



Forever, Never, Always

(Forever #2)

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Category: Romance

Description: Forever, Never, Always is the story of a friendship torn apart by the lies they never meant to tell and the truth they can't take back.

Zoe thought Ric might be her forever. Six months together felt easy, natural . . . even a little bit like fate.

But everything changes when Ric moves next door to one of her best friends.

Sofia is a single mother trying to juggle her chaotic life. Embracing her return to work, loneliness, and the struggles of raising a toddler, she barely has time to breathe, let alone fall for anyone.

Especially not Ric.

But it's Ric who shows up when she needs someone.

Ric who hears the cracks in her voice.

Ric who makes her son laugh when she can't even make him smile.

The feelings are impossible to ignore and even harder to resist.

When a line is crossed, everything unravels.

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Sofia

One thing I hate about kids' birthday parties is . . . well, everything.

Am I a bad parent because I don't want to stand around while kids, high on sugar, race about screaming?

The fact my child is only eight months old means I have to follow him around the soft play area.

It's my idea of hell. But said birthday party belongs to my best friend's daughter, and there was no way I could miss Izzy turning four.

"This is my idea of hell," mutters Zoe, leaning her hip against the pole that Harry is currently clinging to.

He wants to walk but is yet to take his first steps.

"Who invented this cesspit of germs?" she asks, looking around with disdain.

Zoe, also considered a best friend, isn't child-friendly.

She is very clear about the fact that she will never have children.

"Ric seems to be enjoying it," I say, nodding over to where her 'boyfriend' is chasing the kids around and pretending to be a lion. I say 'boyfriend' because it's technically the longest situationship she's ever had. Six months and they're still 'seeing' one

another.

Zoe doesn't look impressed as he runs past with a stream of screaming children. "He's practically one of them," she mutters, rolling her eyes.

I frown. "Trouble in paradise?"

"No, we're fine." But she doesn't sound convincing, and honestly, I've been expecting it.

The second she thinks a man is getting too close, she clams up and finds ways to ick herself out.

The most recent being that he's bought a house that just happens to be next door to me.

Last week, it was because he's the brother of Hugo, our joint friend's fiancé.

"You need to stop looking for reasons," I tell her, and not for the first time. "He's great fun and secure. A real salt of the earth kind of guy."

"Relax, I'm not finding excuses."

"Are you sure? Because last week you didn't look overly impressed when he was with his brothers—"

"He was drunk and acting like an idiot," she cuts in.

"And when he signed for the house, you weren't exactly over the moon."

"It's a semi-detached," she says, screwing her nose up. "No offence."

I roll my eyes. “Don’t be a snob.”

Meg saunters over holding the birthday girl on her hip. Izzy is sweaty, red in the face, and completely worn out. “You’re not moaning about the venue, are you?” she asks, staring directly at Zoe, who has the audacity to look offended.

“Of course not,” she says indignantly. “It’s . . .” she glances around again, shrugging, “nice.”

“Because I loved all the inspo pictures you sent of garden parties and white balloon arches, but I just couldn’t muster the energy to have Dan and Ashley in my home.”

I offer Meg a sympathetic smile. “You made the right choice. At least here you can avoid them.” Dan left Meg over a year ago, after she discovered his affair with Ashley. I look over to where Ashley is rocking her new baby to sleep. “Is Dan here?” I ask.

“Somewhere,” mutters Meg. “In fact,” she places Izzy down on the floor, “go and find Daddy,” she tells her, smiling when Izzy runs off. “He got her clothes for her birthday,” she adds in a low voice. “What four-year-old wants clothes?”

“Were they decent clothes?” asks Zoe.

“Don’t be ridiculous,” Meg says, rolling her eyes. “I have nothing against supermarket clothes—I buy them all the time—but he could’ve made an effort. It’s all he’s getting her.”

“I actually noticed he’s making an effort with himself,” I say, raising a brow. “Designer clothes, a fresh haircut. What’s gotten into him?”

Meg leans in, her voice dropping. “I think he’s having an affair. Actually, I’m certain.

” She’s said the same thing before, back when no one could get hold of Dan after Ashley gave birth. After ten years together, she knows him better than anyone.

“It’s only what Ashley deserves after the way she chased him into her bed,” I say with a shrug.

“Agreed,” says Zoe, nodding. “She’s not looking so smug these days, though,” she adds thoughtfully.

“Having a newborn is hard work,” I say. “Not that I’m defending her.”

“The kid is a couple months now, right?” asks Zoe, and Meg nods. “And she’s still wearing leggings and baggy shirts.”

“Hey,” I hiss, glancing down at my own leggings “Careful where you’re throwing shade.”

She arches a brow, smirking. “And you have absolutely no excuse because Harry is eight months now.”

“One day, you’ll have kids,” I warn, pointing a finger at Zoe, “and I will savour my moment of judgment.”

She barks a laugh. “That’s never happening,” she says, shaking her head like it’s the most ridiculous idea she’s ever heard. Ric joins us, panting, and Zoe eyes him warily. “Having fun?” she asks.

He grins. “There’s something about a soft play that makes me crazy.”

“Really, we couldn’t tell,” Zoe replies, her voice dripping with sarcasm.

