes, it was me," Alex says without missing a beat. "Does it bother you?"

"Um, yeah, it kind of does. I find stalking someone extremely creepy."

He chuckles darkly. "What you call creepy, I call caring. All right, so I followed you a couple of times, I admit it. I wanted to see where you lived, to be close to you, find out more about you. Is that so terrible? When a man finds such a precious jewel, why wouldn't he want to keep looking at it? You've got to remember I've been closed off from the world for so long, I'm not experienced when it comes to matters of the heart, so I'm still learning the ropes, trying to understand what is deemed to be acceptable."

I don't respond.

Jesus, he has such a way of putting things he makes being a stalker sound almost noble.

“The truth is I like you, Jessica,” he continues. “I mean, really, really like you. I’m completely besotted, and that makes me want to be close to you all the time, that’s all. Is that so wrong?”

“No, not really,” I say, finding my voice at last. “But could you please stop the stalking? Honestly, it seriously creeps me out. I don’t like the idea of being watched all the time.”

“All right, fine. I’ll stop following you if that’s what you want. Sorry for ‘creeping you out.’ It wasn’t intentional. Anyway, we have our date Saturday night, so I’ll just have to hold on until then. No more stalking my girlfriend. Happy now?”

“Yes, thank you.” A smile spreads across my face. Wow, that was easy. Who’d have thought? Just ask your stalker to stop stalking you and Bob’s your uncle. Problem solved. I’m still dying to broach the topic of Georgina and the arson attack, but something tells me that could be a step too far. I remind myself I still need to tread carefully as I’m not out of the woods yet. I don’t want to risk upsetting him after the progress we’ve made.

“How much did you miss me?” Alex demands. “Did you miss me as much as I missed you?”

“Um...” I fall silent. Dammit, his aftershave smells so good.

“Don’t deny it. I know you’ve been missing me, and I definitely know you’ve been missing my dick.”

“Oh my God!” I shake my head, incredulous. “I can’t believe what I’m hearing. You

must really think you're something."

"I bet you tried to find a substitute. What did you use to get yourself off? Let me guess: a bottle? A cucumber?"

"What!" Heat creeps up my neck and colours my cheeks. "I-I don't know what you're talking about, you pervert. A cucumber? What?!"

"I bet you feel like a part of you is missing without me inside you. I rocked your world, so you had to find a substitute for when I'm not around. You fucked yourself with a cucumber, didn't you, my beauty, but still it wasn't enough. You need the real thing and I promise to give it to you all night long on Saturday."

"Right, that's it. I'm gone. I don't want to hear any more of this filth."

Laughing, Alex finally releases me, and I make a desperate dive for the door.

"Remember my sweet, seven pm, Saturday. Make sure you're there when Hobbs comes to collect you. Don't forget. I'll be counting down the minutes until then."

"I won't forget," I mutter, slamming the door and brushing myself off. Holy fuck. Somebody shoot me now.

Jessica

As promised, Cynthia's plane tickets along with details of her five-star hotel booking arrive by courier within three days and I'm over the moon to finally be able to hold them in my hands. The rest of the week passes peacefully enough, and things Alex's end go completely quiet. There are no more phone calls, no more suspicious cars following me home and I'm relieved that he appears to have finally got the message. However, as Saturday draws near, I begin to grow frantic. I'm pacing up and down constantly, tearing my hair out in frustration.

I simply can't do this. I can't go on this date with him. I can't go back to that house and most of all, I can't allow myself to have sex with him again. Much as my body craves him, I know being physical with him again is the last thing I should be doing if I seriously want to put an end to this madness. By giving out mixed signals, I will only create more problems in the long run, so the sooner I find a way to extract myself from his vice-like grip, the better.

Somehow, somehow, I need to be honest with Alex and let him down gently, make him understand that this relationship is a non-starter, but the possible repercussions frighten me. If Alex did carry out the arson attack, then what else is he capable of doing if made angry? It doesn't bear thinking about. No matter what happens, I must protect Mum and Freddie at all costs. That will always be my top priority, protecting my family. I simply can't allow them to get mixed up in this.

When Saturday morning comes, I feel so jittery I can barely eat or concentrate on anything other than dreading tonight. I go through the motions, pretending that everything's fine, but inside I'm falling apart. I can't believe I've had so much time

to think things over, yet I still haven't a clue how I'm going to get out of this date tonight.

And then sometime around midday, the bell rings and Cynthia answers the door to two smartly dressed men—one holding a bouquet of roses, the other carrying a stack of expensive-looking boxes.

“Jessica, there's a delivery for you!” she calls from the hallway. “Someone has sent you the most gorgeous bouquet of roses. They smell absolutely exquisite.”

Bracing myself, I run to the door and accept the flowers and card from the man. Mum's right. The bouquet is spectacular, and I don't need three guesses to work out who sent them. Cynthia takes the roses from me and says she will put them in a vase.

“These are also for you,” the other deliveryman smiles, proffering the first of six neatly wrapped boxes that have the name of some upmarket boutique printed all over them. I thank them both and Freddie appears in the doorway to help me wrestle the gifts inside.

After the men have gone, I place the first box on the kitchen countertop and lift off the lid to reveal a stunning orange dress covered with tiger stripes.

“Wow,” Mum gasps. “That is out of this world. Isn't that a Vivienne Westwood? Oh my gosh, it is. Are there clothes in all the other boxes too?”

“Yes, and there's shoes in this one!” Freddie grins, and I look down to see he's already torn open another package to reveal a pair of gold Louboutin heels.

“These are all top designer labels,” Cynthia enthuses. “They must have cost someone a fortune.” She shoots me a look. “Time to ‘fess up Jess. Who's your secret admirer?”

Red with embarrassment, I pick up the card that came with the flowers and see a message scrawled in Alex's intricate hand: Dear Jessica, I couldn't decide which dress to buy you, so I bought them all. I hope you enjoy wearing them as much as I enjoyed picking them out for you. I can't stop thinking about you and am dreaming of the day we meet again. Yours always, Alex.

"Who on earth is Alex?" my mother asks, peering over my shoulder. Hurriedly, I stuff the card in my pocket.

"Oh, um, he's just some guy I know. A new friend of mine."

Dammit, I am so busted.

"Don't give me that," Cynthia laughs. "Do I look like I was born yesterday? I want more details, darling. Where do you know him from? You've never mentioned an 'Alex' before."

"He's just someone I met on one of the photo shoots. We got talking and sort of clicked and I guess he likes me, that's all. But he's just a friend. There's...there's nothing going on between us."

"Sure, right. You're just friends with this boy and he spent how much on you? Wake up darling. You might only see him as a friend but clearly from what's written in that card, he wants something more."

Moodily, I begin packing away the dresses. "Look, I don't really want to talk about this, okay? I don't have time for relationships, especially not after what happened with Jack Parker, plus I'm too busy working. Like I said, we're just friends, nothing more."

"All right, if you say so." Mum rolls her eyes and sensibly decides to drop the

subject. “By the way, when am I going to see some of your photographs?”

“What photographs?”

“From your photo shoots, silly. My baby is a top model and I’ve yet to see any of your pictures in the magazines.”

“That’s because they haven’t been printed yet,” I say quickly. “Photo shoots often take place months before they are featured in a publication. You just need to give it time.”

“Yes, but you must have a portfolio that I can see, surely?”

“Yes, of course I’ve got one, but it’s kept at the modelling agency so I can’t show it to you right now. But I promise I will show you some pictures soon.”

“Great! Can’t wait.” Quietly, she returns to the sink, takes down a vase from the kitchen cupboard and proceeds to fill it with water. As she does so, the house phone starts ringing. “Darling, can you get that please? I’m a little tied up.”

“Sure, no problem,” I say, pleased for the diversion. Hurriedly, I race into the hall and pick up the phone. “Hello?”

“I just needed to hear your voice,” Alex drawls. “I’m sorry, but I just couldn’t hold out any longer. I’m missing you like crazy, my beauty.”

“Oh my God,” I hiss, looking furtively over my shoulder to make sure Cynthia is out of earshot. “Where are you? Are you outside?”

“No, I’m at home, waiting patiently for you. Hobbs is coming to pick you up tonight as arranged. Did you like the presents I sent?”

“Y-yes,” I stammer, nervously playing with the phone cord. “The shoes and dresses are beautiful. Thanks so much, I-I love them.”

“Which one did you like best?”

“Um, the one with the tiger print.”

“I thought you would. Wear it tonight. You’re going to look stunning. You are still coming tonight, aren’t you? My dick is throbbing for you and I’m just longing to taste the sweetness of your pussy.”

“Jess, who is it?” my mother calls from the kitchen. “Is it Erin?”

“No, it’s just a sales call,” I shout back. Then, lowering my voice I say, “I’m sorry, I don’t think I can come tonight. Something’s come up and I don’t think I can make it.”

“What do you mean?” There’s a note of danger in Alex’s tone. “You’re not trying to cancel on me, are you?”

“I just...I’m not sure tonight is such a good idea.”

“Fine. Would you prefer it if I came to collect you myself instead of Hobbs? I’m more than happy to drive over there now and knock on your front door. Your mother and I can have a little chat about who bought those plane tickets.”

“No, wait! Please don’t do that. Okay, okay, I’ll come. But send Hobbs, please.” My back stiffens as I hear Freddie’s approaching footsteps. “Sorry, I’ve got to go. I’ll see you later.” Before Alex can respond, I hastily put the phone down. Shit! My heart is thudding like a Jack hammer.

Jesus Christ, that was intense. He’s such a bloody bastard. He’s got me like a

cornered rat, and he knows it. This is such a tangled web; how the heck will I ever escape?

The next few hours drag on painfully as I count down the minutes until seven pm. It's a struggle to behave normally around my family, and I find that I'm irritable and short-tempered with Freddie, which is totally out of character for me. I'm so nervous I'm constantly wiping away tears of frustration. Eventually, at just before five, Cynthia and Freddie leave the house to visit Erin at her flat in Balham and I tell them I will be going out clubbing tonight with Amina and not to wait up for me.

Once they've gone, I collapse on my bed, relieved I will finally have some peace for a couple of hours to try and sort out this madness. When Hobbs arrives, I would prefer my mother not to be here, so I don't have to answer any awkward questions. I'm tired of telling lies and don't even know what cover story I would give to explain why a chauffeur driven Rolls Royce is picking me up from home at this hour.

At six-thirty, I reluctantly begin to get ready. With a scowl, I slip into the Vivienne Westwood dress, put on a pair of heels and a little bit of make-up, then I throw on my shawl and wait anxiously in the living room for seven o'clock to arrive.

Right on cue, somebody rings on the buzzer, and my muscles tense. I really don't want to do this. For long moments, I sit cross-legged on the living room floor, praying for Hobbs to go away and leave me alone. It's like my body is frozen with indecision and I can't move. Another two minutes pass, and the buzzer goes again, this time the person holding down for a prolonged length of time, indicating their frustration. Still, I don't move. Perhaps if I pretend not to be here, Hobbs will eventually get the message and leave.

For fifteen long minutes, I sit silently in the darkness of the living room, not daring to move a muscle in case of discovery. Nobody rings the door again and as time passes, I stupidly think that perhaps Hobbs has gone and I'm off the hook.

Not a chance.

Out of nowhere, the house phone starts ringing and I almost jump out of my skin. On and on it goes, a shrill discordant sound that pierces the very core of my soul. God, whoever's calling is a persistent sod who is not willing to take no for an answer. On and on the phone rings. Then abruptly it stops before starting up again.

Will this nightmare ever end?

Closing my eyes, I put my hands over my ears in an attempt to drown out the hellish sound.

Fuck off, Hobbs! Just leave me the hell alone.

Finally, something inside me snaps and I decide I will not put up with this crap any longer. I will not be intimidated in my own home. Crawling on my hands and knees, I move discreetly through the hall and in one swift movement, rip out the phone cord from the socket. An eerie silence descends and for what seems forever, I stay rooted to the spot, listening for the sound of a car engine outside. But I hear nothing. Not a thing. Everything is quiet and still.

Hopefully Hobbs has gone away.

After a while, I get to my feet, dust myself off, and head towards the kitchen for a glass of water. My throat is so parched it feels like it's on fire. Taking a mug from the drying rack, I go to the sink, turn on the cold tap and pour myself some water. Gulping it down greedily, I swiftly pour another.

Suddenly, I hear a subtle rustling noise behind me. The mug slips from my fingers and smashes to pieces on the floor. Suddenly, the room feels ice cold and without even turning around, I know that I am not alone. Beads of moisture pop out on my

forehead. Slowly, I turn around and almost pass out from fright.

Alex Kingswood is standing in the kitchen doorway. He's wearing the long-hooded cloak that partly obscures his face and at the sight of him, my knees go weak. Trembling with shock, I grip the countertop to steady myself. For a moment, we both just stare at each other, the only soundtrack in the room the distant sound of traffic. Then he takes an imperceptible step forward. Panicking, I snatch a large knife from the chopping board and wave it menacingly at him.

"Stay back!" I hiss. "Don't you dare come near me. Don't take another step forward or I swear to you, I won't hesitate you use this. Do you hear? How did you get in? What the fuck are you doing in my house? Did you break in or what?"

Alex doesn't answer, doesn't move, doesn't flinch, just keeps his eyes locked steadily on mine, anger radiating off him like electricity.

"Answer me!" I scream. "What are you doing in my house?"

"Calm down, Jessica," he says quietly. "Put the knife down and we'll talk, okay? I promise I'll explain everything but first you need to put the knife down. You must know that I mean you no harm."

"Like hell you don't! No, I will not put the knife down. Just stay the fuck away from me."

"What happened to our plans for this evening? I thought we had a date?"

"What happened to Hobbs? Why are you here instead of him?"

"I suspected from our conversation on the phone earlier that you might try to bail out on me. I thought you might need some persuading to come out of your house. And it

looks as if my suspicions were correct. Now my beauty, I'll ask this just one last time. Put the knife down. You don't want things to get messy, trust me. I've told you, I'm not going to hurt you; I merely want to talk."

At last, I completely lose it. "No, no, no! No more games, Alex. I keep trying to tell you, but you refuse to listen. I don't want to be with you, okay? I can't be your girlfriend, I'm sorry. This relationship isn't going to work. Now please, I'm asking you nicely, get out of my house and please just go away. I don't ever want to see you again."

"No, I will not go away," he replies, his voice laced with menace. "It will never be over between us. Never ever. You're in my head, Jessica. You're the air that I breathe, and we have a bond that can never be broken."

"Jesus, you really are insane, aren't you? What are you talking about? What bond? We barely know each other." I blow air through my cheeks. "The truth is, I'm fucking scared of you and I don't want you anywhere near me or my family because I don't trust you."

"You don't trust me after all I've done for you?"

"Ha! Let's talk about what you've 'done for me,' shall we? I know everything, Alex. I know what you did to Georgina Wickham. I know it was you who set fire to her home. You threw a bloody petrol bomb! Don't try to deny it. Did you know her arm was severely burnt in the blaze? Doesn't that even bother you at all?"

Abruptly, he goes quiet, and his silence speaks volumes. A wave of nausea washes through me. So, it's true. He did do it. Flipping hell.

"Now Jessica, don't do anything stupid, please be rational..." Alex takes another small step towards me. With a shrill cry, I lunge forward with the knife and attempt to

strike him, but he's far too quick for me. In one swift, deadly move, he snatches the weapon, twists my arm up my back and has the knife held to my throat before I can even blink. "All right, baby," he breathes against my neck, "if you want to play with knives—fine! We'll play with knives."

Quivering like a leaf, I try desperately not to move, the edge of the blade precariously close to slicing through the delicate skin of my throat. I can feel the coolness of the metal, the sharp serrated teeth that are just on the precipice of causing everlasting damage. Fuck! Closing my eyes, I exhale softly and try not to think about the enormous erection pressing up against my back. Try desperately not to get aroused by the fear...

"Okay, I admit it," Alex whispers, his lips seductively caressing my earlobe. "I burned down the bitch's house in retaliation for what she did to you. I have no regrets and I would do it again in a heartbeat. For making your life such a misery, that evil bitch deserved every single thing coming to her."

"But surely you can't think it was okay to burn down her house? What about the other people at the party? What if they'd been hurt too...?" My voice trails off.

"I followed you that night you went to the cinema," Alex continues calmly. "I saw what those bitches did to you, heard all the shit they said about you, and how upset you were. I saw how that little prick boyfriend of hers stood you up and left you hanging. You wanted Jack so badly, didn't you, my sweet? Watching the two of you together sent me crazy. I saw how much he turned you on, how much you wanted to fuck him, but then he stabbed you in the back, and you hated him for it. He rejected you the same way you rejected me and right now, I bet you could quite happily murder him. Don't worry, if the bastard so much as breathes in your direction again, I'll rip out his still beating heart and dance on his grave. Nobody, and I mean nobody, fucks around with my property, understand?"

His words send a chill down my spine. The depth of his devotion is scary, and it both excites and frightens in equal measure. Never did I dream I would ever meet someone who would be so committed to me that they would go to these lengths to settle a score on my behalf. Right now, I have so many conflicting emotions and my head is so messed up, I don't know whether to laugh or scream.

"You're insane," I whisper feebly.

"Don't play innocent with me, Jessica. Deep down, I bet you're thrilled about what I did. You can't tell me you didn't once fantasise about doing something similar yourself? All I've done is provide you with the ultimate wish fulfilment."

Very, very slowly, Alex begins to move the knife away from my throat and then, with one deft flick of the blade, slashes my dress straight down the middle, slicing it in two. I gasp in surprise and horror as layers of material peel away and cascade to the floor like two delicate flower petals. I'm now standing in just my bra and knickers and a pair of Louboutin heels with my arm twisted up my back and my body pressed up hard against his. I can feel his heart beating, the warmth of his breath on my neck.

The reprieve doesn't last long, however. Soon the knife returns and hovers menacingly over my chest area, goading, taunting me, and then with another lightning-quick flick, Alex tears open my bra, exposing my naked breasts for all the world to see. Finally, the dreaded blade moves back to my throat and Alex's grip tightens almost to the point of strangulation.

"Now," he says, stroking the metal against the contours of my veins. "I want you to tell me everything that bitch Georgina did to you at school. Tell the truth now because I'll know if you're lying. Be honest, what did she do to you?"

"She...she bullied me for years, did all kinds of terrible things. She turned all the other kids against me, made my life an utter living hell."

“And how did that make you feel?”

“It made me...feel like I wanted to kill myself.” I say the last part in a whisper.

“Did you despise her? Tell me you despised her.”

“Yes, I despised her, I hated her guts!”

“You see?” Alex crows in triumph. “That wasn’t so hard, was it? Georgina destroyed your life so she deserved her comeuppance, wouldn’t you agree?”

“Y-yes...”

“Tell me you’re pleased I did it.”

“I-I’m pleased you did it,” I wince, beginning to feel lightheaded. Every part of my body aches and I don’t know how much longer I can hold this position.

Suddenly, he releases my arm, removes the knife from my throat and presses the tip of the blade against my spine. “All right, start walking. You lead the way. We’re going to your bedroom.”

Shaking with fear, I obediently follow orders and stumble down the corridor, Alex overseeing every step of the way with the knife pressed into my back. He’s drawn a little blood, I can tell, but not enough to cause any real damage. As soon as we enter my bedroom, he roughly throws me down on the mattress and then, not taking his eyes off me, slowly removes the belt from his trousers. As realisation of his cruel intentions hit, all my energy evaporates, and I’m near paralysed at the prospect of what is to come.

“Turn onto your front. But leave the high heels on. You’ve been a very, very naughty

girl, Jessica, and I'm afraid I'm going to have to punish you just a little bit."

"No Alex, please!" I beg. "I-I'm sorry I tried to attack you. I was just so frightened, I needed to defend myself..."

"Do as I tell you or else. You need to learn some respect and appreciate all the things I do for you."

"I do appreciate you! Please Alex, you know I do!"

"No, you don't. A few minutes ago, you said you didn't want me anymore. You said you wanted me out of your life. You know it was so wrong of you to try to attack me when I've been nothing but good to you. I worship the ground you walk on, yet you'd happily stab me death?"

"No, you've got it all wrong. Please, you've got to believe me."

Suddenly, the knife is pressed against my chin and very, very slowly, without making skin contact, Alex runs the tip of the blade down my throat, down my collarbone, down to the space between my breasts and then down to my abdomen before finally settling on my crotch. For a few terrifying seconds, the knife hovers there, Alex's expression cold and unreadable. Oh, my gosh. What is he going to do next?

"Now, my sweet," he rasps. "This can be easy, or this can hard. Either you accept your punishment like a good girl, or I'm going to need to think of an alternative that will be much more painful. The choice is yours."

"Okay, okay, I'll do it!"

"Good girl. Now turn over and prepare to accept your punishment. I'm going to give you five strokes of the belt. Just five, and then we'll call it quits."

Shutting my eyes, I flip over onto my front and wait anxiously for the reprimand to begin. Terror and excitement whip through my system, and my knickers are completely soaked through. Much as I hate to admit it, I'm turned-on big time by his dominance and find the terrifying unpredictability of his anger deeply arousing.

"Now tell me how sorry you are for trying to stab me," Alex growls.

"I-I'm so sorry, please, I won't do it again..."

Thwack!

The first lash of the belt hits my back with such savagery, I'm almost totally blindsided. Shit, that fucking hurts!

"How can I be sure it won't happen again? How do I know you won't pull a knife on me again?"

"I won't, I promise, please Alex!"

Thwack!

The second stroke stings so much I lose all sense of time. Wracked with pain, I sink my teeth into the pillow to stifle my cries.

Thwack! Thwack!

The third and fourth lashes hit me so hard my eyes fill with tears and my spine is in complete and utter agony. Jesus Christ, that hurts so fucking good.

"Now, my lady," Alex whispers. "Here comes the finale, and this time, I'm going to want to hear true remorse in your voice. Tell me again how sorry you are for trying to

kill me.”

“I’m so sorry! Please forgive me!”

Thwack!

The final ferocious stroke of the belt lands on my back and the pain is so acute my head completely explodes, making me forget what my name is. But with it too, comes a strange sense of euphoria; an almost joyful feeling of relief like all my sins have been washed away. Panting and covered with sweat, I submerge my face in the pillow to muffle my moans, waiting for the stinging to subside.

Wincing, I imagine what my skin must look like right now all crisscrossed with multiple lacerations. In some fucked up way, the thought of it excites me. The truth is, I enjoyed the thrashing and I’m literally crying out for more. Dammit, I’m really starting to worry myself: I think I like this all a little too much.

“Well done, Jessica,” he purrs. “You took every stroke of that like a pro and barely made a sound. I’m very impressed. How do you feel?”

“Good...I feel good,” I whisper.

“Did you enjoy it?”

“Y-yes...”

“It got you wet, didn’t it?”

“Yes.”

Roughly, he flips me onto my back and stands at the foot of the bed, towering over

me like the angel of death, stroking the belt sensuously between his fingers. His face is absolutely terrifying, like some creature from a Gothic horror story, but all I can think about is what it would be like to have his big monster cock inside me. Shit, my pussy wants him so badly I can barely feel my legs.

Fixing me with sex-starved eyes, Alex pushes the belt through the buckle and creates a double loop. Grabbing my wrists, he pushes them through the belt and pulls it tightly into a makeshift pair of handcuffs. Next, he positions my arms above my head, and I am now lying face up on the bed, my hands restrained with no way of escape. Finally, he rips off my knickers and puts them in his pocket. Then, he picks up the knife from the dresser and holds it again to my throat.

“Now, my sweet,” Alex says, his canine teeth glistening in the half-light. “You need to listen very carefully to what I am going to tell you. I’m madly in love with you. I don’t want anyone else but you. You’re all I ever wanted in a woman, and I will go to any lengths to keep hold of you. I will obliterate anyone who tries to come between us and if I have to kill someone then so be it. You are the first and only girl I have ever slept with, and I never want to give my body to anyone else but you. Every inch of this cock belongs to you.”

I nod dumbly, shocked by both his confession of love and the revelation that he too was a virgin when we first met. Somehow, I find that very hard to believe and yet...he seems so sincere, perhaps it is true.

“You have my heart, Jessica, so you’d better take good care of it. It works like this: if you are nice to me, I will treat you like a princess, but if you’re bad to me, I’ll be like your worst fucking nightmare, so I’m warning you, you’d better not screw me over. My heart wouldn’t be able to take it.” To emphasise his point, he suddenly presses the knife harder against my throat. “Tell me you love me.”

“I-I love you, Alex.”

“Tell the truth now. No lying to me. Only say it if you mean it. Do you honestly love me, really and truly?”

“Y-yes,” I gasp. “I love you. I love you with all my heart and I...I want to be with you, Alex. No man has ever made me feel the way you do and...how could I not love you?”

“My God,” he whispers, his voice thick with emotion. “You do love me, don’t you? You’re telling the truth. Oh Jessica, you don’t know how long I’ve waited to hear you say that.” Pulling down his hood, he throws down the knife, collapses on top of me and buries his face between my breasts in a flurry of passionate abandon.

For a few heartbeats, he just lies there breathing heavily, the two of us merged as one. Then ravenously, he begins to suck on my breasts, licking and lapping them, making me feel so good I want to scream. Every flick of his tongue sends shockwaves through me, the warmth from his mouth a glorious relief after the brutal reprimand administered just a few short minutes ago.

After a while, Alex stops sucking, lifts his head and gazes up at me with love-filled eyes. We share a moment of silent adoration. Then his thick, full lips find mine and we kiss with a savagery that takes my breath away, sending both my head and my heart to Seventh Heaven. It’s at this moment that I realise beyond a shadow of doubt, that I do indeed love Alex Kingswood. I didn’t want to love him—I was in denial for so long, all I wanted was to lash out at him. I didn’t believe I could fall so quickly for someone so utterly extraordinary.

I tried so hard to fight it; tried to pretend that he had no effect on me, but the truth is he has won me over completely. I have never met anyone like him. He obsesses and excites me in a way no other man ever has. I love the thrill and the danger of him, his passion, his dominance, his kindness, his unwavering devotion—I love it all and I am now irrevocably his. Yes, he’s a crazy psycho but that’s part of what turns me on

most about him. That delicious unpredictability that sets my body alight like nothing else. Is this irresponsible of me? Of course, it is. Is falling in love with a sweet psycho just about the craziest thing I could do? You bet. But I just can't help myself. There's a darkness inside Alex that is far too magnetic for me to resist.

For long moments, we writhe around on the bed, devouring each other's faces like a pair of wild animals, then finally, Alex breaks away and whispers: "I haven't eaten all day and there's only one thing that will satisfy me..."

Before I can respond, his head is between my thighs, eating out my pussy with a hunger that makes my head spin. Fuck, this is insane. Moaning softly, I gaze up at my Spice Girls poster on the wall, barely able to believe that this is actually my life. I can't believe he's going down on me in my bedroom surrounded by all my childhood memories. There's something deeply kinky about it that I find a real turn on. Very soon, he brings me to a shuddering climax that leaves me feeling high as a kite.

"You really felt that, didn't you?" he says, his eyes dancing softly with amusement.

I have no words. I'm too blown away to speak.

Standing to his full height, Alex kicks off his shoes, unclasps his cloak and tosses it on the floor. Then seductively, he pulls his shirt over his head, and I salivate at the sight of powerful biceps and an awesomely chiselled six-pack. Sweet Lord, the word 'buff' doesn't even come close to describing the beauty of this man's body. It is the pinnacle of perfection and seeing it makes me melt onto the sheets like butter. All I want is to run my hands all over it.

Pleased by my response, Alex continues the striptease and slowly unzips his trousers, drops them to the floor and finally, peels down his boxer shorts so his entire manhood hangs loose. Even slightly flaccid, the sheer size of it makes my insides quake and as he slowly wanks himself to a full erection, I find it hard to contain myself. I want him

to shove it in right now. I need so badly to come again. The mushroom-shaped tip is already wet with delectable pre-cum and I can't wait for him to shoot all of that lovely, hot spunk inside me.

"Spread your legs wide for me, my beauty," he breathes. "And get ready to receive what belongs to you."

I don't need telling twice. Obediently, I part my thighs and lay back on the mattress in anticipation of what he has in store. Pinning me down, Alex wastes no time in plunging his thick, hard cock inside me and pulverising my pussy with deep, vicious thrusts that make me scream so loud I'm sure my neighbours must be able to hear me through the walls. Back and forth the bed rocks as a constant soundtrack to our love-making. The mattress springs dig into my spine, but I don't care. Jesus, the sensation is unlike any I've experienced so far, the excitement and terror of my earlier ordeal combining to create the biggest thrill ever.

And then Alex does something I'm not expecting. Looping my legs around his waist, he suddenly sweeps me off the bed with his penis still buried inside me and slams me up against the bedroom door. Faster and faster he pounds, fucking me so hard the whole flat seems to shake, each potent hit taking me a step closer to oblivion. I bite down on his shoulder and try desperately to stifle my screams, not wanting to alert the neighbours.

In the back of my mind, I worry what would happen if my mum and Freddie just happened to return home at this precise moment. What would they say if they knew that good, sweet little Jessica was getting banged in her bedroom by an enormous, filthy beast and enjoying every second of it? What then? It's a scary thought, but right now, I couldn't care less what anyone thinks. All I want is for him to fuck me until I come.

"Look at me," Alex growls, staring deeply into my eyes. I look at him. "Tell me again

that you love me. Say it now!”

“I love you.”

“Now say my name when you come.”

Sensing that I’m close to climaxing, Alex steps it up a gear and pounds me so hard against the door it’s like I’m seeing stars. Up and down the wood jerks, creaking in time to each and every slam, and at one point I worry the hinges could cave. At last, we’re both feeling the fireworks and yell together as a timeless sense of euphoria descends.

“I fucking love you, Alex Kingswood!” I shout as one final super-charged thrust sends me to the point of no return.

With a loud roar, Alex explodes inside me, expelling a sea of warm sticky semen deep into the core of me. For a couple of seconds, he continues pumping, and then stops abruptly and carefully withdraws. Collapsing to the floor, I sit for a while panting from exhaustion. Gently, he unbuckles the handcuffs and then, sweeping me into his arms, carries me over to the bed. For a short while, we just lie wrapped in each other’s arms, soaked in a haze of bliss. My entire body aches from both the sex and the thrashing, but I wouldn’t have it any other way. I’ve never felt so good in my life. Eventually, with a level of reluctance, Alex checks the time on his watch and sits up.

“It’s time to make a move,” he murmurs, reaching for his trousers on the floor. “We’d better get going before your mum and Freddie return.”

“Where are we going?” I ask.

“Isn’t it obvious? You’re still spending the night at mine. We’re going ahead with our

date as planned. We're going to have the wonderful dinner Mrs Bullivant has cooked for us and then I have a lovely surprise for you. Come on, the sooner we leave, the better. It's quite a long drive back and I want to spend as much time as possible with you before tomorrow."

He's right. We'd better get a move on before my mother gets here.

Hurriedly, we get dressed (me in a different posh frock after he destroyed the other one) and after doing a few cursory security checks around the flat, the two of us climb out of my bedroom window and take the back route through the communal gardens out of the estate. Leaving by the front door was never an option just in case we had the misfortune to bump into Mum and Freddie on their return.

As we trudge across the road towards Alex's car, I glance around nervously, hoping and praying nobody I recognise sees us. Luckily the street is quiet and empty and in no time at all, I'm sitting in the passenger seat of the Range Rover, ready to start the journey.

The drive back to Grimschurch is extremely pleasant. The sky is pitch-black and scattered with thousands of stars. We both say very little, basking in the silent enjoyment of each other's company.

We return to Claremont Hall to find a marvellous candlelit dinner laid on by Mrs Bullivant of roast chicken, freshly picked vegetables from the garden followed by a delicious chocolate cake for dessert, all accompanied by a never-ending flow of expensive champagne.

Once more, we are mostly quiet throughout dinner, exchanging the occasional loving glance across the table, confident in the knowledge that we now have a new understanding between us. Alex can't stop smiling and looks like the cat that got the cream. He knows he's got me right where he wants me, and quite frankly I couldn't

give a damn anymore. I'm tired of fighting and besides, being with him is what I want now. By his side, right here, is where I belong.

After dinner, he gently takes my hand. "Come, it's time for me to take you to see your surprise."

"What is it?" I ask playfully with just a little hint of suspicion.

"It wouldn't be a surprise if I told you. Now, have patience. In a couple of minutes, you'll soon see."

Getting up from the table, I follow him along a maze of warmly lit corridors to a magnificent library stacked from ceiling to floor with books. It's an enormous split-level room with high windows and a small flight of steps leading to an upper gallery area lined with yet more ancient tomes. Walking over to one of the bookcases, Alex lifts a candelabra off the wall, and just like in the movies, the bookcase revolves to reveal a dark recess behind it. A succession of wall mounted lamps illuminates a stone passage, beyond which stands the entrance to a futuristic looking elevator.

"Wow! A secret tunnel and a lift that goes to somewhere mysterious. Who are you? Bruce Wayne?"

Alex chuckles. "All in good time, my sweet, all in good time. Now, hold my hand..."

Tentatively, I follow him into the passage, and we step inside the glass elevator. Turning to my right, I notice that the metal call button panel shows floor levels that go to B1, B2, B3 and B4.

"Do these take us down to the basement?" I ask.

"Yes. In fact, there are four basement levels below this entire property. Centuries ago,

my ancestors built an intricate maze of caverns and secret passages, so we had this lift installed to ensure we make good use of them.”

“Wow, that’s so cool.”

“I’m glad you think so.” Alex presses the button for ‘B2’ and the lift begins its swift descent. I admit to being extremely curious about where each of the basement floors lead but imagine I’ll get the opportunity to explore this further another day.

A minute or so later, we arrive at level B2 and step out into yet another dark passage that leads to a set of red painted doors. Excitedly, Alex pushes them open, and I gasp with surprise to see a magnificent cinema auditorium complete with spotlights and a large projection screen. There are enough seats in the place to accommodate perhaps 50 people.

“Wow, this is amazing! I can’t tell you how cool this is.”

“Would you like some popcorn, ma’am?” asks a familiar voice.

Spinning round, I see Hobbs standing next to a retro popcorn and candyfloss making machine. My heart melts. I can’t believe what a lovely surprise this all is. Alex is so sweet it makes me want to weep.

“Two please, and some bottles of Coca-Cola,” Alex smiles, handing me a striped carton overflowing with sticky popcorn. Once we both have hold of our drinks and snacks, Hobbs disappears to the projectionist’s booth, and we head down the stairs to the middle row of seats to wait for the movie to start.

“Okay Hobbs, roll the film,” Alex commands, putting one arm around me.

“What movie are we watching?” I whisper excitedly.

“Don’t worry, you’ll see.”

Instantly, the lights go dim and the film begins to play. Sepia toned images flash up on screen showing scenes of people dressed in old-fashioned clothing waving goodbye to a large ocean liner as it leaves port. Then beautifully haunting music plays and the words ‘Paramount Pictures Twentieth Century Fox presents,’ appear followed by the title of the movie...Titanic.

“Oh, my gosh!” My breath catches. Words can’t describe the flood of emotions engulfing me at this moment. It’s just a movie. Of course, it’s just a movie, but that’s not the point. What’s important is the meaning behind the gesture, and I’m completely and utterly blown away that he would do something so wonderful for me. Tearfully, I glance up at Alex and he beams down at me, his eyes filled with love.

“Thank you,” I croak.

“You’re most welcome,” he replies softly.

Alex

The next day after Jessica has gone home, I'm sitting at the piano, composing a beautiful sonata in celebration of our newfound love, when Beatrix storms into the drawing room with a face like thunder.

"Alex, I just checked the safe and found that one of our most prized pieces of jewellery is missing. You wouldn't by any chance happen to know where it is, would you?"

I stop playing and reply calmly, "If you're talking about the Pharoah's Scarab, then yes, I know exactly where it is. I've given it to Jessica."

"What! Are you out of your mind?"

"No. Do I need to remind you that I am not answerable to you. You know very well all the jewellery in that safe belongs to me now. Grandfather left it all to me in his will and it came into my possession as soon as I turned twenty-one, so what I choose to do with it is my business and nobody else's."

"I can't believe it!" she splutters. "Are you seriously telling me you gave away a priceless family heirloom to that cheap little tart? Are you completely crazy? What planet are you living on, for crying out loud? This is unacceptable and I won't stand for it, do you hear?"

"Careful what language you use to describe my girlfriend. Jessica isn't cheap and she isn't a tart, so stop saying that."

“Oh really?” my mother laughs bitterly. “Let’s see. The girl works for an escort agency. She has sex with men for a living. I don’t know what other word one could use to describe a girl who does that sort of thing, do you?”

With rising anger, I spin my stool around to face her. I’m shocked by her appearance. Beatrix looks terrible: gaunter than ever with chalk-white skin that sort of resembles a shrivelled corpse. She really needs to start eating again. Looking like a tortured skeleton doesn’t suit her.

“Now that isn’t true and you damn well know it,” I say icily. “Okay, so I met Jessica through an escort agency, I’ll admit that, but it was a unique situation. Jessica is a nice girl, she has principles; you know she was a virgin when we first met, isn’t that why you hired her? And she doesn’t make a habit of sleeping with men for money, what happened between us was a one-off. She never wanted to do it, not really. She only joined the agency because her mother is sick, and she needed help paying medical bills. You can’t exact crucify her for that, can you? And she’s not working as an escort anymore so you can stop going on about it. I’ll have you know that Jessica and I are now in a committed relationship.”

“Have you completely lost control of your senses, boy?” Beatrix folds her arms and shakes her head. “Committed relationship? Ha! Do you seriously believe this girl actually cares for you? Do you really believe if it wasn’t for your family’s wealth that she would be giving you the time of day? Come on! I mean, just look at you, Alex. Look at your face and tell me money isn’t her sole motivation. What girl in her right mind would be with you otherwise?”