“Let’s get a picture of you together,” says Meg with a smirk.

“Absolutely not,” Zoe says with a horrified gasp.

“Come on, I’ll tag you on Insta,” I add in a teasing tone. Zoe’s Insta account is perfect. Each picture is carefully thought out with absolutely nothing out of place. A picture of her and a sweaty Ric would not go down well.

Zoe mutters something and heads off towards the bathroom, Ric rushing after her. “I give it another month,” I say.

Meg groans. “Really? I mean, this seems to be going well for once.”

“She’s icked out because he bought a semi-detached house,” I say, arching a brow. “She’s not in the slightest bit sorry for saying it, either, knowing we have the exact same house.”

Meg laughs. “You’ve got to love her honesty.”

Ric

I wait patiently outside the bathroom, and when Zoe steps out looking fresh, I grab her and pull her close. She turns her head slightly when I try to kiss her, making sure my lips land on the side of her head rather than the intended lips.

“Are you okay?” I ask, and she nods. It’s the same response I’ve had for the last few weeks, and trust me, I’ve noticed her pulling away, but when I confront her on it, she tells me I’m imagining it. “Can I get you a drink?”

“Not unless Meg has Champagne stashed away somewhere.”

“I know this isn’t your thing, but it means the world to Meg that you came.”

“Of course, I’d be here, Eric, she’s my best friend.” And she stomps away, leaving me asking myself once again what the fuck I said wrong.

I join my brothers, all three gathered around a table eating from a basket of freshly cooked fries. I snatch one and lower into the seat beside Hugo, my eldest brother and Meg’s fiancé. “How come you’re not taking pictures?” asks Seb, the youngest of us yet the most sensible.

“Pictures?” I ask, taking another few fries.

“For miss Instagram of the year,” he says, nodding in Zoe’s general direction.

My brothers think it’s hilarious that whenever we go anywhere, Zoe has me taking her picture a thousand times over to get the perfect one. It’s annoying, but I get it—social media is her livelihood. It’s where most of her customers come from when they want any kind of party or event planning.

“She won’t be showing her followers that she’s in a soft play,” says Hugo, laughing. “She wanted to organise some lavish party at Mum’s,” he adds. “The type you see the stars throwing in those celeb magazines.”

“And Meg said no?” asks Seb.

“She didn’t want to invite the dreaded ex-husband to our place, and she felt wrong asking Mum to hold it, even though we all know she would’ve loved it.” Our parents are very family orientated, and they’ve accepted Meg and Izzy as their own.

“I get why she wouldn’t want Dan in her happy spaces,” I say. “He tends to taint things with his miserable persona.”

“He’s trying,” Hugo says with a shrug.

“What?” I scoff in disbelief. “You can’t stand him.”

“I know, but I’m trying to be more understanding and supportive for Meg’s sake. She reckons he’s screwing around behind Ashley’s back again.”

I wince. “Ouch. Although it was only a matter of time. The honeymoon stage doesn’t last forever.”

“Meg’s more worried he’ll keep getting random women pregnant so Izzy has loads of siblings from different women.”

“It must be hard enough that she’s had to accept Ashley after what she did,” agrees Jimmy.

“She doesn’t accept her. She tries to be civil, but Ashley makes it impossible.

For a short time, there was peace. After Meg helped deliver the baby, things were quiet for a while, but Ashley demands Dan’s time constantly, and she refuses to let Izzy stay over if she’s got so much as a runny nose for fear of passing germs to the baby. I was surprised she even showed today.”

“This is definitely a breeding ground for germs,” I say, glancing around the room as sweaty kids rub their hands on just about everything in sight.

I spot Sofia sitting with Harry on the floor, stacking blocks. “I’ll be right back,” I say, taking the leftover fries and heading her way.

I sit beside her and slide the basket her way. “Thought you’d like something seeing as you’ve not touched any of the food yet.” I don’t bother to question how I know that

fact.

She offers me a grateful smile. “Thanks. How are you settling in?” She’s asked me that before—more than once—and I’m starting to wonder if I make her nervous, like she’s clinging to the safest question she can think of.

I nod, smiling. “I’m still settling in great. I hope I haven’t woken you with noise. I’m putting some shelves up in the living room for my books.”

“You read?”

I laugh, and she blushes. “Yes. I am an English teacher after all.”

“Of course,” she mumbles, shaking her head, a slight blush on her cheeks.

“And no, you haven’t disturbed me at all.

Do you hear Harry crying?” she asks, wincing slightly.

I do, it’s constant, but Meg mentioned Sofia was struggling with Harry, and I’d hate for her to be anxious in her own home, so I shake my head.

“No, nothing. Quiet as a door mouse. Are you excited to go back to work?”

“Yes, I can’t wait,” she mutters, but the excitement doesn’t quite reach her eyes. “It’ll be nice to be surrounded by adults again.”

When I first moved in, Sofia brought me a freshly made cake and we got chatting about her love of baking.

I was surprised when she said she worked for a magazine and not a bakery because

the woman has serious skills.

“So, no more home baking for a while?” I ask, offering a disappointed pout.

She smiles. “And who’s having Harry?” I ask, handing the little guy a block, which he takes and tries to cram in his mouth.