“There you go insulting me again. Thanks, it’s nice to know I can always count on you to give my self-esteem a good kicking when I’m down. What a loving and caring mother you are Beatrix.”

“I’m just a realist,” she snaps. “There’s no point living in cloud cuckoo land. You’re

not exactly a young girl's dream, are you? No, it's very clear to me that Jessica Gardner is all about money and I have a right to protect this family's interests. I simply can't have you just giving away priceless Egyptian artefacts to every cheap little gold-digger that comes sniffing around. I want her to give it back."

My tone darkens. "Now, I've asked you nicely, and this is the last time I'll say it. Please stop insulting Jessica. I love her and you don't know a damn thing about our relationship, so keep your disgusting opinions to yourself. And no, I will not ask her to give back the Pharaoh's Scarab, it belongs to her now." I get up from the piano and begin pacing up and down the room. "I'll have you know Jessica says she loves me too, and I happen to know her feelings for me are genuine. For the first time in my life, I've met someone who truly cares for me, but you can't stand the thought of me ever being happy, can you? No, you want me to be as miserable and lonely as you all the time."

I hesitate, deliberating whether to stick the knife in. "It's not my fault my father—your dead husband—put a clause in his will saying if you ever remarry you will relinquish all access to his finances. I bet you're mad because it means you can never find love again and I do sympathise. But you need to stop taking it out on me. You married the sick bastard, so you need to take some responsibility. From now on, I'm going to live my life the way I want and that means you're going to be seeing a lot more of Jessica around here, so you might as well start getting used to it."

"Loves you!" Beatrix rolls her eyes. "This just gets better and better. Wake up Alex, before it's too late. Can't you see she's using you? All she wants you for is money, you can't honestly believe her feelings for you are genuine."

"So let me get this straight," I say, jabbing my finger at her. "You set me up with my perfect woman, tell me it's okay to screw her a couple of times, but it's not okay for me to fall in love and have a proper relationship with her? Do you know how twisted and fucked up that is? What an awful, disgusting hypocrite that makes you? What a

black-hearted soul you have.”

“Now Alex, I think you’re being quite hard on me,” she says, sounding genuinely hurt. “I am merely looking out for your best interests, okay? We both know this ‘thing’ you have with this girl can never work out in the long run. It’s just some crazy little infatuation you have, and it will pass, I promise you. What I want to do is ensure you don’t take us all down with you when it eventually all ends in tears.”

Flexing my knuckles, I try hard to keep my temper, but the woman is seriously testing my patience.

“Do you know what your problem with Jessica is?” I sneer. “You hate her because she’s working-class and lives on a council estate. You hate her because she’s poor. Deep down, you’re really a dreadful snob, and despite all your protestations to the contrary, you don’t want me to be with her because you see it as me taking a step down. Well, let me tell you something. Jessica has more class in her little finger than you’ll ever have, and if it was a choice between you and her, I’d choose her every single time.”

“All right,” Beatrix concedes, taking strides over to the window. “I’ll admit the girl is frightfully common. She doesn’t know how to use a knife and fork properly and certainly isn’t the sort of girl I’d want to have my grandchildren. But you know this isn’t about that, Alex. Perhaps if you were a normal person, it would be, but you’re not a normal person, are you? What’s going to happen when sweet little Jessica finds out the truth about what you really are?”

“And what am I, Mother? I’m still waiting to hear you say it.”

She turns on me with flashing eyes. “You know damn well what you are. All I’ll say is this: your ‘girlfriend’ could be in for a nasty shock when she finally finds out the truth. That’s if she lives long enough to tell the tale.”

“What are you insinuating?” I shout. “That I might harm Jessica? How dare you! I would never ever do anything to hurt her.”

“Oh really? I wouldn’t be so sure.” She reaches inside her pocket, takes out a packet of cigarettes and lights one. “Now, my advice is for you to forget about this girl, Alex. You’re young and naïve. You hardly know her. I understand you lost your virginity to her, so you’re going through all these emotions that make you think you are in love, but believe me, you’re not. It’s just about sex, and to that end, I’m more than willing to speak to the agency and find you another virgin. I’ll get you ten virgins if that’s what it takes for you to leave Jessica Gardner alone. This fixation you have with her isn’t healthy and it will only end in tears.”

The walls of the room begin to shake. A heavy wooden cabinet suddenly crashes to the floor. Trembling uncontrollably, Beatrix drops her cigarette and stares at me with saucer eyes. “You just did that, didn’t you? I made you angry, so you made the walls vibrate.”

I let my breath out slowly to calm down. Fuck, she winds me up so much I want to destroy every piece of furniture in this room.

“I think it’s time we parted ways, Mother,” I say, running my fingers through my hair. “You’ve gone too far this time. As of tomorrow, I want you to pack up your things and make arrangements to move out of Claremont Hall. I’m sorry, but this just isn’t working anymore. It’s very clear you’re going to be an obstacle to my relationship with Jessica, and I won’t allow that to happen. I told you, she’s all that I want and if it’s a choice between you and her, I’ll choose Jessica every time.”

“You cannot be serious,” she scoffs. “You would kick your own mother out of her home for that little floozy? Have you truly lost your mind?”

“Don’t worry, I’ll see to it that you’re comfortable. We’ll get you installed in our

Oxfordshire property and if you'd like, I'll allow Mrs Bullivant to go along with you. How's that sound?"

"No, Alex. This is my home, why should I be thrown out like a piece of old rubbish? All because you have some infatuation with a cheap little hussy."

"I told you, no more insults. Look, I just think we'd both be better off apart from each other. If we're honest, this hasn't been working for a long time. You hate me, you say I drive you crazy, you think I'm controlling the weather and making rooms shake. I'm clearly not having a good influence on your mental state. Well, now is your chance to finally be free of me. We're always at each other's throats and this could be a brand-new start for us. We'll probably have a better relationship living apart."

Beatrix lapses into a morose silence. She can tell from my expression that my mind is made up and knows I'm stubborn as a mule when pushed too far. If my mother knows what's good for her, she'll go quietly. Take my generous offer of the house in Oxfordshire and the services of Mrs Bullivant and leave me be. That would be the sensible thing to do, and I hope she does. If, however, she decides to dig her heels in and make trouble, she can be sure it won't end well.

"All right," my mother says finally, "I'll make plans to be out of here by tomorrow. I could certainly do with a break from you. But I warn you, Alex, I don't like this one little bit. Your obsession with this girl is going to be the ending of you if you're not careful. You know as well as I that you can't keep a romance alive when there are so many secrets you are keeping. Just don't come crying to me when it all blows up in your face because you only have yourself to blame."

"Fine," I say, smiling coldly. "I won't come to you because it's not going to happen. But thank you for being so accommodating. I'll speak to Mrs Bullivant today and we can begin to get things going for your move to Oxfordshire."

Picking up her cigarette butt from the floor, Beatrix turns and sweeps out of the room in a huff, leaving me feeling disturbed. On the one hand, I'm pleased to finally have my mother out of my hair for good, but on the other, her harsh assessment of Jessica has affected me more than I care to admit.

Underneath my bravado, I'm deeply insecure about myself and it doesn't take a lot for me to start questioning things. Could Beatrix be right? Could Jessica just be stringing me along for the money? She says she love me but does she, or is she just saying that to pacify me?

I know she enjoys our lovemaking. How could she not? Now she's had a taste of the demon dick, there's no going back, and nothing else will do. Once she let me come inside her it was game over. I've embedded my semen deep within her core and now desire for me flows through her veins as organically as blood.

No matter how hard she fights it, no matter how many times she tries to run away, I know she will always come back to me because she's addicted to my cock, and that's my trump card every single time. No other man will ever be able to satisfy her the way I do, and on that count, I know that pussy is mine forever.

But true love...now that's an entirely different animal. Sexual attraction is not the same as love, and what I want from Jessica is her complete devotion to me, body, heart and soul. I will not settle for anything less.

Despondently, I sit back at the piano and try to resume my composition from earlier but find it impossible; I'm just not with it anymore. Beatrix has planted a seed of doubt that is fast growing into an obsession, and I need something to hold onto to give me comfort. Closing the lid of the Steinway, I get up and go upstairs to my bedroom in search of the one thing that always uplifts my spirits. Stepping into my walk-in wardrobe, I run my fingers along the rails until I find what I'm looking for: the treasured clothes Jessica wore the first night she stayed over.

Greedily, I submerge my face in her delicate white T-shirt and get intoxicated from her glorious scent. Mrs Bullivant had wanted to wash them, but I flat-out refused. My beauty's garments must stay exactly as they are, bathed in the sweet sensual aroma of her warm body. Her jeans, her T-shirt, her bra and most of all her knickers, so deliciously tantalising I can barely contain my excitement when holding them. These sacred items are what keep me going for the long periods of time we are apart. They are what I need to help me climax every single night when I pleasure myself.

As I continue to stand in the wardrobe with my eyes closed, getting horny from inhaling her wonderful smell, I decide it's time to test Jessica's veracity. The next time I see her, I need to find out exactly how far she will go to prove her love for me.

"Oh my gosh, that was so bloody good," Jessica gasps, smoothing down her hair and straightening her skirt. "I needed that so much. All day long, it was all I could think about. My God, I thought I was going to go insane...oh, Alex, that was fucking amazing."

"I'm glad it was so good for you," I mutter darkly. Drumming my fingers on the steering wheel, I stare gloomily through the windscreen at the surrounding houses. Everywhere is pin-drop quiet and there's not a living soul about.

"Are you okay?" she asks timidly. "You seem like you're in a bad mood tonight."

"Don't worry about me, I'm fine. Absolutely...fine."

Like hell I am.

It's two o'clock in the morning and we're parked in my Range Rover a couple of streets away from Jessica's flats. We've just finished fucking in the back seat and she was so wet, so excited, she came within two minutes and then said she was too sore to carry on. And I hadn't even got started, not by a long shot, and now I'm stuck here

with a raging hard-on and nowhere to go, feeling used and far from impressed about the way this night is developing.

It had all started off so well. Around six pm, for the first time ever, I received a phone call from Jessica begging me to come down and see her. She said she was gagging for my dick and needed me to come over and give her a good seeing to. Well, of course I was over the moon and said hell yes, I could drive down right now to see her. It was just the tonic I needed to soothe my bruised ego after all the crap with Beatrix earlier. I saw Jessica calling me as reassurance that she wasn't just in this for the money, that she really wanted to be with me, and we had finally reached a breakthrough.

But then my heart sank when she told me not to drive down just yet, wait until later, just in case one of her neighbours saw us together, which suggests she's ashamed to be seen out with me. And now this 'one hit and it's over' thing has me feeling sick all over again. Maybe, just maybe my mother was right. Perhaps it is just money and a couple of quick fucks Jessica wants from me and nothing else. The thought of it is driving me crazy and I decide it's time to use a bit of reverse psychology to get to the root of her true intentions towards me.

"Um, so how was the traffic coming down to London?" she asks, fumbling to make conversation. "Did you have any problems getting here?"

"No, the roads were completely clear," I say. "It's two in the morning. Not exactly going to be busy, is it?"

"Good point." Jessica gives a nervous giggle. "Well, I-I guess I should be going now. I mean, it's getting late and it's a bit risky hanging around so close to my house. You know, someone might see us."

"Funny. You weren't worried about taking risks when I was just pounding my cock into you."

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Nothing. Look, if you want to go, then just go, okay? I’m bored of sitting here having inane conversations about nothing. I didn’t drive all the way down here for this. Go on, get out the car. Go!”

There’s a moment of loaded silence. Jessica remains in her seat. The entire Range Rover smells of her pussy and it’s getting me so horny it’s hard to think straight.

“Alex, why are you so angry with me?”

“What do you care? I told you, get out of the car.”

“Please talk to me. Why are you behaving so—”

“I said get out of the fucking car now!”

Trembling, she hurriedly reaches for the door release.

“So, is that it then?” I say coldly. “You’ve climaxed so now I’m summarily dismissed. Is that it? No thought whatsoever to whether I’m satisfied. Is that how this works?”

“I’m sorry about that. I know I came too quickly, but it’s only because you turn me on so much and it had been building up in me all day, I just couldn’t hold out for very long. I promise to make it up to you next time.”

“So, you’re just going to leave me hanging? You’re not even going to try to get me off?”

“What do you want me to do? I told you I’m too sore to...” Her sentence falters. “I

guess I could...I could give you a hand-job?"

"I don't want a fucking hand-job. I can do that all by myself. Why would I drive all the way here just for that, huh? Talk sense woman." Moodily, I focus on the glowing dashboard, my stomach tight with sexual frustration.

"Then what do you want from me?" Jessica demands, her temper rising. "If you'd stop being so cryptic, maybe we could get somewhere."

"I want you to touch me."

"What are you talking about? I do touch you."

"No, you don't, not properly. You let me fuck you, that's all. You just lie on your back and leave me to do everything, and don't get me wrong, I love fucking you, but I want more now. I need to be touched, Jessica. I need to feel your hands, your lips, your tongue all over my body. I need you to show me that you want me and do all the same things I do to you to make you feel good."

"All right...all right, I promise I can do all of that next time."

"And you never go down on me."

Once more, she giggles nervously, and even in the dark, I can tell she's blushing. "Is that what this is about? You're mad at me because I won't give you a blowjob?"

"No, that's not all it is," I say, feeling a rush of butterflies at the thought of her lips around my cock. "But it would be nice occasionally if you showed an interest in giving me the same pleasure I give to you. I love going down on you, it's one of my favourite things to do, but how about you return the favour, just once in a while?"

She bites her thumbnail and looks away. “Okay fine. Like I said, I’ll do it next time.”

“Next time, next time. That’s all you keep saying. How about right now? How about taking me into your bedroom right now and showing me what you can really do?”

Jessica massages her temples. “I can’t take you into my house, it’s too risky.”

“I thought so. Can I ask you something?”

“Go on.”

“Is there ever going to be a time when we can stop hiding in the shadows? When we stop meeting each other under the cover of darkness? You say that you love me, but will there ever be a day when you are proud to walk down the street with me holding hands in public? Will I ever be introduced to your family, to your mother and Freddie?”

She falls silent again and I know I’ve got the answer to my question. Jessica has failed the test miserably. So, Beatrix was right. This girl doesn’t love me.

“Get out the car, and this time I mean it.”

“You’ve got it so wrong about me,” Jessica says quietly. “You think I don’t want to go down on you? Of course, I do, but I’m scared, Alex. I’m sexually inexperienced. I’ve never done anything like that before and I’m nervous, okay? It’s not because I don’t want to. And all of that stuff you said about me not wanting to introduce you to my family, well, it has nothing to do with the way you look. I’m holding off you meeting them because I still haven’t figured out a way to explain how we know each other. I can’t exactly tell my mum about the escort agency, and let’s be real, you don’t exactly look like you work for a modelling agency, do you?”

She sighs heavily. "It's just so bloody complicated right now, but you've got to stop making this about you when it isn't. I'm the one with the issues. Now I promise, as soon as my mother returns from Germany, I'll figure out a way for you to meet her. Yes, she might be a bit shocked when she first sees you, but in the end, she'll accept you if she knows that you make me happy. We just need to wait for the right time, that's all."

"I'm still not buying it," I say. "To me it's obvious you're terrified of people finding out about us. You're embarrassed to be seen with me. You don't want Cynthia or Freddie to see me because of how hideous I am."

"Hideous? No, you're not hideous...at least not to me. Not anymore. Stop believing you're ugly because it just isn't true, Alex. You're the sexiest guy I've ever met, everything about you is sexy and that includes your extraordinary face. Listen, let me tell you something about me. Have you ever seen the movie Legend with Tom Cruise?"

I shake my head. "No."

"Well, it's a fantasy film set in a magical kingdom. In the story, Tom Cruise's arch enemy is a devil called Darkness played by Tim Curry." She pauses and then she whispers seductively: "Want to know a secret I've never told anyone? One summer when I was thirteen years old, I watched that movie on repeat, and you know what? Tom Cruise didn't get me wet. Darkness did."

For a long moment, I sit rigidly in the driver's seat, completely lost for words. It's like I've been hit by a thunderbolt. Never in my wildest dreams did I ever imagine a girl saying these kinds of things to me. I can't believe it. This is what I've been waiting to hear my whole entire life and I'm so filled with emotion I'm rendered speechless.

And then Jessica shoots me a smouldering look with those beautiful eyes of hers and I almost come in my boxer shorts.

“I’ve changed my mind,” she purrs. “I want you to come to my bedroom now.” She reaches down and takes hold of my hand. “We’ll have to go in through the back and be very, very quiet, but you can stay for a little while. I want you to teach me how it’s done, Alex. Show me how you want me to touch you, where you want me to kiss you, how you want me to suck you. I’m ready to do anything to prove to you how much you mean to me.”

I exhale softly, still unable to speak. Oh my God, I cannot believe this is happening. Finally, I’ve met my soulmate, someone who is prepared to do all the things I could only dream of. Silently, we leave the car and walk hand-in-hand to Jessica’s estate, taking the route through the dark communal gardens to access her bedroom through the back window.

As soon as we get inside, Jessica switches on the bedside lamp and wastes no time getting down to business. First, she lifts off my hooded cloak, throws it to the floor and then stares at me for a long time, her brown eyes glistening with adoration. Reaching up, she lavishes me with the warm touch I’ve craved for so long.

Gently, she strokes the side of my cheek, caresses my stubble, then tenderly runs her long slender fingers over the entire surface of my face, touching every irregular bump and jagged contour without a shred of fear. Her hands move over my lips, my nose, my forehead, my eyelids. I exhale with pleasure. No one has ever touched my face so intimately before and it excites me to distraction.

Keeping her eyes fixed on me, she slowly begins to unbutton my shirt and tosses it over a chair. For a moment, she gazes at my pumped-up chest and perfectly chiselled torso and the desire in her face is unmistakeable.

“Your body is so beautiful,” she whispers. “I want to taste every last inch of you.”

Her words give me goosebumps and I get sort of choked up. Then plunging her fingers in my hair, Jessica pulls me in for a long, hungry kiss that makes me dizzy with longing. Her lips are soft as silk and hot as Hades. She’s never kissed me like this before and the sweet taste of her mouth sends me half crazy. It’s like I’m completely drunk or something.

Slowly, seductively, she takes off my shoes. Then she unbuckles my belt, unzips my Moschino jeans, pulls them down and does away with those too. Quietly tells me to lie down on the bed. Eagerly, I follow her instructions, more than happy to take orders from my queen. The way she looks at me makes my dick ache.

Starting at my neck, Jessica works her way down gradually, her hot tongue seeking out every hollow, every crevasse, leaving a trail of indescribable pleasure everywhere her mouth touches. I moan loudly. She places one hand over my mouth.

“Sssh! My mother might hear you. We’re going to have to be really quiet, okay?”