“He’s going to a private nursery,” she almost whispers.

“Oh, right. Expensive.”

“Tell me about it. But I have no one else, and I need to work so . . .” She trails off.

“It’s a hard situation to be in. There’re a few teachers at work who have recently come back from maternity and they’re practically working for nothing because all their wages go on childcare.”

Zoe

I watch the way Ric leans into Sofia, making her laugh with whatever he’s saying. They look good together. They’re suited. He’d make an amazing father, and although we’re not at the stage where I can ask him about it, I already know he’ll want children because he adores them. And they adore him.

I place my hand over my invisible bump and sigh heavily. I know I can’t tell him about the baby because he’ll want me to keep it and I just can’t.

I’ve never been into the whole marriage and children thing.

Even as a small child. I didn’t plan my wedding or list my future children’s names, because as far as I was concerned, I wouldn’t have that sort of life.

I wouldn't put a child through what I went through.

My parents love money more than they do me.

They were always away on business, and I was raised by a stream of different nannies, none of which I bothered to get to know because once my father had shagged them, Mother sacked them and hired the next. It was a never-ending cycle.

And I love money too, so very early on, I chose money over family. I only wish they'd been selfish enough to do the same so they could have spared me the heartache of rejection.

I've spent a long time building my brand.

I break my back to pull off the best events that run smoothly and are Instagram worthy.

Because in this day and age, that matters more than anything.

If it's not photo worthy, people don't want to know.

I've been sucked into the social media world, posting content that appeals to like-minded social media addicts.

And with a sea of influences at my mercy, I take full advantage.

These people are a different breed, and they throw events for anything.

A million followers equals ten grand spent on the best celebration to look worthy enough to keep growing, and that's just a rough price for a garden event at their own place.

If they want to hire a venue, double it, triple it even.

So, in the fake world I am surrounded in, I'm thankful to still have my two best friends from childhood, and Eric, who, despite his flaws, makes me feel so loved and needed that I can't quite be selfish enough to walk away.

He spots me watching and smiles, holding out his hand. I head over and grab it, lowering to sit in the circle the three of them have created. "Want a chip?" he asks, pushing the basket my way. I smile, taking one.

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Sofia

I'm late. It's Monday morning and my first official day back at work, and I'm already feeling like a failure.

I had my outfit prepped, hanging up and ready to slip right on after my shower.

And it was all going to plan until I woke Harry up and he puked down the front of my cream silk blouse and pinstriped trousers.

It even managed to soak into one of my brand-new low-heeled shoes.

That meant a quick outfit change into a creased green blouse I had pre-pregnancy, which is popping open slightly at the bust, covered by a dark blue trouser suit I owned from fuck knows when that hasn't seen the light of day in forever.

And I topped it with heels that are way too high now I'm a mother and used to wearing flats.

I take a deep breath as I press the doorbell for the private nursery. I'd spent months looking for the perfect place for Harry, and this seemed it from the reviews left by other parents who swear this is the place to have your little humans nurtured well.

The door swings open and a girl no older than seventeen stares at me with mistrusting eyes. "I'm new," I announce, and she frowns. "I mean, Harry is new," I rush to correct, laughing nervously.

She steps to one side for me to go in, which is unexpected seeing as the lady I came to meet before said they take them at the door.

“Actually, I’m running late,” I tell her as I follow her through to the baby room, where several women are rocking screaming children.

Harry clings to me, staring wide-eyed at the other babies.

“I really need to get off.” She ignores me and grabs a large book off the side.

She turns, handing it to me without a word, and I wrestle with my bag, shrugging it to my shoulder, and taking the book.

“What’s this?” She walks away, and I stare after her in bewilderment.

“You just have to sign it,” a nearby mother tells me.

I smile in thanks then move to the nearest table and crouch down, resting Harry on my knee and dropping my bag to the floor.

I turn to the right page and scribble my name down.

I stand and look around, picking out a play leader in a blue uniformed top and heading her way.

“Excuse me.” She smiles, and I relax a little.

“It’s Harry’s first day,” I tell her, and she takes Harry’s chubby hand and gives it a little shake.

“Welcome, Harry.”

“It’s just, I really need to go because it’s my first day too and I’m running late.”

“We usually ask the parents to stay until their little one is settled.”

I look around at the screaming babies, noting that Harry is still clinging to me with one fist wrapped in my hair. “I was told I could just drop and run, so to speak.”

“I guess he does seem quite settled,” she mutters, reaching for him.

Harry tugs my hair, making it clear he will not release it without a fight. I pass him over and try to untangle the fist of doom. “Mummy needs to go,” I sing-song, my voice filled with anxiety. It’s no good—his grip is strong as the playworker begins to hand him back to me.

“No,” I say clearly, and Harry startles, the way he does when he’s about to take something he can’t have.

His bottom lip wobbles, and I glance around frantically, spotting a pair of scissors.

“Let me just—” I snatch the scissors and make quick work of hacking above the piece of hair that Harry is holding onto.

The playworker stares at me with wide eyes, and I offer a weak smile.

“I’ll collect him at five-thirty. Have fun, sweetie,” I say, kissing him quickly on the head before grabbing my bag and running out the door.

By the time I make it on the overpacked tube and to the office, I’m a hot, sweaty mess.