“Okay,” I whisper. “I’ll try not to make too many noises.”

With a naughty smile, she resumes her sweet onslaught. Continuing to work her way down, she spends an interminable time exploring every inch of my body with her wet hungry mouth—all except my penis. That will have to wait. She kisses my pecs, my torso, she sucks my toes, licks the soles of my feet, even kisses my ankles. It’s the most divine feeling on Earth. Eventually, she moves onto my inner thighs and runs her hot tongue all over my most sensitive areas, licking slow swirling circles that make me want to scream down the house.

Fuck, fuck, fuck that feels too good.

Tentatively, Jessica finally takes my rock-hard cock in her hand, and I feel light-headed at the thought of what she's going to do.

"Tell me how you want it? What should I do?"

"Put it in your mouth," I breathe. "Imagine you're sucking on a big fat ice lolly. But be careful with your teeth. Remember to be gentle."

"Okay."

Obediently, she gives the glistening tip a few gentle kisses before pushing her tongue deep inside my little sensitive hole. Lord God, that's sublime. Encouraged by my whimpers of excitement, she goes in all guns blazing and swamps her entire mouth over the head of my dick and begins sucking vigorously.

My throat goes dry. My body twists and turns. There's no way she'll ever fit my colossal member all down her throat, but she's certainly taking a good crack at it. Each time, she pushes my shaft just a little deeper, and the sensation is so heavenly I feel paralysed from the waist down. Every stroke, every caress of her tongue sends me out of my mind and very soon she has broken down all my barriers. All my bravado and tough guy talk goes out the window and in a moment of vulnerability, I call out her name.

"Oh Jessica, I love you, I love you so much!"

She doesn't answer, her mouth is far too busy.

Goddamit this girl knows how to suck cock. Up and down she goes, licking and slurping my penis with an enthusiasm that leaves me gasping.

"That feels so damn good," I groan. Then tentatively, I ask: "Baby, can you lick my

balls?”

She stops sucking and looks up. “Will that make you feel good?”

“Yes. It will make me feel really, really good.”

“Like this?” Nervously, she flicks her tongue over one of my ball sacks and then quickly glances up at me for approval. Her face looks so damn cute it takes my breath away. She’s so beguilingly corruptible.

“Yes, that’s right. Now do it again.”

With careful diligence, Jessica continues licking away at my ball sacks like a kitten lapping milk. After a few seconds of blissful gorging, she falters again. “Tell me if I’m doing it right?”

“Yes, keep going, don’t stop. Mmm...that’s so fucking nice. Now take them one at a time into your mouth and fully suck on them. Remember to be gentle. I’m very sensitive down there.”

“Okay.” And then like a seasoned pro, she dives in and greedily sucks on them like she’s sucking a pair of oranges. My buttocks clench. I grasp at the bedsheets. Holy fucking shit...

“Does that feel good?” Jessica whispers again. “Do you like that?”

This time, all I can do is nod my head energetically in response.

Lovingly, I gaze down at her, not able to quite believe this is really happening. Never did I dream something like this would be possible. That she would go to such lengths to please me is mind-blowing. It’s almost like I need to pinch myself.

After she's finished licking and lapping my balls, I spread my thighs further apart to give her easy access to other regions.

"Now baby," I breathe, lightly stroking her head. "I want you to stick your tongue up my arse and wank me off slowly. Just for a little bit."

Jessica's eyes widen and I sense a note of hesitation for the first time. "I'm not sure I'm ready to do that."

"Why not? I do it to you all the time."

"I know but it's..."

"Nasty? Of course, it is. That's why I want you to do it. I'm just longing to feel your sweet tongue up there. Come now, there's no need to be shy. You know I enjoy tasting every single part of you, nowhere is off limits. Now it's time for you to return the favour. It's time to show me how much you care."

"Well, okay. If you're sure it will make you feel good..." Lowering her head again, she takes a small, tentative lick of my butthole.

"Fuck," I gasp. "Do that again."

Spurred on by my words, she sheds all her inhibitions and really puts her back into it, licking out my crack like it's the best thing she's ever tasted. I moan with delight. Oh, my fucking God, that is beautiful. Then she ups the ante, grips hold of my dick and simultaneously wanks me off, sending me on a star ship to Mars. I have no words. My world has been blown apart.

After a while, Jessica resumes feasting on my mammoth shaft and very soon a wave of bliss crashes through me and I shoot my hot load into her mouth, the orgasm so

electrifying I see white lights for a few seconds afterwards. With her mouth full of my sticky cream, Jessica looks like she's about to gag. She has no idea what to do with it.

"Swallow it, my beauty," I purr. "Show me how much you love me."

For a moment she hesitates, then dutifully, she does as she's told. I hear a delectable gulping sound and then, wiping her mouth with her hand, she beams up at me in triumph.

"Good girl," I smile, stroking a hair out of her face. "Did you like that? Did I taste good?"

"Um, it tasted kind of salty and will take some getting used to, but as long as I pleased you, that's all that matters."

"Oh, you pleased me very, very much. I've never felt anything like it."

Jessica grins broadly. I have never loved her more than I do at this moment. She's just so fucking sexy. Pulling her in for a kiss, I devour her lips hungrily, relishing the taste of my salty semen on her mouth. I love that she took me all inside her. Every single drop. The thought of it turns me on so much. After a few moments of sweet, ravenous tongue play, I grab her arm and pin her face down to the mattress.

"Now tell me, do you love me? You didn't answer me earlier."

She makes a non-committal sound.

"Do you love me?" I repeat. "I want to hear you say it!"

"I don't want to," she laughs.

“Say it now, or I swear to you, I’ll fuck you up the arse with no lubricant. I mean it.”

“Is that a promise?” She wiggles her hips suggestively.

“No, I don’t think you’re ready.”

“I am ready. I want you to do it right now. Go on, stick it in.”

For a moment, I’m sorely tempted. The moment passes.

With a dark chuckle, I release her and give her buttocks a playful slap. “No, your cute little tush isn’t ready for that yet, and I don’t want to mess up your clean white bedsheets. But trust me, when the time is right, you won’t know what’s hit you.”

“I look forward to it, Mr Kingswood.” Then she pulls me back for a final, lingering kiss and whispers, “You’d better go before someone discovers us. I love you.”

“I love you too. More than anything in the world. What we did tonight was so...so...”

“Ssssh.” She puts one finger over my lips. “I know. You don’t need to tell me. Now go, before my mother wakes up.”

“When do I see you again?”

“Same time tomorrow night?”

“You bet I’ll be here.”

My heart starts to sing. I have never, ever loved anyone the way I love Jessica. I want to keep her forever and ever and woe betide anyone who tries to come between us.

## Page 12

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Jessica

“I think we need to talk, Jess,” Cynthia says when we return home from dropping Freddie at school the next day. “There’s a couple of things I need to clear up with you.”

“Sure, no problem,” I reply.

Well, there goes my peace of mind. All morning, I noticed Mum was acting strangely and suspected that this was coming, which is a shame because everything had been going so well between us. I should have known something was coming down the pipeline to ruin things.

After we’ve hung up our coats and taken off our shoes, we head to the kitchen where I put the kettle on to make some coffee. My mother leans against the wall with her arms crossed, the stance she always takes when waiting to launch into a tirade. As I place a jar of Nescafe and two chipped mugs on the sideboard, I can sense her eyes watching me intently. Whatever’s on her mind I wish she’d just say it. I hate being kept in suspense.

“So, what’s up?” I ask, trying to sound casual. “You said you wanted to speak to me?”

“Yes.” Cynthia clears her throat. “I bumped into Mrs Biederhof from number 10 yesterday at the supermarket.”

“That’s nice. How is she?”

“She’s fine. Talked non-stop as usual, but this time she had some interesting stuff to tell me. She reckons she saw you and a strange, hooded man climbing out your bedroom window on Saturday night and said you left through the back garden. Is this true?”

My shoulders stiffen. “Strange, hooded man? Is the old dear all right in the head? No, of course it isn’t true. Mrs Biederhof must be seeing things.”

“Tell me again where you were on Saturday night? When Freddie and I got home from Erin’s you weren’t here, and you didn’t come back until late afternoon Sunday.”

“I told you, I went out clubbing with Amina on Saturday and then I stayed over at her place.”

“Can she vouch for you?”

“Sure, she can.”

“Uh-huh. Well, that’s interesting because Amina phoned here yesterday before you got back asking to speak to you, and guess what? I said I thought you were with her and she didn’t know anything about it.”

An awkward silence descends. Dammit. Rule number one: if you’re going to use one of your girlfriends as a cover story for misbegotten deeds, make sure you’ve briefed her first.

The kettle finishes boiling. I spoon some coffee into each mug and pour in the hot water.

“Well,” my mother pushes. “What have you got to say for yourself?”

“All right, all right, I went out with a guy on Saturday,” I admit. “But I didn’t climb through any window with a hooded man, okay? Mrs Biederhof needs to get her eyes checked. I just...I just went on a date, that’s all. No big deal.”

“See, that wasn’t so hard, was it?” Cynthia opens the fridge and takes out a carton of milk. “If it was all so innocent, then why all the secrecy? Why lie and pretend you stayed at your friend’s house?” When I don’t respond, she asks: “Was it Alex you went out with?”

“Yes.”

“The guy that sent you the roses and bought you those designer dresses?”

“Yes.”

“The same guy that gifted you that magnificent Egyptian necklace made of solid gold that you pretended was just a little piece of costume jewellery?”

I roll my eyes. “Yep, that’s him.”

“Is he married?”

“No! Of course, he’s not married. Why on earth would you think that?”

“Because there’s clearly something about this guy you’re not telling me. As I said, if things are above board, then why all the secrecy? When you went on the date with Jack the prat you couldn’t wait to sing it from the rooftops, but with Alex, not so much. To me, that rings alarm bells.”

“We’re just taking things slowly, that’s all,” I shrug. “I didn’t want to tell you because it’s still early days and I wanted to be sure about him before I made any kind

of announcement.”

“How old is he?”

“Twenty-one.”

“And you say you met him on a photo shoot?”

“Yes.”

“Can I ask you something else, and only answer if you’re going to be truthful.”

“Yeah, okay.”

“Has Alex ever given you money?”

I hesitate before deciding to tell a partial truth. “Yes.”

“How much?”

“He gave me money for...well, he paid for your plane tickets to Germany and for the hotel.”

“Right, okay.” She takes a sip of coffee and stares briefly into the middle distance. Then, putting down her mug, she reaches in her pocket and places a small white box on the sideboard. My eyes widen as I recognise my birth control pills.

“Mum! I can’t believe you went in my bedroom and poked through my things. Do you know how wrong that is? It’s like reading a person’s diary!”

“I’m sorry, Jessica. I’m not proud of what I did, but you left me with little choice. I

had to do a bit of snooping to find out what was going on. You've changed so much these past couple of weeks I barely recognise you. You've gone from hardly ever going out to spending so much time away from home. Then you got yourself all these modelling jobs and now you've suddenly got this secret boyfriend. It's getting hard to keep up. To be honest, I don't like the changes I'm seeing in you. I just hope you're being careful."

"What is that supposed to mean?"

"I mean I wouldn't want you to end up pregnant. Not at your age."

"I'm nineteen years old for goodness' sake," I snap. "I'm allowed to have a sex life, and of course, I'm being careful. The proof is in what you stole from my bedroom."

"Yes," she concedes, "but nineteen was also the age I got pregnant with you, and I don't want you throwing your life away by having a baby too young, Jess. Don't make the same mistakes I did."

My temper flairs. "You think me and Freddie were mistakes?"

"Of course not. But there's so much I want you to do with your life before you think of becoming a parent, that's all. Especially if this thing with Alex is only something casual."

"Who said it was casual?"

"Is this boy definitely serious about you? The kind of men who sniff around the modelling scene tend to have their fingers in a lot of pies. I'm assuming he's loaded?"

"Yes, his family has money, but what does that have to do with anything? Are you saying a rich guy wouldn't be serious about me?"

“I just don’t want you to be left holding the baby if things don’t work out.” She takes another gulp of coffee. “And him buying you all those expensive gifts, spending all that money on you so early in the relationship does ring alarm bells. It’s like he’s trying to buy your affection. Although...” she adds hastily, “please do thank Alex for the plane tickets and the hotel. It was extremely generous of him, and I’ll be forever grateful. Tell him I think he’s very kind.”

“All right, I’ll tell him.”

Cynthia puts down her mug and straightens out her collar. “Now listen, Jess. There’s a lot of things that have happened recently that I’ve turned a blind eye to and choose not to look too closely at because I just don’t have the time or the energy right now. A lot of things that just don’t add up.”

“Such as?”

“Did you really make that ?50,000 working as a model? Come on now, tell the truth, this is me you’re talking to. Be honest.”

“Yes, I made it through modelling.” Even as I say it, I can tell she knows I’m lying. I scratched the side of my chin, always a dead giveaway ever since I was a kid. “What makes you think I’m not telling the truth?”

“Lots of things,” Cynthia says. “But mainly just motherly intuition. For one thing, why do you still keep your job at Sloppy Joe’s if modelling pays so much better? You’re telling me you can make ?25,000 per photo shoot but you’re happy to still accept minimum wage at the diner? Get out of here. Something smells off.”

Dammit, she’s got me there. “I, um...well isn’t that the sensible thing to do? Modelling is such an unstable career, one minute you have work, the next you don’t, so isn’t it safer to keep my part-time job as something to fall back on?”

She laughs bitterly. “You have an answer for everything. I don’t know what mischief you’re up to, darling, but all I’ll say is this. Whatever you have going on in your personal life, don’t let it get in the way of you taking care of Freddie while I’m gone, okay? I need to know I can completely trust you while I’m in Germany, or else I won’t be able to go.”

“Of course, you can trust me!” I shout, slamming down my coffee. “Mum, I promise you there’s absolutely nothing to worry about. Go to Germany and do what you need to do, everything will be fine here while you’re gone. Freddie always comes first, you know that. Don’t even think about cancelling.”

“Well, that’s good to hear, because I’ve already got enough things to worry about, what with the school sending another letter home about Freddie’s behaviour.”

“What are they complaining about now?”

“His teacher said he’s been hitting the other kids again.”

I pull a face. “That’s only because the other children provoke him. My brother is not a troublemaker, Mum. Freddie told me the other kids in his class are always teasing him about his idiosyncrasies. You know, like his thing with counting how many baked beans are on his plate at dinnertime.”

Cynthia runs her fingers over her face. “The thing is, his teacher, Miss Barnes, says she wants a meeting with me next week to discuss his progress. That’s the same week I fly out. There’s just so much to do it’s getting overwhelming.”

I take both her hands in mine and look her dead in the eye. “Now listen to me, Mum. Don’t worry about anything, okay? I’m sorry for all the sneaking around, you’re right, I should have just come clean and told you the truth. As of today, I promise to be honest with you about when I’m meeting up with Alex. And I’ll happily go to this

meeting on your behalf at the school. You just focus on preparing for your trip and keeping your stress levels low, okay? I want you to focus on getting better and nothing else.”

She smiles weakly and then pulls me in for a one-armed hug. “Oh darling, what would I do without you? You really are an angel, but sometimes you can be a little devil too. All right, I gratefully accept your offer to go down to the school, thank you. I can’t deal with Miss Barnes right now, so your intervention is much appreciated, but don’t take any crap from her about Freddie. Remember to stand your ground. But can you promise me just one last thing?”

“Sure.”

“When I return from this trip, can we sit down together and have a proper chat about everything? I mean about where you really got that ?50,000, because sweetheart, I know it wasn’t from modelling.” I open my mouth to protest but she shushes me with one finger. “Nope. No more lies. Oh, and I also want to meet Alex. If you’re going to continue seeing him, then he will need to be vetted by me.”

My palms get all sweaty. “Um, yeah sure. I can do that.”

“Do you promise?”

“I promise.”

“Fantastic, that helps put my mind at rest. I love you.”

“Love you too.”

Oh no. How the heck am I going to get out of this one? Not for the first time, I’ve backed myself into a corner with no way out.

Later that day, as I'm walking through Clapham High Street to buy some groceries from Sainsbury's, I hear a car horn beeping to get my attention. Spinning around, I see a black Rolls Royce parked across the road and get a shock when I realise the man in the driver's seat is none other than Hobbs. Oh my gosh. What is he doing here? Then the mystery deepens as the passenger window slides down and I see the ghostly face of Mrs Kingswood, her lips moving and saying something inaudible from this distance.

What the hell does she want?

Glancing left and right, I jog across the street and hesitantly approach the car, my heart thudding like a drum. Why oh, why do I get a bad feeling about this?

"Mrs Kingswood," I say, forcing a smile. "What a nice surprise. What are you doing around my neck of the woods?"

"As a matter of fact, I came here especially to see you," she replies. "Is there somewhere private we could go to talk?"

I rock back on my heels. "Actually, I was just in the middle of doing some shopping. Now isn't really a good time, but if you maybe come back later, we could—"

"Jessica, this is a life-or-death situation. I need to speak with you now urgently."

Life-or-death? This lady is starting to worry me...

"How long is this talk going to take and what's it about? Can you at least give me a clue?"

"I told you, the matter is private, but it's highly important we speak today. There's not a moment to lose. I promise it won't take long, no more than half an hour. Now,

you know this area. Where can we go where we won't be bothered by anyone? This is an extremely sensitive matter, and I must have absolute privacy."

For a few seconds, I say nothing, just stare into her haggard face and wonder what secrets she could possibly reveal. Deep down, a part of me doesn't want to know, but in the end, curiosity gets the better of me. I want to know what this 'life-or-death' situation is.

"Okay, there is one place we could go," I say at last. "There's a quiet spot on Clapham Common where people rarely ever go. We could go and talk there, I guess."

"Excellent!" Mrs Kingswood flashes a sickly grin. "Get in the car and you can give us directions."

With great reluctance, I pull open the door and slip in next to her. About ten minutes later, Hobbs is parked up on a side-street and me and Beatrix Kingswood are sitting on the same bench where this whole crazy thing first started—the same secluded clearing where I first read The Sunday Sport story about a girl selling her virginity. The irony is not lost on me.

For a while, the two of us sit stiffly side-by-side, looking away from each other, virtual strangers brought together by the most bizarre circumstance. Mrs Kingswood has brought a battered old suitcase with her from the car, and something about it makes me nervous. I wonder what dark secrets are held within it.

"Does Alex know you're here?" I ask, as it suddenly occurs to me.

"No," she replies. "I come to you in the strictest confidence, Jessica, and would rather you kept what I am about to tell you just between the two of us."

"Okay. So what's this all about, then? What is this life-or-death situation you are

referring to?”

Beatrix goes quiet for a while, like she’s fumbling for a way to articulate it. “Put simply, I think my son is dangerous and you would do well to steer clear of him. Your very life could depend on it.”

I blink at her stupidly. “Come again?”

“I believe Alex could be a danger to you and I want you to stop seeing him. Your life could be at risk if you don’t heed my warning.”