I run my hands through my hair as the lift rises to the top floor.

It's been a year since I was last here, and there have been a lot of changes.

My old boss, who I loved, has left, and she told me there were a lot of staffing changes.

But nothing prepares me as I step out onto what was once a floor of small offices to find a huge open-planned space with bustling noise and music playing loudly.

I frown, looking around for what used to be my office, only to find a group of young-looking women all crowded around a desk chatting.

I head over, and they stop talking to look at me.

"Hi," I say but not one of them smiles. "I'm Sofia Heart.

Returning from maternity leave." They continue to stare blankly, and I swallow my nerves. "Where's the boss?"

"Dex," one of them calls out loud, making me jump in fright, "new girl is here."

I frown. "Not new," I mutter, turning towards a man heading our way. He looks me up and down, arching a brow in what I think is a judgemental way. "Hi, I'm Sofia," I tell him, holding out a hand. He frowns deeper before shaking it.

"Dexter. Follow me."

He leads me into the only office space here and closes the door, drowning out the heavy beats of the music. "Take a seat," he adds, pointing to a pink shell seat. The entire office matches this one chair, and it's so bright, I contemplate wearing sunglasses. "Pronouns?" he asks.

“Huh?”

“He/she/they/them/him/her.”

“Clearly she,” I mutter.

“How is it clear?” he asks, sounding impatient.

“I’ve just come back from maternity,” I say, shrugging.

“Are you saying men can’t have children?”

I wince slightly, wondering what this guy is on. “Well, yeah. I mean, they can have children and come back from paternity , but I’m back from maternity, meaning I gave birth.”

He eyes me for a second. “My pronouns are he/him.”

“Right.”

“Please don’t assume pronouns. It could upset a lot of your colleagues.”

“Things have changed since I was last here,” I reply, wanting to change the subject.

“Clearly.”

“I used to have an office.”

“We thought open-plan was more modern. We can communicate without walls as a barrier.”

“In my day, we just used the door.” Dexter doesn’t even smile, and I take another calming breath. “And the music,” I continue.

“We each get a music day. Today, Tommy is in charge.”

“And he likes dance?” I ask, forcing another smile. “Loud dance?”

“They,” he corrects, “not he.”

“Right. Maybe you can just show me to my desk, and I’ll find my way from there?”

Eric

“Homework as you pass my desk,” I shout over the hustle and bustle as the final bell rings and the kids make a run for it.

“I don’t want excuses,” I add as Jason stops to give me another of his bullshit lies as to why he couldn’t produce a short story on his chosen topic when I know full well, he was drinking cider all weekend and shagging Ellie from the year above.

“Have it in for tomorrow,” I tell him, knowing I’ll never see it.

The room empties, and I fall back into my chair and rub my brow. I swear, I’m getting wrinkles. “Long day?” I look up to find Hugo in the doorway.

“Yes, boss. I need a raise.”

“You had one in April, brother. That’s how you got your new house.”

I smirk. “If you’re here to tell me the meeting’s been cancelled, I will love you forever.”

“Ha, no such luck.” I groan. “However, Jimmy convinced me it would be better held in the pub, so see you there?”

I fist bump the air. “Nice one, James.” Jimmy is four years younger than me. He followed in mine and Hugo’s footsteps to become a teacher, although Hugo outranked us both when he took the headship here, but then he made me deputy and Jimmy head of year.

The meeting runs a little over an hour, with not much talk of work at all and more talk of our mother’s impending birthday celebration.

By the time I get home, I’m shattered but thankful I remembered to grab a pizza on the way. I’m heading up my path when I hear the usual screams of Harry. The neighbour the other side catches my eye, rolling his. “That kid never stops,” he says. “Someone should check on it.”

I force a smile, unlocking my door and placing my laptop bag inside. I then proceed to re-lock it and head next door. The neighbour watches me, and I shrug. “I’m doing what you suggested and checking on our neighbour because maybe she’s just having a real hard time with a young baby.”

“I meant official, like social services,” he mutters.

I offer a tight smile. “Well, let’s just take one step at a time, shall we?”

I knock loud, and it’s a minute or two before Sofia rips the door open, looking hassled.

Her eyes are swollen like she’s been crying, and her hair is tied back with a large piece sticking up to the side.

I eye it, and she consciously tries to slap it down.

“Hi,” she whispers, her voice sounding hoarse.

“Pizza,” I offer, holding up the box. “It’s way too big for just me, so I thought I’d share.”

She glances behind her. “It’s not a good time.”

“I’d say it’s the perfect time,” I tell her, offering a friendly smile.

She stares past me. “Hi, Mr. Graham,” she calls. “Do you want to join us for pizza?” He must shake his head because she steps to one side to let me in, rolling her eyes. “Of course, you don’t, you nosey bastard.”

I stare at the piles of toys and discarded clothes across the living room, with Harry sitting amongst them crying.

I turn to Sofia and hand her the pizza because she needs the distraction as much as Harry, and then I go to the little guy and scoop him up.

He instantly stops the noise, seemingly shocked I’m not put off by his cries.

“That’s better,” I say, wiping his wet cheeks with my free hand.