“Define what you mean by dangerous?” Like I don’t already know. Let’s see, arson, stalking, assault with a deadly weapon...

“Did Alex ever tell you about the circumstances surrounding what happened to his father?” Mrs Kingswood asks.

“Er, no. All I know is his dad died when Alex was ten and that’s it.”

“Well, I’m afraid there’s much more to it then that.” She falters. “Eleven years ago, my husband Neville fell down the grand staircase at Claremont Hall and broke his neck. Died instantly. All a terrible accident...at least that’s the official version of the story.”

“What do you mean? Are you suggesting some sort of a cover up?”

“For you to get a better understanding, I probably need to go back to the beginning.” Cautiously, she opens her briefcase and takes out what appears to be an old library book and a couple of faded newspaper clippings. “A few months before Neville died, Alex discovered an old Ouija board under one of the floorboards in his bedroom. He began playing around with it, and he told me someone was trying to communicate

with him from the spirit world, you know, like a ghost or something. He told me the planchette moved all by itself, but I just dismissed it as childish nonsense. I thought he was making it up, but then, after a while, I noticed discernible changes in my son.”

“Such as?” I ask nervously.

“It was as if Alex became a different person. Overnight, he became a musical genius who could play the piano like nothing I’d ever heard before. Suddenly, he excelled in everything, could speak fluent Latin, French, and generally had a vocabulary far advanced for his years. His governess and music teacher were dumbfounded. Nobody could explain the change, least of all me because I was looking in all the wrong places.” Beatrix breaks off and takes a moment to compose herself.

When she speaks again, her tone is low and troubled. “Then weird things started happening around the house. Furniture would be rearranged in an odd way. Doors would slam out of nowhere. There were strange banging and scratching noises at night. A terrifying incident involving knives. The servants began to whisper we had a ghost in the house, but I scoffed initially as I wasn’t a believer in the occult at that time. I was so blind I failed to make a connection between Alex’s newfound abilities and the appearance of this ghost.”

“This is nuts,” I murmur.

“You haven’t heard the half of it,” Mrs Kingswood says sadly. “Things took a dangerous turn the night Neville returned home from working in the Middle East. He was a violent brute who used to physically abuse me, but I put up with it because at that time, a woman had to know her place. The night Neville died we argued viciously, I forget about what, and Alex tried to intervene to protect me. And that was when it happened...”

“What happened?” I ask eagerly, now on tenterhooks.

“That was when I saw something so wild, so crazy, I’m still not sure if I imagined it. Just thinking about it gives me trouble sleeping even after all these years.” She swallows hard and licks her lips. “As Neville and Alex stood on the staircase arguing, I thought I saw...”

“What did you see?”

Beatrix bows her head, almost in embarrassment. “I thought I saw an enormous black tentacle rip through Alex’s shoulder and smack Neville on the head. I thought I saw my son strike the killer blow that sent his father crashing down the staircase to his death.”

There’s a long, dark silence. The park suddenly feels very cold. My jaw drops, unable to process what I’ve just heard. “Are you saying you think Alex murdered your husband?”

“No, not Alex. I’m saying that some unearthly creature within him did. That tentacle didn’t belong to Alex...it belonged to something else.”

I give a crazy laugh. “Wow, now I’ve heard everything. Is this supposed to be a joke? Is there a hidden camera somewhere and Jeremy Beadle is gonna jump out from a bush in a second to tell me You’ve been framed?”

“You shouldn’t laugh. Every word I’ve said is true.”

“I’m sorry, but I just don’t believe you. Do you know how insane you sound? A big black tentacle ripped out from a ten-year-old? What?”

“It was only after Neville’s death that I finally started to do some research and take the whole ghost thing more seriously.” Solemnly, Beatrix passes me a bunch of tattered newspaper clippings dating back to the late 1980s depicting stories of

demonic possession from all over the world: South America, Europe, Africa, everywhere.

“Demonic possession?” I say, incredulous. “That sounds like something out of a horror movie. Am I supposed to take this seriously?”

“Just hear me out. Don’t judge me until you’ve heard everything.”

Mrs Kingswood then goes on to say that after Neville died, most of the servants fled Claremont Hall, refusing to continue living in a house that was haunted and where a mysterious death had taken place. Only Hobbs and Mrs Bullivant were brave (or foolish) enough to stay on. And it was then she began to notice that strange things seemed to occur around Alex. For example, if he was angry or sad, the sunny sky would suddenly go dark outside. Sometimes his tantrums would bring rain and gale force winds. Beatrix noticed other things too, like her son could attract or repel animals at will. Sometimes when Alex was seriously mad, an entire flock of birds would flee the woods, only to return when he was in better spirits.

“Oh my God, this just gets crazier by the minute,” I say, shaking my head. “But I still don’t see how you came up with the idea of demonic possession?”

“I’m coming to that,” she says. Her face looks so pinched and pale she sort of reminds me of Nosferatu the vampire. “Okay, so sometimes at nights, I’d hear Alex talking in his sleep and he kept on saying the name Erasmus over and over again, but in the morning when I asked him about it, he said he didn’t know what I was talking about. I thought it was an odd name for a child to fixate on, so I decided to do some research and came up with this...”

Wordlessly, Mrs Kingswood passes me the old library book entitled Demonology Vol. One. Flipping to a page near the middle, she points to a Medieval woodcut of a horrific beast-like creature with tentacles and its head on back to front. I break out in

a cold sweat. As I stare into the diabolical monster's cold, inhuman eyes, I see something disturbingly familiar in them. They remind me of the way Alex's eyes look sometimes when he's angry. Then I get to thinking about all the times I noticed the temperature drop as soon as he entered a room. But was that real or just my imagination? Surely, it's not possible for a person to control the temperature? Hurriedly, I push the ridiculous thought from my mind. No, that's impossible. Demons don't exist.

"What is this horrible creature?" I ask, hoping to steer the conversation in a different direction.

"That is the great Erasmus, demon of the elements," Beatrix replies softly. "It is said he has the power to control the weather, amongst other things."

"Hold on, so let me get this straight; you're saying Alex messed around with a Ouija board when he was a kid and somehow channelled the spirit of the demon Erasmus into him, and he's now possessed?"

"In a nutshell—yes."

"Jesus. I'm lost for words. This is just about the craziest thing I've ever heard."

"But it's true, I tell you!" she implores. "Every word. Haven't you seen his eyes, for goodness' sake? How sometimes they're bluey-green but at other times yellow? How else can you explain that phenomenon? But the demon is clever, it knows when not to show itself. I'll give you an example. When Alex was twelve, I called in a Catholic priest to see him in the hope of getting an exorcism done to clear away the bad spirit. But the whole entire time, Alex behaved normally. The demon refused to show himself, so the priest denied us the exorcism as there was no proof of my son's possession. Erasmus is very, very crafty, let me tell you."

That's it. I can't take any more of this.

With a loud sigh, I drop the book and newspaper clippings back in Mrs Kingswood's lap. Getting up from the bench, I pace back and forth, trying to hold it together. I don't want to believe any of this madness is true, but there's something horribly convincing in Beatrix's grave tone and demeanour. The way she looks, her whole appearance suggests someone who has been through a traumatic experience. And looking back, there was definitely something not right in Claremont Hall the first time I visited. An undeniably black aura surrounding Alex that was more than just about his outward appearance. Deep down, my intuition suggests it just might be true. But how could it be? Demons are the stuff of folklore. They're not real...are they?

No, no, no! I refuse to believe it. She's not sucking me into this insanity.

"You have no idea what it was like living with Alex when he was growing up," she continues more to herself than me. "How...how temperamental he could be as a teenager. Depending on what mood he was in, your whole world could be torn apart by bad weather. The day could start out sunny one minute and be swamped by a torrential downpour the next. When Alex hit puberty things only got worse. At the slightest provocation, all the furniture in a room would be smashed to pieces. Storms would appear out of nowhere. Once, a lightning bolt even struck the clock tower in one of the outbuildings after we argued. The situation was becoming unbearable, and I knew a lot of my son's fury was borne of sexual frustration, so I did what any mother would do. I tried to find him an outlet for his desires, the perfect girl who he could vent his—"

"Let me guess, that's where I came in?" I interject sourly.

Beatrix nods her head. "Yes, but you weren't the first. Before you, I brought several girls to Claremont Hall to see Alex, all pretty girls from high class escort agencies, but he refused to sleep with any of them because he said they were 'unclean.' The

girls were all prepared to do it for the money, even though they were obviously terrified of him, but Alex said no, he wanted someone pure and untouched, and saw the idea of sleeping with a 'whore' beneath him."

"Right. So that explains why you wanted me to pretend to be your friend Doug's daughter. You were worried if Alex knew I was an escort just like the rest, he would refuse me too, and you couldn't allow that to happen."

"Exactly," she smiles grimly. "But this time around, instead of Alex refusing the girl, it was you who refused to sleep with him, and it set off an obsession that continues to this day. Do you know, he actually says he's in love with you? And he really believes that you love him too."

"That's because I do," I say fiercely. "I love Alex with all my heart."

"You can't be serious."

"Never been more serious in my life."

"What sort of future do you think the two of you have together, hmm? Have you not seen the way people react to Alex? They run a mile. If you continue this relationship, you'll be ostracised from society too, just as he has been. Is that what you really want?"

"I don't give a damn what people think about us!" I say, my voice rising. "I don't live my life to please others. Look Mrs Kingswood, I appreciate you coming to see me today to warn me and everything, but you can't expect me to believe all this crazy stuff about demonic possession. Do you know how insane you sound? And I can't just end things with Alex because you say so. We love each other and I want to be with him. The way he looks doesn't bother me, in fact, I love his face. I love everything about him. What kind of a parent are you anyway? You had such little

faith in your son's ability to find his own partner, you resorted to hiring prostitutes. Do you know how messed up that is? How damaging that is to Alex's self-esteem? Making him think he wasn't capable of finding someone who would truly love him for himself and not because they'd been paid to? I think what you did to him was kind of sick."

Beatrix's demeanour swiftly returns to her former brusqueness. "Well, I can see I've wasted my time on you. You refuse to believe me anything I say or take heed of my warning. For some reason, you seem determined to walk the path to destruction, and all I can say is good luck. At some point, you will find out the truth about Alex, but sadly, by then it might be too late."

"What do you mean, too late?" I ask fearfully.

"Don't worry, you'll find out soon enough. All I'll say is this: it is my belief there is a battle going on inside Alex's subconscious between the demon and his humanity. You'd better just hope the human side wins because if not, God knows what Erasmus is capable of. But you've made your decision, so I'll bid you good day, Jessica Gardner. I pray that I'm wrong about this, but I don't think I am. Take care of yourself."

Exhaling softly, I sit back down on the bench and stare at her. I notice her hands are shaking. Shit, this lady really does believe in all this demonic possession stuff. What a nightmare she must be to live with. No wonder she and Alex don't get along.

Silently she packs up her briefcase, then tidies her suit jacket and marches off in the direction of her car, leaving my peace of mind in tatters. I don't want to believe it, but there's a niggling voice deep inside telling me to be careful.

A harsh breeze blows despite the milky sunshine, and I tighten my scarf in an effort to keep warm. Then suddenly, I hear a rough, cawing sound from above my head.

Glancing up, I see a blackbird circling and am instantly overcome by a sense of dread. I've always been told that blackbirds bring bad luck. I pray this is not an omen of things to come.

Jessica

After Mrs Kingswood has gone, I head straight for the nearest phone booth to call Alex. Disturbed by his mother's revelations, I decide now is the time to warn him ahead of time that our plans for tonight will need to be cancelled. The bizarre conversation about demon possession combined with Cynthia's warnings about the neighbours being wise to our clandestine meetings convince me it might be a good idea to put things on ice for a while, at least for a couple of days until the dust has settled. My head is all over the place and I just need space to take stock of the situation.

Nervously, I put some coins in the slot and pick up the receiver. As I wait patiently for the call to connect, I notice several seedy business cards for a local massage parlour stuck to the booth's grimy interior.

Alex answers on the second ring. "Jessica, is that you?"

"Yes," I reply.

"Oh baby, I've been missing you like mad! I can't tell you how pleased I am to hear your voice. All day I've been hoping and praying that you would call me just so I can hear your voice. We are so in tune with each other, you must have read my mind. Is everything okay?"

I scratch the side of my nose. "Not really."

"What is it? What's happened?"

“So, I’m thinking that maybe we shouldn’t meet up tonight. I know we planned for you to drive down again but I think it’s all a bit too risky at the minute.”

A hint of panic enters his voice. “What do you mean? Why are you saying this? Last night was so magical, I thought we had a new understanding between us. I thought you understood that I now need to see you every single night, never fail. I don’t mind driving a thousand miles, you know I’ll do whatever it takes to be with you, even if it means only staying for an hour.”

Biting my lip, I press my thighs together and try desperately not to get aroused by his voice. Even at this distance he’s affecting me, and my sex is crying out for a good seeing to.

“I know, and I do want to see you too, believe me,” I say, in an attempt to pacify him. “It’s just that one of my neighbours, Mrs Biederhof, told my mum she saw us climbing through my bedroom window on Saturday. My mother confronted me about it today and I denied it, obviously.”

“Did she buy it?”

“To be honest, I’m not sure she did, she kept asking all sorts of questions, but either way it might be safer for us to cool things for a couple of days, or at least until things have calmed down. It wouldn’t be safe right now for you to come to my bedroom as she’ll be watching me like a hawk, not to mention Mrs Biederhof.”

“Then can you come over to mine?” he asks hopefully. “I could come and get you later and bring you back here to spend the night? Don’t you understand how much I need to see you, my beauty? I’m literally dying here.”

“Me too,” I say, twirling the phone cord around my finger as I picture his head between my thighs. “I really wish I could be with you, but it isn’t just the thing with

the neighbours that's bothering me. There's something else too..."

"What is it? What's happened? Tell me!"

"Your mother Beatrix just came to see me."

"What!" Alex sounds genuinely alarmed. "What did she say?"

"She said all this outlandish stuff. I don't even want to repeat it."

"Tell me what she said. I need to know everything."

"It was just all this stuff about your father, something about you playing with a Ouija board, demonic possession and some creature called Erasmus. It was totally crazy, totally unbelievable. She...she wanted me to stay away from you." There's a long silence on the other end of the line. "Alex, are you still there?"

"Yes, I'm still here," he replies, his tone dripping with ice. "I can't believe she said all that to you. How dare she try to interfere in our relationship? I'm absolutely livid!"

"I'm so sorry, darling, I know it's crazy. Listen, I've got to go. I've got to do some shopping and then I've got to prepare for work. I'm on a late shift tonight."

"I need to see you, Jessica. More than ever now that I know my mother is trying to drive a wedge between us. Please can I drive over tonight after you finish work, and we can go somewhere quiet to talk?"

"I'm not sure that's a good idea. Like I said, I think we shouldn't meet up for a while. We need to wait for things to settle."

“It sounds like you’re just making excuses not to see me,” he growls. “I hope you’re not letting what my mother said get to you?”

“No, of course not,” I say, noticing a man standing outside waiting to use the phone. “But I’ll admit I’m a little shaken up by it. I’m sorry Alex, I really do have to go now. I love you. I’ll call you soon and let you know when it’s safe for us to meet again.”

“Jessica, wait—”

I hang up and make a hurried exit from the phone booth. It’s only as I’m walking away that I suddenly realise at no point did Alex deny any of the allegations made by Beatrix. He didn’t call them out as preposterous or show any signs of shock when I mentioned the name Erasmus. It was almost like he had been expecting it. But what the hell does this mean? That his mother was telling the truth?

No, that’s absurd. Demons don’t exist. I refuse to believe it. Even so, I shiver inwardly every time I picture Erasmus’ diabolical face and his terrifying animal eyes. No matter how hard I try to put aside my misgivings and tell myself I’m being silly, I can’t shake the feeling that something isn’t right. It’s like I’m in way over my head in something I don’t fully understand with no viable escape route.

The rest of the afternoon passes without incident, and I try my best not to think about Alex or Beatrix, or Catholic priests and exorcisms. I try not to envisage Neville Kingswood lying at the bottom of the stairs with his body all twisted and his neck broken.

After picking Freddie up from school, I spend a bit of time with him in the local children’s playground and relish having some quality time with my little brother. As I watch him laughing and running around, I find it hard to believe that any of what Beatrix said is true. How could it be? This right here, having fun with Freddie on the swings, is what real life is about, not the dark world of demons and poltergeists and

Claremont Hall, which once more feels like nothing more than a distant dream.

Around five pm, I arrive at Sloppy Joe's for the late shift and find that I'm going to be working with a new girl called Katie who just started today. It's Amina's night off and Brian asks me to show her the ropes, which I'm more than happy to do as it will help to keep me busy and not think too much.

The next couple of hours run like clockwork. The diner is naturally quiet on Monday nights, so I find I have plenty of downtime to show Katie what needs doing: where all the crockery and cleaning stuff are kept, how to process an order, how to work the jukebox, all the usual stuff, and we have a proper laugh doing it. She seems like a nice girl, a bit shy but with a great sense of humour, and I decide that I'm going to enjoy working with her.

Then sometime around nine-thirty, the door to the diner opens and in walks a group of guys I vaguely recognise from school (I think they were in the year above me). As soon as they swagger in, they instantly cause a commotion with their rowdy and obnoxious behaviour, and it soon becomes apparent that this is one stop on what will probably be an all-night bender.

I roll my eyes. Here we go...

Drunk customers are never nice to deal with at the best of times, and if Amina had been working tonight, I would have begged her to oversee their order. Unfortunately, Amina isn't here to save the day, and as this is Katie's first night on the job, it looks like it will fall to me to do it. It just wouldn't be fair on the poor girl to drop her in at the deep end and leave her to deal with a bunch of boozers on her own.

Stealing myself for a confrontation, I pick up five menus from the countertop and walk hesitantly towards their table. As I get closer, my stomach lurches as I realise that one of the men is none other than Jack Parker. Seeing him again after all that's

happened gives me whiplash and I stop and take a sharp intake of breath before proceeding.

Dressed in a grey Reebok tracksuit with a fresh tan and lush blonde hair styled like a member of a boyband, there's no denying he's drop-dead gorgeous. But Jack Parker no longer has any effect on me. Now when I see him, there is no rush of butterflies, no racing heart, no sweaty palms. The scales have completely fallen from my eyes, and he's now dead to me. In fact, just the sight of him makes me want to be sick. The thought of what he and Georgina did to me still makes me so angry I almost feel like turning around and walking right back to the kitchen.

Too late. He's already seen me.

"Hey, Jessica, how have you been?" he asks with a nervous smile. "I haven't seen you around in a while."

I totally ignore him. "What can I get you boys to drink?"

"Five Budweisers," slurs one of his friends.

"Actually, make mine a Cobra," says another. "Do you serve Cobras here?"

"No, we don't serve Cobras," I reply coldly. "But we do have Budweiser."

"Okay, then I'll have to go with a Budweiser." Then under his breath, the guy turns to his mate and hisses: "Bruv, have you seen the tits on that?"