“Yah know, for such a little man, you’re very loud. ”

I follow Sofia into the kitchen, catching her braced against the worktop with her head hanging in defeat. “Bad day?” I ask, and she spins to face me. “Sorry. Didn’t mean to scare you.”

She forces a watery smile before opening the pizza box. “Pepperoni, my favourite.” She opens a cupboard then slams it. “No clean plates,” she mutters, and I spot the dishes stacked in the sink. She’s drowning .

“Who eats pizza from a plate?” I scoff. “Get that box over here,” I tell her, sitting at the table and moving a stack of magazines to one side to make room.

She joins me, and I take a slice, fighting off Harry’s hands trying to grab it as I take a bite. Sofia laughs as she quickly wipes away the tear rolling down her cheek.

“The first day back was hard?” I guess, and she nods, swiping a tear from the other eye. “It’s been a year, and I’m sure leaving Harry was difficult.” She bursts into tears, sobbing into her hands. I slide my chair closer, resting a hand on her back and rubbing circles while she takes a minute.

Harry pats her head, causing her to laugh some more before she sits back, wiping her face. “It was hard,” she confesses, “and I feel out of my depth.”

“It was your first day, Sofia. Cut yourself some slack.” I close the pizza box. “How about you get this one to bed and we can eat pizza after. You can tell me all about it.” She nods gratefully, and I hand Harry over.

Once she’s gone upstairs, I stand and look around the kitchen. First things first. Wash the dishes.

Zoe

“What do you mean it hasn’t arrived?” I demand, looking around the boxes frantically.

One of my top influencers is arriving any minute and she specifically requested a

diamond-encrusted microphone to give her arrival speech.

Not real diamonds, of course, but let me tell you, it was hard to find a pink diamanté microphone just the same.

I shake random boxes, eventually feeling heaviness in one and sighing with relief as I retrieve the microphone and hand it over to my runner just as the Rolls Royce stops outside. I breathe a sigh of relief and stand off to one side as guests gather at the entrance to hear my client's speech.

I take out my mobile and fire off a quick message to Sofia.

Me: Hope your first day back was fabulous and Harry enjoyed nursery. Xx

Then I send another to Ric.

Me: I'll call round later if you're free? x

We're both so busy with work, it's been hard to meet up at all lately.

Ric: Okay. I'll wait up x

I smile, tucking my phone away. One more day and I can begin to look him in the eye again, because hiding this pregnancy has been a nightmare.

I found out three weeks ago, discovering I was almost four weeks.

There was no question in my mind, I knew I was going to terminate, but the guilt is eating me alive because I actually like Ric, and doing this without his input feels wrong.

But it's the right decision for me, and what he doesn't know can't hurt him.

The gathering goes inside, and I follow. This time tomorrow, it'll all be over with.

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Sofia

I take a bite of my pizza slice and close my eyes in delight. Nothing beats a gooey, cheesy slice when you're hungry. "So, you didn't enjoy your first day back?" asks Ric.

"You really didn't need to wash the dishes," I tell him. "It was next on my list."

"But now you can eat in peace and not worry. It really isn't a problem."

"First day back was different."

"Different good or different bad?"

I sigh, dropping the slice in the box. "I've only been off for twelve months and it feels like the entire place has changed." I take a drink of water. "I mean, it has changed . . . a lot. I don't think I like that."

"It's a big thing to go back after such a long time off, but I reckon the changes won't feel so bad once you settle."

I nod in agreement. "I daren't call anyone he or she for fear of offending them."

Ric grins. "It's a sign of the times for sure. Imagine nine hundred teenagers all feeling the pressures of it. I stick to names, it's easier."

"I don't know anyone's name," I mutter.

“But you will, Sofia. It’s like anything new—you just have to find your feet.”

“And Harry was distraught when I returned to collect him. The playroom leader said he’d been unsettled all day.”

“Again, it’s new for him too.”

“I had to cut my hair to escape his clutches this morning.” I stare, waiting for her to laugh, and when she doesn’t, my eyes take in the tuft of hair poking out from the rest. She pats it down again, and I smile, fighting the urge to laugh.

“You can laugh,” she says, shrugging. “I would if it wasn’t me being so pathetic. ”

I place my hand over hers. “I don’t see you as pathetic at all. I see a mother who is struggling to find her feet in the next stage of motherhood. But you will. I promise.”

The following day, I set my alarm an extra thirty minutes early.

I find a cute soft pink trouser suit, which I don’t put on until Harry is fed and ready.

I leave my hair down to hide the hideous chunk I cut yesterday, promising myself that if I can just get through this week, I’ll treat myself to a new haircut.

We get to nursery ten minutes early, and I sit with Harry, reading a book before I hand him over to the room leader. He seems more settled and even offers me a watery smile as I leave.

I glide into the office with five minutes to spare, relaxing as I dump my bag on my desk.

A girl who looks around eighteen bounds over with a huge smile and thrusts a device

in my hand. “It’s your music day. Pick anything.”

I stare at the iPad. “Erm, I’d rather skip my day until I settle in.”

Her smile fades like I’ve punched her puppy. “You have to choose. It’s your day.”

I sigh, glancing at the streams of music presented to me. “I’m really not good at this.”

“You can choose anything you like. No judgement.”

I glance at her. “Are you sure?”

“Absolutely.”

I sigh again, tapping the search box and typing ‘90’s R n’ B’. I smile, handing it back, and she rushes off. Minutes later, the sounds of Ashanti fill the space, and I smile wider. Maybe this isn’t so bad after all.

It’s almost lunch when I print off an article I’ve written at Dexter’s request about a small author whose book has been picked to be the next big film.

I tap on his office door and enter, freezing when I see the girl who forced me to choose the music selection mounting him like a horny dog.

“Oh,” I say, turning my back on the pair so they can compose themselves.

“You’re supposed to wait until I say enter,” Dexter barks, and I hear the rustle of clothes being straightened.

“Sorry, it’s habit. My old boss was relaxed about entering her office.”

“And she isn’t here anymore,” he spits.

The girl rushes past me to leave, and I finally turn to face Dexter, who looks more than annoyed. “I finished the article,” I tell him, placing it on his desk.

He snatches it up, and I back out. “Wait,” he says firmly, and I stop by the door.

“This is no good.” He slides it back to me.

I frown. “You’ve hardly read it.”

“I’ve seen enough to know it won’t make print.”

“But why?”

He sighs heavily, turning the article back to face him and running his eyes over it. “It’s boring.”

“Boring?”

“Yes. It’s quite clear a . . .” He looks me up and down. “Thirty-something wrote it.”

I scoff at his rudeness. “Thirty-two,” I snap. “Hardly a dinosaur.”

“Yet you chose music from the nineteen hundreds.”

“Late nineteen hundreds,” I correct, “and she said I could have what I wanted . . . no judgement .”

He holds his hands up. “Hey, I’m not judging. I’m just saying that we’re a little more up-to-date these days. Have you even read the book?”

“Of course I haven’t, I only came back yesterday. If that was a requirement, you shouldn’t have given it to me.”

He stares back at the article. “So, how do you know it was dark and gritty in places while still filling the urges of thousands of housewives?”

I blush at my words. I guess it does sound a little cringe. “I read the reviews.”

“We can’t trust reviews, Sofia.”

I shrug. “It’s how we always used to do it.”

“Like I said, things have changed.” He opens his laptop. “Look, I’ll take what you’ve written to Jessie and let her work her magic. She’s read the book. I’ll send you a less complicated task.”

I frown. “I don’t need simple tasks. I can write an article. But if I need to read the books first, give me more time.”

“I’ve emailed you a list of things to do.” He slams his laptop shut. “And by the way, I forgot to mention that we’re less formal these days.” He points to my outfit. “You can leave the powder pink suits at home.”

I swallow the retort on the tip of my tongue and leave the office.

Wanker.

Eric

Samantha Hague has been a royal pain in my backside since the day she started in year nine.

She joined halfway through the year, which didn't help things, and she's struggled to make friends, like a lot of girls her age.

Because even when they do find a group, arguments soon ensue, which is why I'm sitting in my office with her right now while she rants and rages.

She paces angrily, her fists balled and her face red, while she reels off the names of all the kids she hates in this school, giving me reasons for each one.

"Have you got many friends, sir?" she eventually asks.

I frown. "Yeah."

"Really?" she asks, looking surprised.

"This isn't about me," I tell her.

She stops pacing. "You're alright, sir. I guess."

I smile. "Coming from you, Samantha, it's a compliment. Now, if you've finished your rant and you're feeling calmer, can you head back to Spanish?"

Meg appears in the doorway, and Samantha grins. "Oh, I see, you need some alone time with Mrs. Headford." She skips out the room.

"That's a rumour starting," says Meg.

"It could be worse—they could say I was shagging Cora from the art department."

Meg laughs. "Cora is lovely."

“And at least ninety. I swear she was here when the building was first built.” I lean back in my chair. “What can I do for you?”

“It’s nothing to do with work,” she says, stepping farther in. “Are things okay with Zoe?”

“I think so, why?” Her words cause alarm bells ringing. It’s not often Meg asks me about Zoe because she tries not to involve herself.

“She’s acting odd. I can’t put my finger on it, and I was wondering if you’d noticed too.”

I shake my head. “Actually, it’s probably Sofia you should be worried about.” And then I wince, wondering if I should have said anything.

“Oh god, why?” she asks, taking a seat.

“I called round last night because Harry was screaming the house down. I think she’s really struggling at the moment. She could probably use a friend.”

She smiles slightly. “Seems she’s made one if you’re calling round to check on her.”

I laugh. “Only because her other neighbour commented on Harry crying all the time. I was trying damage limitation by showing him she’s got friends.”

Meg looks hurt. “She does have friends, but when we offer to go over to see her, she arranges to meet somewhere else.”

“Yeah, I think I know why. Maybe call round unannounced?”

Zoe

I clamp my mobile between my shoulder and ear while I unlock the front door to my apartment. “Can we do it tomorrow instead?” I ask.

“No, Ric seems to think she’s struggling.”

“How does he know so much?”

“He popped in to see her last night.”

I frown. He cancelled seeing me last night. “Oh. He never said.”

“I don’t think it was planned or anything. But anyway, can you meet me or not?”