"I know, proper fit, innit."

Ignoring the crude jibe, I hastily scribble down their order and am just about to leave when Jack suddenly reaches out and grabs my hand.

“Why are you blanking me?” he whispers, looking up at me with the cutest baby blue eyes. “Why am I in the doghouse? What have I done to upset you?”

“You know damn well what,” I hiss. “Now let go of my hand, please.”

“Wooo! She’s fiery!” chuckles one of his friends.

“She’s not interested, bruv. Let the girl do her job in peace.”

Jack still refuses to let go. If anything, his grip gets tighter, and I can smell stale alcohol on his breath. “Can you just give me a chance to explain what happened?”

“There’s nothing to explain,” I snap. “Georgina put you up to it and you were too damn weak to say no.”

“It’s not what you think. I didn’t want anything to do with it, but she forced me.”

“Yeah right. You really had no other choice but to go through with it, even though you knew how much it would hurt and humiliate me?”

“Like I told you, I didn’t want any part of it. I hated the idea, but Georgina was blackmailing me. See, the thing is, I borrowed some money from my dad—”

“Borrowed?” scoffs his friend. “You mean stole.”

The other lads snicker, but Jack remains unfazed. He is completely fixated on me and it’s like he can’t see or hear anything else. “As I was saying, I borrowed some cash from my dad, and I was planning to give it back, you know? But before I could, Georgina threatened to tell my parents if I didn’t agree to go along with what she had planned for you. For what it’s worth, I want you to know that I’m sorry for what I did and if I could turn back the clock, I would. I never, ever meant to hurt you, Jessica.

You've got to believe that."

"Great, now can you let go of me?" Finally, Jack releases my hand, but he's still not done with me. Not by a long shot.

"I've always liked you," he resumes quietly. "I mean, like really liked you. Ever since Year Seven, you were the only girl in school I actually fancied. For so long, I wanted to ask you out, but you always seemed like such an Ice Queen, I never had the guts to. You never paid me any attention..."

His mates begin to heckle: "Ooh, Jack's in love. Can't you see she's not into you? You're such a fucking melt."

Turning on my heel, I storm back towards the kitchen, bored to tears of his pathetic excuses. "Amina was right," I say under my breath. "You are a bloody wanker."

In a drunken rage, Jack springs up from his chair and roughly grabs my arm. "What did you just fucking call me? Did you call me a wanker? Take it back! I said take it back!"

"Oi, get off her, you little toerag!" Brian shouts, pole vaulting over the counter to intervene. "Stop harassing my staff. Right, that's it, I want all of you boys out now! You've been nothing but trouble since you arrived, and we don't give service to troublemakers."

"Make me, fat boy," one of the men spits. "If we choose not to go, what are you going to do about it?"

"Fine, then I'll have to call the police," Brian snaps. "Now get out, while I'm still asking you nicely. And don't think I don't know who you all are. I've seen you boys around town and know who some of your parents are. Trust me, they'll be hearing

from me.”

For a few minutes, the gang continue to laugh and jeer but eventually begin to make their way out the diner. With reluctance, Jack finally releases my arm and shoots me a death stare as he retreats.

“Hurry up, get a move on!” Brian barks, clapping his hands. “And if you behave like this again the next time you come around, you’re barred from here for life. Got that?”

“All right, all right, Frank Butcher, keep your hair on.”

“Don’t worry, we won’t be coming back to this dump.”

Katie rushes over to give me a hug. “Oh, Jessica, are you okay? Those guys were so awful! Do you know them?”

“Sadly, I do,” I reply, my voice trembling. “They went to my school. Complete twats the lot of them. Hopefully we won’t be seeing them again.”

The hour before closing time crawls along at a snail’s pace and after my unpleasant encounter with Jack, I can’t wait to get out of here and go home. It doesn’t help that Katie won’t stop talking about it and asking questions. What were they like at school? Why was Jack such an idiot? Do I think they’ll come back to start more trouble? I mean, how the hell should I know? This latest debacle combined with the unsettling meeting with Mrs Kingwood earlier make me just want to forget this horrible day ever happened.

At last, at just gone eleven, Brian pulls the shutters down on the restaurant and says goodnight to us. As the three of us part ways on the street corner, he asks me if I’m okay to walk home alone, and I tell him yeah, it’s cool, I only live fifteen minutes away and should be back before I know it. Famous last words...

The sky is black as a raven's wing as I stroll along the busy high street in the direction of my flats, grateful there are still quite a few people about despite it being so late. No matter what time it is, Clapham is always buzzing it seems. I pass a couple of takeaways, a cut-price shoe shop and then as I reach the zebra crossing, I hear somebody say loudly: "Hey, isn't that the bitch who got us turfed out of Sloppy Joe's?"

Turning, I see Jack and his mates loitering at a bus stop holding cans of cheap lager, looking the worse for wear. As soon as they see me, some of them whoop and catcall, and a lascivious grin creeps across Jack's face that I don't like one bit. When he's smashed, gone is the softly spoken charmer to be replaced by an abrasive dick that I suspect is probably him showing his true colours. It's almost as if he has become a different person and as his gaze travels lustfully over my body, there's an expression in his eyes that scares the shit out of me.

Time to get out of here.

Quickening my pace, I walk hurriedly up the street towards Fenchurch Avenue, a shortcut that will take me back to my estate in half the time. Unfortunately, my unwanted admirer is now tailing me, his friends following a short distance behind, laughing and egging him on.

"Hey Jessica, stop!" Jack shouts. "Don't walk so fast. I want to talk to you."

"Leave me alone," I cry. "Just go away!"

"Ha! You're scaring her off, bruv," chuckles one of his mates. "I told you she's not into you."

"Bitch is blanking you hard, man."

“Maybe it’s his breath.”

Now at almost a run, I pass through a large swathe of people dressed up like they’re going clubbing, and, hoping to lose my pursuers, use the brief diversion to shoot down a dark alley. I sprint a couple of steps and then, reaching a brick wall, I stop and look behind me to see if I’ve lost them.

Nope.

Jack and his four mates are standing at the entrance to the alley forming a human blockade. The laughter and jeers are getting louder, and my body is near paralysed with fear. Now they all have the same crazed look in their eyes as Jack, a look that tells me unless there is some kind of a miracle, I am in deep, deep trouble...

Slowly, Jack strides towards me, the cocky grin on his face getting wider and wider with every step. Desperately, I glance behind me at the wall to see if there’s anywhere to escape to, but sadly there isn’t. I’m like a fly trapped in a spider’s web with no way out.

“Stay back!” I yell. “Don’t come any closer. I’m warning you!”

“Yeah, yeah, yeah,” Jack says through clenched teeth. “You keep shouting like that and I’ll knock your fucking teeth out. Now get on your knees, you stupid little bitch, and give me a blowjob.”

The others shriek with laughter. I begin to feel sick. I need to get out of here, but how? What happens next feels like an out-of-body experience. I don’t see Jack’s blow coming, but I definitely feel it. A hard, stinging slap across the face that makes my eyes water. My handbag drops to the ground, scattering the contents everywhere.

And then I’m on the ground with him on top of me, trying to tear off my tights and

hitch up my skirt. I scream and scream till my throat is hoarse, but nobody comes to my rescue, nobody cares. I might as well just be invisible to the passers-by on Clapham High Street who appear to show no interest in the sounds of a woman in distress. That I'm about to be raped just a few minutes' walk from a busy main road is utterly inconceivable, and yet here it is happening.

"You were always such a prick tease," Jack murmurs, his stale breath fanning my face. "Always wearing tight tops, playing hard to get like you were too fucking good for me. Well today, you're going to really get it."

As my attacker continues to be spurred on by his mates, the energy evaporates from my body and it's like the sound has been turned down on everything. My vision gets blurry, and a sea of men's faces dance around me like a horrific kaleidoscope of colours. My cheek hurts so much from the slap I can barely move my jaw, but still Jack continues trying to force himself on me. His penis is now exposed, and I can feel his hard-on pressed up against thigh. I'm so disgusted I think I've thrown up in my mouth a little.

"Hey Jack," snickers one of the devils. "When you've finished with her, can I have a go?"

"And me!" says another. "Break her in and make her nice and wet for me."

"How 'bout we all take it in turns and batter out that pussy? Think she'll like it?"

"Of course, she will, bruv. Skets love getting gang banged."

Their sick words shake me to the core, and I try even more desperately to lash out and get Jack off me, but he's far too strong. Shutting my eyes, I say silent prayers and prepare miserably to accept my fate.

And then it happens. An ear-piercing shriek of a man in excruciating pain. Gasping, I peer upwards and see the guy standing nearest me holding up one of his hands. Two fingers are missing, and he's completely covered in blood, but things begin to move so quickly, I barely have time to register it. Next, something dark and shiny darts at lightning speed towards another of the men and tears into his face, ripping out pieces of flesh, sending blood spurting everywhere.

Instantly, Jack gets off me and backs away as the entire alley is suddenly filled with what looks like a sea of huge black glossy snakes, rippling and undulating like a terrifying tsunami from Hell. There are more awful screams. More blood. More flesh torn apart. The sound of bones snapping. I'm so scared, my mind simply can't process the horrors unfolding before me. It doesn't seem real, can't be real. This is like something from a Science Fiction film, something unearthly that is impossible to describe.

Then I hear Jack screaming and I turn around to see one of the enormous snake-like vines darting towards him. With a shock, I realise for the first time that the creature has a mouth with multiple layers of teeth! It's a living, breathing thing from another dimension. Before Jack can get away, the monstrous organism lunges for him and rips out a massive piece of flesh from his cheek. Jack collapses to the ground yelling so loud it's like he's being tortured. Somewhere else, I see a guy lying in a pool of blood, moaning quietly with what looks like one of his eyes gouged out. I have no words. No voice left to speak. All I can do is stare and stare and stare in absolute horror at the carnage left by these...these creatures.

What the actual fuck is happening?

There's another shrill cry from one of the men, and I glance towards the entrance to the alley and what I see almost makes me pee my pants. Alex Kingswood is standing there in a hooded cloak, his face mottled with rage. Six massive black tentacles are writhing out from his back and his eyes glow a cold, demonic yellow. There's not a

trace of humanity left in him. The tentacles appear to all be separate living entities with mouths and tongues and teeth on the ends like some sort of otherworldly reptiles.

Holy. Fucking. Shit.

No...this cannot be real, no way! I must be dreaming. Somebody pinch me and wake me up from this terrible nightmare.

Then suddenly, five of the tentacles slither through the darkness like monstrous leeches and travel up the legs of each of the men lying helplessly on the ground. Bile rises in my throat. There's a chorus of ear-splitting shrieks as the creatures sink their fangs into their victims' crotches. Alex smiles wickedly, and then, with one deadly twist of his waist, he rips out five sets of testicles, sending a fountain of blood and severed penises flying everywhere.

I throw up instantly.

What happens next is a surreal blur. Wiping the vomit from my lips, I try to make a run for it but am backed against the wall. Slowly, Alex walks towards me with his arms outstretched, but I start screaming louder than I ever have in my life. Jesus, I don't want him anywhere near me! Looking left and right, I try to make a jump for it and claw at the brickwork in an attempt to climb up it.

But it's no use, I'm totally stranded. There is nowhere to escape from Alex. I know it. He knows it.

Then the wave of undulating tentacles engulfs me, wrapping themselves around my body so tightly I can barely breathe. It feels as if I'm being strangled. Tighter and tighter they press into my bones like the deadly embrace of a King Cobra, and all I can see are Alex's malevolent eyes glinting at me through the blackness.

Evil. Hypnotic. Mesmerising.

I gasp as one of the mighty tentacles worms its way up my blouse and envelops my throat in a lethal chokehold. Everything weaves and swarms around me, and my head starts to get light as the gruesome thing grips my neck so tightly, I'm momentarily prevented from breathing. A wave of sweet oblivion washes over me; the restricted blood flow leaving my body limp and floppy as a ragdoll. The last thing I remember before passing out is Alex's hellish face gazing down at me. And then everything goes black.

Jessica

I open my eyes and blink a couple of times. Slowly, my surroundings come into focus. I'm lying on a bed in a large, dimly lit room with opulent furniture and a bright fire burning in the hearth. Everything is pleasantly warm and toasty, the mattress blissfully soft and comfortable. For a few heartbeats, I'm confused and disoriented, with no idea where I am. Where is this place? Nothing seems familiar. My head hurts like hell and my entire body aches as if I'm on the verge of getting a fever.

Lifting the bed covers, I find that I'm wearing a black silk nightie, but have no recollection of how I came to be in it. Who dressed me? Come to that, who brought me here? If this isn't my bedroom, then who's is it? Where are my Spice Girls posters?

Drifting in and out of consciousness, I can just make out a dark shape sitting beside the bed. As my eyes grow accustomed to the gloom, I realise it is Alex Kingswood, sprawled in a high-backed armchair, his face shrouded in shadow. At first my mind can't comprehend the scenario unfolding before me and I'm lost in a daze of incoherence.

"What time is it?" I mumble.

"Nearly four in the morning," he replies. "You've been out cold for a good couple of hours."

"Seriously?"

“Yes.”

Snuggling under the duvet covers, I return to a state of semi-consciousness, still not able to fully process what is happening around me. Suddenly, I sit up sharply, and it all comes back to me. This is Claremont Hall. This is Alex’s bed I’m lying in. Oh my God...Horrific memories from what happened earlier in the alley hit me like a ton of bricks. Blood, tentacles, severed appendages flit through my mind and I fight the urge to be sick again.

For a long time, I can’t speak, can’t move, all I can do is stare at him, fear robbing me of my faculties. I notice Alex’s appearance has returned to normal. There are no tentacled creatures coming out of his back and his face has resumed some semblance of humanity. But I’m not a fool. What I saw in that alley was real, I’m sure of it. I didn’t imagine it. He really did transform into a demon.

“How are you feeling?” he asks gently. “You were talking a lot in your sleep. It sounded as if you were having lots of bad dreams and you kept calling out for your mother.” He reaches for my hand, but I jolt back violently, crossing my arms as if to block a punch.

“Stay away from me! Don’t come anywhere near me!”

“Now Jessica, you need to calm down. I’ll be taking you home to London in less than an hour, so there’s no point getting hysterical. You’ve been through a terrible ordeal tonight, and you need to stay calm and focus on keeping your strength up for the drive back.” He reaches out again to touch my hand, but once more I recoil in horror.

“Stay away from me, you monster!”

“No, my beauty,” he says. “I think you’ll find the true monsters are those vile creatures who tried to rape you. I won’t call them animals because that would be an

insult to animals. Animals are pure and innocent, they don't inflict insane levels of cruelty on each other the way humans do. At least now thanks to me, that despicable creature you call Jack will be, shall we say, 'out of action' for good and never again be a danger to women." His voice grows suddenly hard. "I don't mind saying that I took great pleasure in destroying that handsome face of his. Now Jack looks as hideous as his soul and never again will any woman be taken in by him."

At these words, horrific images from earlier in the night hit me like a slap in the face: bloody testicles on the ground, pieces of flesh torn out of Jack's cheek. It was horrible, just horrible. With a shudder, I push the bad memories away.

No, I can't think about that right now, it's too terrible to comprehend.

"What were you even doing in that alley?" I demand. "I thought I told you to stay away from me?"

Alex's eyes widen. "Stay away from you? Are you crazy? As if I could ever stay away from you. No, the minute you told me not to drive down and see you, I instantly made up my mind that I would. I drove to your workplace to surprise you but found you had already left, then I drove along the high street to track you down, and it looks like it was a good thing I did, or else things could have turned out very differently. What those filthy bastards tried to do to you makes me sick to my stomach."

"My God, what are you?" I whisper. "Are you really a demon? Was your mother telling the truth? What the hell was all that crazy shit that happened in the alley with the tentacles?"

There's a long suspenseful silence. Then, with a resolute sigh, Alex runs his fingers through his hair and says, "It's complicated, but the short answer is yes. Yes, when I was ten years old, I messed around with a Ouija board and caused a demonic entity known as Erasmus to enter my subconscious and attempt to take control of me."

“Attempt? What do you mean attempt?”

“My mother thinks Erasmus succeeded in possessing me entirely, but she’s wrong. Yes, I’ll admit in the beginning, when I was a weak and feeble child, the demon took full control, but as the years went by, my human side grew stronger and stronger and, in the end, it was I, Alexander Kingswood, who won the battle. I made Erasmus my bitch, which means he is now a part of who I am without dominating the side of me that is human. It is I who call the shots. I who says what happens and I am able to harness the demon’s powers to do whatever I please. With a snap of my fingers, I can channel the forces of darkness and reap all the benefits of the supernatural without having to forfeit my humanity. And that is what my mother has always failed to understand.”

My bottom lip trembles. I can’t believe what I am hearing. None of this seems real. It’s too shocking, too crazy.

“So did you...did you really kill your father?” I ask breathlessly. “Beatrix said she saw one of your tentacles push him down the stairs.”

“Yes and no,” Alex replies without missing a beat. “I’ll admit I wanted Neville dead. I despised him, especially for the way he treated my mother, and he fucking murdered my kitten Trinity, something I could never forgive him for. But Erasmus had full control of my body at the time of the ‘accident.’ I was just a kid back then and still hadn’t worked out how to use my powers, so when that tentacle shot out and hit Neville, I was barely even aware of it. But...” he adds softly, “A part of me does believe that I may have in some way ‘willed’ Erasmus to do it. The demon knew I hated my dad, so it’s possible he acted on my behalf. So, as I said before, the whole situation is...complicated.”

For a long time, I don’t say anything, the shock of his confession almost too much to bear. Hot tears begin to flow down my cheeks. Once more, Alex tries to take hold of

my hand to comfort me, but I coldly brush him off. Jesus, this feels like a never-ending nightmare. My head wants to explode. So, Beatrix was telling the truth after all. Alex is a demon. He isn't human and after the carnage that took place in that alleyway, I am left in no doubt that this relationship cannot continue.

Without a doubt, those sick bastards deserved their comeuppance, but the gruesomeness of what I witnessed has left an indelible mark on my soul which cannot be erased. Just thinking about what those awful tentacles did to Jack and the others makes me want to throw up all over again. I understand why Alex did it—he only wanted to protect me, but that doesn't change the fact that I am now terrified for my own safety. How can I love a demon, a hellish creature that is capable of committing such acts of depravity?

Throwing back the duvet cover, I jump out of bed and try to make a run for it, but Alex is too quick and catches me in his arms before I reach the door.

“Let me go!” I shout. “Get your dirty hands off me!”

But my pleas fall on deaf ears. Dragging me kicking and screaming to the bed, Alex throws me on the mattress and pins me down with such force, it feels as if he could snap every bone in my body. I am absolutely terrified.

“Where do you think you're going?” he whispers, gazing down at me. “How far do you think you're going to get in the middle of the countryside dressed in a nightie, huh?”

“Let go of me! Please Alex, I just want to leave this place. I can't take any more of this madness. Please, I just want to be normal again. I-I don't want any part of this...this insanity.”

“I told you, I'm going to drive you home soon. Why can't you wait until then?”

“Because I don’t want to be with you anymore, Alex. This relationship ends tonight. What you’ve just told me, I’m sorry, but I’m not strong enough to cope with it, not when I’ve got all this other stuff with my mother to think about. There’s only so much a person can take before their head completely explodes and I just need to get away. Can’t you understand that I just want to be normal? I don’t want to be part of this—”

“So even after all I’ve done for you, you still want to end things with me?” Alex says coldly. “After I saved you from being raped tonight, you still see me as the enemy and not those sick fucks who tried to violate you? My God, Jessica, what will it take to get a little bit of gratitude from you?”

“Of course, I’m grateful!” I fire back. “But can’t you see it from my perspective? This is a lot for me to take and my head just can’t handle it right now. First those bastards try to rape me, then you come along and transform into something from a horror film, and I am forced to witness the most sickening display of violence I have ever seen. I’m sorry, but it’s going to take time for me to get over it. It’s just too much to deal with all at once.” I pause to catch my breath. “Now please can you let go of my wrists? You’re hurting me.”

Instantly, Alex loosens his grip but continues to lie on top of me, weighing me down to the bed with no means of escape. When he speaks again his voice is soft and seductive and my body begins to react to him in ways I wish it didn’t.

“Baby, can we please just stop fighting? It’s been a rough night and all I want is to hold you for a little bit before I take you home. Come on, you know how much I love and worship you, you know I’d never ever harm you. I’ll always take care of you. Please don’t do this to me. I can’t breathe without you and if you try to leave, I’m liable to do something stupid. I need you so much. You know I would do anything, anything for you.”

“No, Alex,” I breathe. “This ends tonight and I mean it. I don’t want to be with you.”

“You don’t want me, huh? Okay, why don’t we check...” Slowly, Alex’s hand travels down my thighs and he slips two fingers into my soaking wet knickers. “Mmm. Just as I thought. I think you need to stop lying to yourself, my beauty. You say you don’t want me, but your pussy tells a different story. Get this into your head. You and I are going to be together forever, understand? I will never, ever give you up, you belong to me now, every single piece of you, and you’re not going anywhere.”

My cheeks redden with embarrassment. “I don’t want this; I don’t want to be with a...with a demon.” There. I’ve said the unsayable. But Alex isn’t fazed, not in the least.

“What’s so wrong with loving a demon?” he whispers against my ear. “You know, if you give it a chance, you might find it can be extremely enjoyable.”

Suddenly, the tentacles are back, writhing and twisting around me, engulfing my limbs like diabolical black vines. But this time, I sense a difference in their movements. Something soft and sensuous. Even so, sheer terror consumes me as I think back to the lethal damage they caused earlier, and I let out a shriek of fright.

“No, don’t be afraid. They won’t hurt you; I promise. Now just stay calm and let me show you what they can do.” Gently, Alex presses his knee between my thighs to part them, and then one of the tentacles works its way up my leg and slides inside my knickers. Slowly, the creature’s hot tongue begins stroking my clit, licking, lapping, sending heavenly vibrations through me. I gasp with delight.

That feels so damn good it’s unreal. So wrong and yet so right.

“You like that, don’t you? It feels nice, doesn’t it?”

“Yes.”

“Now listen very closely,” he says, his lips teasing the corners of my mouth. “This is what’s going to happen. We’re going to drive back to London now and I will allow you to spend the next couple of days with Cynthia before her trip, so that the two of you can spend some final quality time together. I promise you won’t hear from me throughout the whole entire time. But as soon as she leaves for Germany, I will return to claim you.”

I barely hear a word. Closing my eyes, I gasp again as the intense motion on my crotch brings me to the precipice of an almighty orgasm. “Shit...”

“Tell me you love me,” Alex breathes. “Tell me that you still want me in spite of everything, that you will accept me as I truly am. Human or demon, you will accept both parts of me unconditionally.”

“Please...don’t stop. That feels too good.”

“Say it! Say it now or I’ll stop pleasuring you.”

“All right, I love you. I fucking love you.” My body goes limp as I reach a splintering climax.

“That felt good, didn’t it?” When I don’t respond, he adds softly, “And that’s just a little taste of the delights that are to come.”

Abruptly, the tentacled creature stops sucking my clit and slithers down towards my anus. With deliberate slowness, the thing starts to lick my tight virgin buttthole, stimulating me to breaking point. I moan softly, wishing for it to go deeper and fully penetrate.

“Can you imagine what else I can do with these?” Alex says seductively. “I know what kind of filthy thoughts are in your mind, my sweet, and I promise to fulfil every last one of them. Tell me, would you like that?”

“God, yes!” I shudder as the blissful caressing combined with the sexiness of his voice gives me yet another orgasm. Rapidly, the sea of tentacles retracts and very soon vanish back from whence they came.

Lowering his head, Alex devours my lips with a kiss that makes my heart pound. I respond ferociously. What the hell am I doing? This is sweet, beautiful insanity. I shouldn’t be doing this, it feels so wrong and yet so right, but I just can’t help myself. He turns me on like no one else and when he holds me, I’m like putty in his hands.

“Now as I was saying,” he continues after he’s quite finished gorging. “You will spend the next few days with your mother and then I want you and Freddie to come and live with me.”

My muscles stiffen. “What?”

“I want you both to stay in Claremont Hall for the month that Cynthia is away in Germany. I can’t be without you, Jessica, I must have you with me every single day. Don’t worry, I will take good care of you both. I told you, I want to look after you and your family, and I meant it.”

“But we can’t,” I protest feebly. “I’ve got work and Freddie has school. I can’t just pull him out for a month to come and live with you. What will the teachers say?”

“Tell them you’re both travelling abroad for a month. During that time, Freddie can be home schooled by me. I’m an excellent teacher. I promise he won’t miss out on any of his curriculum and as for your job at Sloppy Joe’s, well, after what took place tonight, I think it’s time to hand in your notice. It just isn’t safe for you to be working

late shifts at a place where those sorts of people come. If you quit your job, I promise to take care of you financially, you won't want for anything. What do you say?"

I hesitate, my mind racing with possible hindrances to the plan. "But what about your mum? Surely Beatrix wouldn't be happy for us to come and stay here?"

"Beatrix's opinion doesn't count because she doesn't live here anymore. I sent her away to Oxfordshire. She has interfered in my life once too often and I will no longer stand for it. I told you Jessica, nobody gets in the way of us and now that she's gone, I'll need you more than ever. It's so lonely here with just me and Hobbs, I need joy and laughter to liven up the place. Please say yes."

"I-I don't know what to say."

Bring my brother to come and live here with a demon? What could possibly go wrong?

No, I won't do it. I can't bring Freddie to stay here. This is complete and utter madness. I mean, what will he say when he sees Alex's face? How will he react? Will he be frightened and more to the point, will Freddie pick up on all the supernatural stuff as he's so sensitive about things?

I shake my head. No, bringing my brother here would not be a good idea at all and might even be opening Pandora's Box. But as juices continue to flow down my legs and a fever of sexual longing overtakes me, I find it difficult to think straight. I am no longer being rational and find myself wanting to agree to anything Alex says. Worse still, all I can think about is how I need to feel his lips on mine again and, oh my gosh, I need to know what else those tentacles can do...

Jessica Gardner, you are one sick puppy.

“I won’t take no for an answer,” Alex rasps, his tongue tracing the delicate shell of my ear. “You’re coming to live here with me whether you like it or not and when you’re here I will treat you like a queen. Every night, I’m going to fuck you so many times you won’t know what day of the week it is. I’m going to make you come again and again and again. I have so many secrets I want to share with you, so many doors I want to unlock, but I can only do that if you are open to being adventurous. If you’ll let me, I promise to show you pleasures beyond your wildest dreams and let you experience sexual thrills you didn’t think were possible. All I need is for you to say yes.”

“Yes,” I whisper. “I’ll come and live with you, if that’s what you want.”

“Good girl, I knew you’d make the right decision. Now come, show me some love...”

We kiss again and then, sweeping me into his arms, he carries me to the bathroom where I take a quick shower and dress in preparation for our drive back. The jets of hot water are just what I need to wash away the bad memories of the night from Hell. After I’ve finished dressing, Alex takes me down to the library and lifts the candelabra off the wall to reveal the secret glass elevator.

“What are we doing here again?” I ask.

“I want to show you something before you go.” Pressing the call button, he summons the lift and we briefly step inside. “Do you see these?” he says, pointing to the metal panel showing the basement floors that go to B1, B2, B3 and B4. “Each of these are doorways to secret special places that I will share with you one day.”

My pulse quickens. “What sort of places do they go to?”

“It wouldn’t be a secret if I told you, now would it. But when the time is right, I will

reveal all to you and I know you're going to love it."

I'd like to know more, but right now I'm too weak, too exhausted to articulate more than a passing curiosity. In time, I'm sure all will be revealed, but I admit to feeling a little apprehensive. When Alex says 'the doorway to secret places' what exactly does that mean? Other worlds, other dimensions? It's all too much for my head to take right now and I push the thought to the back of my mind to revisit at a later date.

"Come on," Alex smiles, closing the doors to the lift. "It's time for me to take you home before Cynthia and Freddie wake up and wonder where you are."

"Okay. Let's go."

We head outside to the car and by the time we arrive back on my street at just gone half six, the sky is light and you can hear the birds singing in the trees. For a moment, we sit in semi-darkness, our faces illuminated by the green light from the dashboard. Tenderly, Alex strokes my cheek with his thumb, his gaze so penetrating I'm forced to avert my eyes.

"Remember, I'll be coming back for you and Freddie in a couple of days," he whispers. "Don't forget."

"I-I won't," I stammer, reaching out for the door.

"Hey, don't I get a hug?" Before I can speak, I'm in his arms again and he's holding me tightly. The truth is, a warm, loving hug is precisely what I need after the nightmarish night I've had. Encased in his big strong arms, I feel so secure, so protected and I know I'm going to miss him like mad.

The feelings I have for Alex are such a paradox. He simultaneously delights and terrifies me but no matter what happens, I could never be without him. He is now

vital to my very existence, as organic to me as breathing and it's at this moment I realise I honestly do love him. I don't care what he is, demon or human, he's everything I could ever want in a man.

After what seems forever, Alex releases me and gently kisses my forehead. "Now go inside before anyone notices you're missing."

"Okay," I say, attempting to push open the car door a second time. "Oh, and Alex?"

"Yes?"

"Thank you for what you did tonight. For saving me from those bastards, I mean. If you hadn't come along when you did, it doesn't bear thinking about. And I just want to say that I love you."

"You don't need to tell me, my sweet; I already know what's in your heart. You know I am yours forever. Now hurry on inside."

With a small, weak smile, I step out the car and head towards the entrance to my flats.

Jessica

The next two days are kind of a blur and I'm so spaced out, I'm barely even aware of what month it is. I try my best to keep busy and go through the motions of pretending to be normal, because that's the only thing I can do. The only thing that prevents me from breaking down completely. As always, I find a way to compartmentalise my problems and put the nightmare from the alleyway behind me.

Every day, I take Freddie to school, help Mum clean up around the house, run general errands and do everything I can to help her prepare for her trip. I hide my secret torment from her and keep a smile plastered to my face at all times. I try not to think too hard about the many troubling questions that remain unanswered, such as did Jack and his friends survive the tentacle attack?

And if they did what happens now? Did they tell the police and ambulance services what they saw? But who would believe it? More importantly, is there any chance I could be implicated as a potential witness? Will I soon be receiving a knock on the door from the police to ask me questions about what happened? This, however, seems unlikely as Jack and his mates would then have to explain what we were all doing in that alley just before the attack, and they wouldn't exactly come out smelling of roses. Still, the thought of what the future repercussions could be worries me.

A couple of times, Cynthia catches me staring off into the distance and asks me if I'm okay, and I say yeah, everything's great, she shouldn't worry about me, which just isn't true. More than anything, I long to fall into my mother's arms, sob my heart out and tell her everything that happened—about Jack and the attempted rape, about the carnage in the alley, about my escorting work and most of all, that I have fallen in

love with a demon called Alex. I wish I could confide in her about everything, but unfortunately, I can't, because she has enough to deal with right now, plus she'd never believe all the supernatural stuff, so I keep all my feelings bottled up in the hope that one day soon, when the time is right, I'll be able to come clean with her.

Then on Thursday morning, I take my umbrella and trudge through the rainswept streets of Clapham to Freddie's school for a meeting with his class teacher, Miss Barnes—a loud, boisterous lady with fuzzy brown hair, brightly coloured clothing and novelty glasses. As I take a seat in her messy office lined with dog-eared furniture, I decide she reminds me of a children's TV presenter: overly cheerful and desperate to be liked, but ultimately fake.

"I'm so sorry, I'll be with you in just two secs," she beams, riffling through a stack of papers on her desk. "I can't seem to find Freddie's school report anywhere. I'm sure it was here a moment ago. My goodness, what am I like? I'm so bloody disorganised!" Miss Barnes laughs in an attempt to ingratiate herself to me, but I only manage a tight smile in return. There's something about this woman I do not like and decide it's best to tread carefully until I know more about her.

While Freddie's teacher continues to fuss over the missing report, I scrutinise her office closely. The walls are covered with kid's drawings and it smells of floor polish and pencil shavings, the hallmark of a typical primary school. For a moment, I close my eyes and am transported back to being an eight-year-old again. Looking back, I'd actually quite enjoyed my time at primary school. It was only when I went to secondary school that things began to go wrong.

"Found it!" Miss Barnes trills, holding up a grey folder that I presume is my brother's report. Silently, she flips through a couple of pages to familiarise herself, and then adopts a more authoritative tone. "Okay, thanks for coming today, Jessica. You are Freddie's...?"

"Sister," I clarify with a nod.

“His sister, great. And where is his mother?”

“Sorry, Cynthia couldn’t be here today because she’s travelling abroad tonight, so I came instead. I’m on record as one of his next of kin.”

“Fine. Well, let’s get down to it then.” She clears her throat. “To start with, I just wanted to say what a lovely boy Freddie is. He has a wonderful little personality with so many good qualities. He just has trouble concentrating in class sometimes. Also, sometimes he can be a bit disruptive to the other kids because he lacks concentration, and that’s one of the areas we really need to work on.”

“When you say disruptive, what do you mean exactly?” I ask.

She spreads out her hands. “Freddie gets easily distracted in class. He finds it hard to follow instructions, gets bored easily and doesn’t seem to engage with the books we give him to read.”

“That’s because the books are boring,” I snap. “He doesn’t find them intellectually challenging. The reading level you have put him at is far below his capabilities. My brother is more advanced than you give him credit for, but you’re still giving him books for five-year-olds to read.”

Miss Barnes looks very offended. “Really? Is that what you truly think? I suppose we could assess his reading level again and see what comes back. However, I do have other concerns. Whenever we ask him to read in front of the class he freezes up and refuses. Part of our literacy assessment is based on the child being able to confidently speak in front of their peers, and Freddie isn’t really capable of doing that at present. He appears to have difficulty with social interactions.”

“That’s only because my brother is shy when put in front of large groups of people,” I counter fiercely. “What’s wrong with that? Lots of kids are shy at his age. Anyway, what about his maths? He’s very good with numbers. Why don’t you talk about that

instead of focusing on the negative?”

“Yes, I agree he is exceptionally good at maths and that is one of the few areas I have no concern about. But...” His teacher releases a heavy sigh. “I’ll get to the crux of the matter. Freddie can be quite tactile with the other children, and that has been causing problems.”

“What do you mean by tactile?”

Miss Barnes scratches the side of her mouth. “He keeps trying to hug the other children, even when they don’t want him to, and then he gets upset and sometimes lashes out when things don’t go his way. I’m sure he means well, but Freddie seems to find it hard to acknowledge other children don’t always want their personal space invaded.”

My temper flares. “But that’s just Freddie showing affection to the other children. Me and my mum give him hugs all the time. We are a very demonstrative family. I don’t understand why it’s a problem. The world needs more love, not less of it.”

“Be that as it may, we’ve had several complaints from some of the other parents. The truth is Jessica, we’re at a point where I don’t believe this school can provide Freddie with the level of attention he needs any longer. Ravensbourne is a small school with only one teaching assistant per class, but what Freddie needs is somebody to devote their full attention to him on a daily basis, and we are just not able to do that here because we simply don’t have the resources.”

Taking off her glasses, she shines up the lenses on her cardigan and puts them back on. “We’ve always known he was on the spectrum and when Freddie first started here, we thought we could meet his requirements. Sadly, I no longer think that is the case, so we are going to have to explore other options.”

“What are you suggesting?” I say sourly.

“I think you and your mother are going to have to seriously consider sending Freddie to a school for autistic children. Somewhere they can cater to his needs. That’s my personal opinion, anyway.”

“But we’ve already looked into that,” I say. “Those specialist schools are expensive, and my family does not have the money to pay for him to go to one. Plus, we really want Freddie to mix with regular children as we feel it will be good for his development.”

“I understand,” she says with faux empathy. “But you’ve got to think about what’s best for Freddie. If you did decide to send him to a private school which specialises in autism, then you could always apply to the local council for funding. Did you know there is help for low-income families? If you’re interested, I’d be happy to help you fill out the relevant application forms and walk you through the process.”

“That won’t be necessary, thank you,” I say, standing up and putting on my coat. “As of next week, we will be taking Freddie out of school to go travelling for a month, and after that we will look to explore our options.”

“You’re taking him out of school?” Miss Barnes appears alarmed at this news. “This is the first I’m hearing of it. Does the head teacher know?”

“Not yet,” I reply, walking towards the door. “But she will. Don’t worry, we’ll put it in writing and send the school a letter.”

“Please, Jessica, don’t be too hasty. Whatever you and your mother decide to do, you must make sure it is in Freddie’s best interests.”

Turning around, I look her dead in the eye. “That’s exactly what I’m doing. Putting my brother first. I was on the fence about what to do, but you’ve just made the decision for me.” Without another word, I leave the office and close the door behind me. I feel exhilarated. Well, at least that’s one less thing to worry about, though how

I'm going to explain my decision to Cynthia, I have no idea. Once more, it will need to be a discussion that is put on ice until her return from Germany.

The rest of the day passes quickly. When I get home, my mother's bedroom looks like a bomb hit it. There is an explosion of clothes everywhere as she does some last-minute packing for her trip this evening. She asks me how the meeting at the school went and I tell her it went okay, carefully adding that there was talk of sending Freddie to a specialist school, but I refuse to elaborate further. We'll talk about it when she gets back, I say. My mother shows a vague interest, but is so stressed about catching her flight, she appears to barely be listening, which to be honest suits me just fine. The less said the better.

After I collect Freddie from school at three, Erin comes around to our flat with her suitcases packed and the four of us enjoy a final farewell meal together of roast garlic and butternut squash risotto, followed by Arctic roll, all washed down with liberal helpings of Aqua Libra. It's a very emotional time as the three of us have never spent more than a week apart and this feels like a step into the unknown. All throughout dinner, I keep praying that this will not be the final time I ever see Cynthia. I want her to return from the trip to Frankfurt completely healed so that we can get on with the rest of our lives. All I can do is hope that my wish is granted.