I groan, looking around my nice, clean apartment. I love staying home when the cleaners have been and everything feels fresh. “Fine,” I say on a sigh. “Let me change and I’ll head over.”

I disconnect and hiss when a sharp pain rips through me. I was told to expect heavy bleeding and pain, and I should be resting, but Meg’s already asking me a hundred and one questions, and I don’t want to give her something else to quiz me about.

I change into joggers and a vest then pull my hair into a ponytail and slip a cap on. I feel like crap and look just as bad, and the last thing I want is to bump into anyone I know.

By the time I get to Sofia’s, Meg is already there, sitting in her car. I knock on the window, and she jumps a mile before getting out “Shit, you scared me,” she mutters. Then she looks me up and down. “Okay, who are you and what have you done with Zoe?”

I roll my eyes. “I felt like wearing my comfies.”

“You never wear comfies outside. In fact, I didn’t even think you owned comfies.” She peeks under my cap. “And you’re pale. Have you even got makeup on?”

“Can we concentrate on Sofia, please?” I snap, heading towards her house with Meg following.

I knock on the door, and the familiar sound of Harry screaming begins. “Great. Now, we’ve set him off,” I hiss.

The door swings open and Sofia stares back wide-eyed. “What are you doing here?”

“We wanted to see how you are,” says Meg, smiling brightly.

Sofia scowls. “Are you ill?” she asks me.

I sigh impatiently. “Can we come in or not?”

“Did Eric put you up to this?” she asks, her eyes narrowing with suspicion.

“For goodness sake, Sofia,” I mutter, stepping inside and giving her no choice but to let us in. I freeze as I scan the mess in the living room.

“I was just about to clean up,” she mutters.

Harry is in his highchair covered in food and screaming for attention. Meg goes over, grabbing a discarded pack of wipes and cleaning him up before lifting him from the chair. She gives me a wary look before gently asking, “Why didn’t you call us, Sof? We would have come to help.”

“I’m fine,” she says, her voice high-pitched and wobbly. “Everything is fine.” And then she bursts into tears.

I wrap my arms around her. “It’s clearly not fine at all.”

“It’s just a lot,” she snuffles, “with work and Harry. The house is last on my list.”

“How is work?” I ask.

“Terrible. My new boss hates me. Everyone else is half my age, and I don’t know who the fuck is straight, gay, or pansexual. There’s so much to take in,” she wails.

I arch a brow. “Why do you need to know their sexual orientation?”

She shrugs. “I don’t know, but they all seem to think it’s important.”

I give a small laugh. “Okay, take a breath and start at the beginning.”

“Dexter, my new boss, hates me. He keeps referring to me as Gen Y. I don’t even know if that’s bad.”

I stifle another giggle and sit down, pulling her beside me. “It’s how the Gen Z refer to our age,” I say. “We’re Gen Y because we were born eighties to nineties. Gen Z is the younger generation, the one’s you’re probably working with.”

“I keep getting corrected for using he and she,” she adds.

“Yeah, Gen Z is particularly anal about that. They just want you to accept and respect their pronouns.”

“Dexter said my article was shite.”

Meg sits too, gently patting Harry’s back as he snuggles into her neck. “Dexter sounds like a big twat.”

“He really is,” mutters Sofia sadly. “He wants me to go on a course to ‘update’ my knowledge,” she says, using air quotes. “I’ve been writing articles since I was sixteen years old.”

“Hey, if he’s paying for this course, take it,” I say. “You can never have enough knowledge.” I turn her face to me. “What did you do to your hair?”

She automatically brushes down a sticking up piece, but it springs back up. “Harry was holding onto it when I was running late, so I just cut it. I think it was a mini breakdown.”

I gasp. “We need to sort that,” I say, shaking my head. “You can’t go out like that.”

“Let me take care of bath time,” offers Meg.

“Great. I’ll call my stylist,” I say, standing and ignoring the pain as I pull out my mobile.

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Sofia

I stare at my reflection in the mirror, hardly believing it's me. Zoe forced her stylist into seeing me right away, and I am so glad she did because I look amazing.

"Thank you," I whisper with tears glimmering in my eyes. "I don't know what to say."

"My darling, you do not need to thank me. It was a pleasure to see such an amazing transformation," he says, kissing my cheek.

Zoe insists on paying and then she drives me home. I'm so stunned, I have no words, so we drive in complete silence. And then once we get inside, I'm even more amazed to see the place sparkling. Meg turns to me, arching a brow in surprise.

"You cleaned up," I mutter.

"And Harry is in bed fast asleep," Meg tells me. "I even managed to get some pasta on for dinner."

"That's so kind," I whisper as tears roll down my cheek again.

Zoe throws her arm around me. "No more tears."

"You look amazing," says Meg, stepping closer to look at my new hair.

"Ches suggested framing her face and giving her some shape," Zoe explains. "And

then he ran some highlights through it. I can't believe how different she looks."

"We need to celebrate this weekend," says Meg, and Zoe nods in approval then winces and bends at the waist.

"Okay," I say firmly, "that's about the tenth time I've seen you in pain. What's wrong?"

"Just cramps," Zoe mutters, shrugging.

"Bullshit," says Meg. "You were on two weeks ago."

"Why are you tracking my cycle?" she demands.