Then around nine pm, a taxi arrives to take them to Heathrow airport. The flight is in the early hours of the morning, so they need to get a head start on the journey. Hurriedly, Freddie and I help my mother put her suitcases in the car boot, and then with tears in our eyes, say our final goodbyes.

"Are you definitely sure you'll be okay?" Cynthia whispers. "I feel so guilty leaving you guys all alone like this."

I wipe my wet face and force a smile. "Mum, I told you everything is going to be fine. Don't worry about us. I promise to phone you every day at the hotel to keep in touch, okay?"

“You’d better do or I’ll be on the first flight home.”

Laughing through our tears, we all share a group hug, then Erin and Mum get into the taxi, and I stand on the street corner waving them off, my chest tight with emotion. As sad as I feel, I know this is for the best. It’s my mother’s one shot at sorting this out once and for all.

That night, I sleep in Freddie’s bed to help comfort him and it’s the best rest I’ve had in ages. Gazing down at his sweet cherubic face as he sleeps, I swear never to allow any harm to come to him. God knows what the future holds, but whatever happens I will do everything in my power to keep my little brother safe and protected.

The next day, as we’re having breakfast before school, the buzzer goes, and I answer the communal entry door to a delivery man holding a large cardboard box.

“I’ve got a parcel for F. Gardner,” he smiles, putting the heavy item down on the mat. “I just need someone to sign for it.”

“A delivery for me?” Freddie squeals, jumping up and down in his bare feet. “I’ve never had a delivery before. This is so exciting!”

It is indeed, but who is it from, I wonder?

Thoughtfully, I scribble down my signature and wrestle the hefty box into the kitchen.

“Open it! Open it! I want to see what it is.”

“One second, Kiddo, I need a knife to cut the tape.”

Moments later, the package is open and my jaw drops when I see inside is a brand-new Super Nintendo with so many games they can barely be contained. My brother

shrieks with delight and instantly begins unpacking them. What a wonderful surprise, but who on earth sent it? It isn't Freddie's birthday, and I can't imagine who else might want to send him something like this. Unless of course by some miracle, his deadbeat dad Darren has finally decided to step up and actually acknowledge his child's existence.

"Wow, this is amazing," I beam. "Christmas has definitely come early. It looks as if someone has bought you every game in the Woolworths' Top40. I wonder who sent it? Is there a card or anything that came with it?"

Freddie rolls his eyes. "I already know who sent it, silly. It's from your secret boyfriend."

"What?"

"He came to my school the other day. He spoke to me through the fence at playtime and he was wearing a hood and this funny mask and I don't know why because I couldn't see his face and I'd like to see his face. He told me he was your secret boyfriend and said I shouldn't tell anyone because it's a secret."

My body stiffens. Alex came to Freddie's school? Oh my God.

"And then," my brother continues excitedly, "your secret boyfriend asked me what I wanted most in the world and I told him a Super Nintendo just like my friend Ollie and now he's got me one isn't it brilliant? I like your secret boyfriend, Jess. He's much nicer than Jack. I didn't like Jack."

For a few seconds I'm struck dumb. This is getting out of control. I can't believe Alex went to see my brother in broad daylight. And he was wearing a mask? Jesus, this just gets crazier and crazier. Of course, the gifts he has bought for Freddie are lovely, but I just wish he had discussed it with me first. It feels like I'm being overwhelmed again.

Still, it was awfully sweet of Alex.

Then I remember something else. Today is the first day that we will be on our own since my mother's departure. Alex said he would come back to claim me as soon as she left. Does that mean he is coming for us tonight to take us back to Claremont Hall?

"Jess?"

"Yes, Freddie?"

"Why does your boyfriend wear a mask? Ollie says only superheroes wear masks. Is your secret boyfriend a superhero?"

"Um, yes, you could say that," I smile.

After I've dropped my brother at school, I pay a visit to Sloppy Joe's to hand in my notice. When I enter the place, I find it virtually empty. Typical Friday morning. Song2 by Blur plays softly in the background, suggesting Amina has taken control of the stereo again. Taking a deep breath, I walk towards the long serving counter where the girl in question is busy stacking plates and polishing cutlery. A broad grin sweeps across her face.

"Hiya, Jess, what are you doing in? You're not working today, are you?"

"No, I just came to sort out some stuff."

"I feel like I haven't seen you in ages."

"I'm fine," I mutter distractedly. "Is Brian in? I need to speak with him."

"Sorry, he isn't here. He went to Makro to stock up on supplies. He won't be back for

an hour and has left me in charge, can you believe? It's nice that he trusts me enough not to burn the place down. So right now, it's just me and Katie." She dries her hands on a tea towel. "Why? What's up?"

Rummaging through my bag, I pull out a small white envelope and hand it to her. "When he gets back, please can you give him this?"

"What is it?"

"My letter of resignation."

"What, are you leaving us?" Amina looks genuinely disappointed. I notice her black liner is a little smudged, giving her the appearance of having a black eye, but her new nose stud more than makes up for it. "No fucking way! I loved working with you, Jess. Why the hell are you resigning?"

I shrug my shoulders. "It's just time to move on, that's all. For what it's worth, I'm going to miss working with you too, hun. But we'll keep in touch obviously. You have my number, so we can go for a drink sometime."

"Is it because of all that stuff that happened here on Monday night?"

"I guess you heard about that, then."

"Yeah, Brian told me all about it. And on that subject..." Amina's voice lowers to a conspiratorial whisper. "I need to talk with you in private. I've got some juicy gossip to tell you." Discreetly, she jerks her head towards the kitchen, and I follow her to the back, my heart thumping wildly. I have a feeling I'm about to hear some news I'm not sure I'm going to like.

Once she's confident Katie is out of earshot, Amina resumes excitedly: "You won't believe this but something crazy went down on Monday night after those tossers left

here. All I'll say is, karma is a bitch."

"Why, what happened?" I ask, feeling slightly nauseous. For a second, images from the dark alley flash up in my mind again. Writhing tentacles. A severed finger on the pavement. The deep gushing wound in Jack's crotch area where his penis used to be...

No, it's just too terrible to think about.

"Apparently, they were attacked just around the corner from here," she continues. "After they left Sloppy Joe's, Jack Parker and four of his mates got jumped by some gang and had the living crap beaten out of them. And when I say beaten up, I'm talking seriously fucked up, here. I'm talking Scarface level shit, 'say hello to my little friend' and then some."

I swallow hard and lick my lips. "Wow, that's mad. Are they...are they okay? I mean, they're going to live though, right?"

"How should I know? Apparently, it's touch and go with some of them because they've had some serious injuries inflicted on them."

"Do you know what sort of injuries?"

"You really want all the gory details?"

"Well, no," I stammer. "I guess I was just wondering..."

"I don't know all the ins and outs, but my sources hint that it was something seriously fucked up. Like..." She pulls me in close and hisses in my ear: "They had their willies cut off."

My mouth gapes in horror. "No way!"

“Yes, way. See, I told you it was fucked up. Hey, but don’t go telling anyone about it, as it could just be a rumour, but if it is true, how sick is that? Guess that’s what happens when you mix yourself up in a turf war.

“Turf war? Do the police think that’s what it was about?”

“Definitely got to be gang-related,” Amina says with conviction, picking lint off her sleeve. “Although to be fair, I never had Jack pegged as the type of boy to get mixed up in that sort of thing, but I guess you never can tell with anyone, can you? And one of the guys that was with him, someone called Taser, has definite links to some gangs in Peckham so it’s sort of obvious that’s what this was about.”

Grotesque memories from Monday night return once more to haunt me. Hot bile rises in my throat and this time, I really am going to be sick. Bolting out the kitchen, I race into the ladies and throw open one of the cubicles just in time to vomit down the toilet bowl. A minute later, Amina appears in the doorway, her voice laced with concern.

“Geez, are you okay? Was this because of my colourful language?”

“No, it must be something I ate,” I gasp, wiping fluid from my mouth. “I’m all right now. I’ve got it all out of my system.” Slowly, I get to my feet and stagger over to the basins to wash up.

Amina places a comforting hand on my shoulder. “Are you definitely sure you’re okay?”

“Yes, I-I’m fine.”

“Who knows, maybe you’re pregnant,” she laughs.

Very funny. How could I be...

Wait. Now that I come to think about it, my breasts have been feeling rather sore lately. And every now and then I've been getting these weird stomach cramps, but I put it down to an upset stomach. No, there's no way I could be pregnant. How could I be? I'm on the pill. Then I remember a couple of times over the past few weeks, I haven't kept to taking my tablet at the same time every day, one of the conditions to ensure its effectiveness. Stupid, I know. There's just been so much going on in my life, keeping to my schedule has not always been my top priority. Dear God, could I really be pregnant with Alex's baby? It certainly seems plausible given that we've been having lots of sex and never once used protection.

In a daze, I leave Sloppy Joe's wracked with anxiety. Now that Amina has planted the seed of doubt, I simply have to know. I need to find out if it's true that I'm pregnant. Hastily, I rush to a pharmacy and pick up a home pregnancy test. I've never bought one before, and have no idea how to use it, but the box claims to be able to tell you within five minutes. Gosh, just five minutes is all it takes to find out if your life will be changed forever.

Tossing the box in my bag, I continue running my errands around town, deciding not to take the test until later this evening in the privacy of my own home. That's what I tell myself, anyway. The reality is, I'm putting it off because I just can't deal with it right now. I'm too scared to find out what the truth is because of the potential earthshattering implications.

Alex is part demon. If we had a baby together, what would that mean? Would the child be half human, half demon with tentacles coming out of its back? Would it have special powers? The never-ending possibilities are too much for me to handle and I try not to think about it or else I'll go crazy.

At three o'clock, I pick Freddie up from school and take him to have an ice cream in McDonald's. From there, we go to the park and play on the swings. It's bitingly cold weather, but I don't care. I need to be outside in the fresh air to help keep my head clear.

We spend an hour or so fooling around, and then we go home, and I make us both some pasta, my signature dish as my culinary skills are not as advanced as Cynthia's. Then we play Super Mario World on the Nintendo, and we'd be having the best time ever, if it wasn't for the constant sick feeling in my stomach. I'm really suffering here. Finally, at around eight-thirty, I sneak off to the bathroom, leaving Freddie engrossed in the shenanigans of the world's two most famous plumbers.

On tenterhooks, I sit on the floor and take the pregnancy test out of my bag and read the instructions closely. Then I read them again to make absolutely sure I've understood what I'm supposed to do. When I'm satisfied that I know what I'm doing, I carefully unwrap the plastic sheath and begin to psych myself up. Okay, here goes nothing...

Suddenly, somebody rings the doorbell and I almost jump out of my skin with fright. Oh my gosh, could that be Alex? With trembling fingers, I drop the test on the floor and quickly pull up my tights and knickers. That will have to wait.

"Jess! Someone is at the door!" Freddie shouts, stomping through the hallway excitedly. "Should I go and answer it?"

"No, wait! Stay where you are. I'll do it."

Hesitantly, I approach the glass spyhole and peer through to see who's out there. Strange. I can't see anyone. The communal hall appears to be completely empty. But someone must be out there. Heart pounding, I begin taking off the chain and nervously turn the lock to open the door.

"Stand behind me, Freddie," I whisper fiercely. "Let's see who it is..."

Jesus, what will happen when my brother first sees Alex? What will his reaction be? Will Alex be wearing a mask like he did when he came down to the school, or will Freddie be faced with the full force of my boyfriend's demonic countenance? I know

from experience that the first time is likely to be a big shock and I brace myself in preparation.

Slowly, the door creaks open on its hinges and then...

“Mrs Biederhof!” I release an enormous sigh of relief. “What a surprise.”

“Hello, Jessica, I hope I’m not intruding?” The old woman grins, showing a row of crooked teeth. “Were you expecting someone else?”

“Um, no, of course not.”

“Only, I promised Cynthia I’d come to check in on you both from time to time while she’s away to make sure you’re okay.”

“We’re fine,” I say quickly. “We just finished having dinner and my brother will be getting ready for bed soon, so yeah, everything is great. It’s so nice of you to check in on us like this, but honestly, we’re fine.”

“I’m going back to play Mario World,” Freddie pouts, and darts to his bedroom. That should have been her cue to go, but sadly, our unwanted visitor continues to linger on the doorstep.

“Well, like I said, it was nice of you to call by,” I say, starting to close the door.

“Do you mind if I come in for a bit? I’ve brought you both some little gifts.”

“How lovely of you. Sure, no problem.” Gritting my teeth, I step aside for her to enter. Great. Alex could arrive at any minute, and I’ve now got to entertain the world’s nosiest neighbour.

Cheers, Mum.

Reluctantly, I take Mrs Biederhof into the living room and watch her milky blue eyes scrutinise everything in meticulous detail: the paint splattered easel, the lack of curtains in the windows, piles of boxes scattered around in a formation of organised chaos. I can only imagine what the old busybody is thinking. Probably wondering why we have so little furniture. I mean, we don't even have a proper dining table. As usual, she's dressed like she's going to church in a navy-blue skirt suit, pale pink cardigan and lacy white gloves. Her thick grey hair is perfectly coiffed as always.

For a few seconds we stand in awkward silence, not knowing what to say to each other.

"Just the two of you here tonight, then? Just you and your brother, Freddie?"

"Yes," I reply. "Why do you ask?"

"No reason. Just making conversation." She hesitates, then she adds dryly, "Your brother is up rather late, isn't he? When I had my children living with me, they were always in bed by seven, never fail."

"Yeah, I know he stays up late. That's something we're still working on, but I'm sure we'll get there eventually. It just takes time."

"What kids need is a proper bedtime routine. Bath, book, and bed. Always works a treat."

"Thanks, I'll remember that." I rub the back of my neck in exasperation. "So, you said you brought us some gifts?" I say, hoping to steer the conversation to more tranquil waters.

"Yes, thanks for reminding me." Reaching inside a plastic carrier bag, she produces some packets of biscuits. "I got you and Freddie a big bottle of Lucozade too. There are also some brandy snaps in there that my niece gave to me last Christmas.

Unfortunately, they give me terrible gas, but you and Freddie might like them.”

“How thoughtful of you. These all look great, thank you.”

“I also brought you this, Jessica.” Smiling, she produces a small velvet pouch and takes out a pretty silver crucifix. Gently, she places it in the palm of my hand and closes my fingers over it. “This is especially for you, my dear. I hope that you’ll wear it.”

“Oh, thanks. It’s lovely.” What an odd present. I hardly know her, yet this seems surprisingly sentimental. Also, I’m not particularly religious.

There is another moment of loaded silence.

“Are you still seeing that young man?”

“Come again?”

“The young man I saw you climbing out of your window with last Saturday.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about. I didn’t climb out of—”

“Oh, please,” Mrs Biederhof scoffs. “I might be old but I’m not blind. Just answer the question. Are you still seeing him?”

“Yes,” I admit lightly. “Why, what has it got to do with you?”

“I’m just looking out for your welfare, my dear.” The old woman pauses, picking words. “It’s just that I’ve seen him around here a few times parked in that black car of his. He doesn’t like to show his face, does he?”

I make no response. Dammit, I don’t really know what to say to that and find her

level of directness deeply unsettling. I had no idea she knew so much about us.

“The thing is,” she continues. “I always get such a strange vibe from him. It’s like I can almost sense when he’s around, and you know it’s weird, on two occasions when I saw him, right afterwards, my electricity just cut out. Isn’t that strange?”

“I’m not sure I understand. What are you trying to say?”

“I’m just telling you to be careful, that’s all, and wear your crucifix. There’s something about that young man that isn’t right, I’m certain of it. Darkness follows him around like a shadow and I feel...I feel there’s something abnormal about him, though I can’t exactly say what. I don’t know if your mother ever told you, but I’m an esoteric healer which means I’m highly sensitive to disturbances. And that young man of yours disturbs me more than anyone I’ve ever met. Please, please, take care.”

I shift my weight awkwardly. I don’t want to hear any of this and need her to leave right now. “Listen, I really should be putting Freddie to bed. You know, ‘bath, book and bed?’ Thanks again for the presents, Mrs Biederhof, this crucifix is lovely, and the brandy snaps will be gone by tomorrow. I’d love to spend more time talking, but it’s getting late, so I’d better see you out.”

She doesn’t say anything; just shakes her head like I’m a lost cause. Gently, but firmly, I usher her out the living room towards the front door, but before I can close it, she reaches out and clutches my hand again.

“May God be with you,” she whispers. Then she’s gone.

For a couple of heartbeats, I stand with my back against the door and release a long, slow, breath. Wow, that was intense. I honestly don’t know how much more of this I can take. It’s just one thing after another. That conversation with her has really creeped me out and I can’t help wondering if this is another omen of things to come. I always knew Mrs Biederhof was a little ‘out there’ but an esoteric healer? What even

is that? And what is she insinuating? That Alex is evil and could be a danger to me? How many times have I heard that before?

It's Beatrix Kingswood all over again and despite knowing deep down that their warnings are probably well intentioned, I simply don't want to hear it. I know what my boyfriend is. I know about the shrouds of malevolent darkness that surround him, but I don't need rescuing. He's a demon, a creature from another world, and I don't care. I still want to be with him. Nobody makes me feel the way he does. Nobody fucks me the way he does. No, I must do as my nature dictates and no matter what they say, I cannot, will not be without him.

After a while, I drift into the kitchen and switch on the kettle to make a cup of camomile tea to help calm my nerves. Then I remember the pregnancy test and my whole world caves again. Prickling with nervous tension, I return to the bathroom to finish what I started, my limbs heavy with a dark sense of foreboding. Picking the plastic device up from the floor, I remove the cap and take it over to the toilet to urinate on. After I finish doing the deed, I replace the cap and put the test on the windowsill to ensure it remains horizontal as advised in the instruction leaflet. I now must wait five minutes to learn my fate. Folding my arms protectively across my chest, I pace up and down the bathroom in a mild frenzy. Every couple of seconds, I keep checking my watch for the time.

I run my fingers down my face. Oh my God, the suspense is excruciating. What the hell am I going to do if the test is positive? What then? I love Alex but the thought of having his baby scares me to death. It would be such a journey into the unknown, how would I ever cope?

At last, the five minutes is up. I walk over to the windowsill. My head throbs. The room starts to weave and spin. With shaking hands, I lift up the pregnancy test to check and see what colour band appears. For what seems forever, I hold the test in mid-air, prolonging the moment far longer than is necessary. Finally, I look down to see what the result shows. I cover my mouth to stifle a sob.

Suddenly, there are three loud knocks on the front door. Eerie hollow sounds that echo throughout the entire flat...followed by a ghostly silence.

I don't need three guesses to know who it is.

"Jess!" Freddie shouts. "There's someone at the door again. Should I open it?"

This time I make no response. I'm too shocked to speak.