I laugh because Meg's tracked Zoe's cycle for years, so we'd know when she's being a cow or when it's hormonal.

Zoe sighs, her face suddenly serious. "I don't suppose it would hurt to tell you now, but you can't tell anyone. Not even Hugo," she warns, and we both agree.

"I had a termination."

I exchange a surprised look with Meg. "You did what?" I ask.

"It's not a big deal," she mutters then sighs, scrubbing her hands over her tired face.

"It is a big deal, I know it is, but it's for the best."

"You didn't even talk to us first," states Meg.

"Well, some things are best left alone," she says with another shrug,

“Does Ric know?” I ask.

“God, no, and he can’t ever know.”

“Zoe, this is huge, and you haven’t spoken to anyone about it,” I say, looking at Meg, who’s nodding in agreement.

“I have. I spoke to medical professionals who know more about all this than you.” I arch a brow, and she sighs. “Sorry, I don’t mean to snap. I’m tired and in pain.”

“How long have you known?”

“A few weeks,” she admits. “But the second I found out, I knew I didn’t want it. You know I don’t want kids. It was a mistake, a slip-up that won’t happen again.”

“A slip-up how?” Meg asks.

“I forgot to pick up my prescription for the pill so was late taking it for about a week. It was stupid, and I thought I’d be safe. I avoided Ric all week, but then we bumped into one another on a night out and one thing led to another.”

“Ric wants kids,” I mutter.

Zoe scowls my way. “So, now, you’re best friends with my boyfriend?”

“Oh, he is your boyfriend?” I snap. “Because you never seem sure.”

“Hey,” says Meg, “let’s not argue. Now is not the time. Zoe, if you’re okay, that’s all that matters.”

I relent, taking Zoe’s hand. “She’s right. It’s your choice. Sorry.”

“I know Ric wants children one day, but not yet and probably not with me. We’re still very new to this relationship thing, and neither of us are ready.

If I’d have told him, he would have felt obliged to talk me into it, and then I’d have resented him.

I’m just not strong enough to be a mum,” she says. “I’m not like you two.”

“I’m not strong,” I mutter. “Look at the state this place was in when you arrived. I’m totally winging it.”

“All parents are,” says Meg. “None of us know what to do, but we do our best and that’s all that matters.

What we really need to do is talk more. Sofia, you should’ve called and said you needed help.

You’re not on your own in this journey. And Zoe, you should’ve trusted us to tell us this huge thing.

We would’ve supported you, and I could have come with you. ”

“I guess we’re all so busy doing life, we’ve let things slip,” I say.

“From now on, we talk more,” says Zoe.

“Agreed,” I reply.

The next day, I go into the office feeling better.

I love my hair, and it’s still holding the bounce that Chas curled into it last night.

I opted for a summer dress with white trainers, which Zoe approved for me.

And as I pass Dexter, he follows me with his eyes, and I think I see a hint of approval there, boosting my confidence further.

Think like a boss bitch . That's what Zoe drummed into me last night.

"Dexter," I say casually, "a word." I head for his office, and he joins me seconds later, his eyes travelling up my body.

"I rewrote the article," I say, handing him a fresh copy.

When I told the girls about my article, Meg informed me she'd read the book and filled me in.

"And this time, read it properly before giving me your feedback." I turn on my heel and march away, my entire body tingling with excitement.

A few minutes later, Dexter approaches my desk, perching on the edge. "I love it."

I glance up in surprise. "Really?"

"Yeah. It's perfect. How did you read the book so fast?"

I smile. "So, it'll get published?"

He nods. "Next issue." He starts to walk away before turning back. "Everyone's going for drinks Friday night. You should come."

Eric

I do a double take when I spot Sofia in her back garden. Heading into my own, I look over the fence. “You did your hair,” I say, and she spins to face me.

“You made me jump,” she says, sounding breathless. She scoops Harry up from his sand table and moves closer. “You told the girls on me,” she adds accusingly but then smiles. “Thank you for looking out for me. Things feel better now I’ve spoken to them about my struggles.”

I rest my arms on the fence, hesitating just a beat too long. “Maybe . . . we could grab some dinner?” The words are out before I can second-guess myself, so I pretend like I’m cool about it.

“Dinner?”

“If you haven’t eaten?” She shakes her head. “Great. I know a little place that’s child-friendly.”

We take my car, and I head for a restaurant by the lake. It’s nice this time of year and one of my favourites, but Zoe hates it because of the number of kids who come for the free ice cream station.

We opt for a table outside to make the most of the sunshine, and Harry doesn’t fuss when she pops him in the highchair because he’s too busy watching the boats on the lake.

There’s something different about Sofia. She looks happier and more relaxed as she scans the menu. “My treat,” I tell her.

“No, don’t be silly. I should be treating you for helping.”

“My dad would have a heart attack if I told him I’d invited you for a meal and didn’t

pay. Honestly, let me or I'll feel sick with guilt."

She laughs, and the sound warms my heart. "Okay, thank you."

We order, and once the drinks arrive, I sink back into my seat. "I love the hair," I say, meaning it.

"Zoe's idea," she replies, a small smile playing at her lips. Guilt twists low in my stomach—I'm not even sure why, but it's there, heavy and persistent. "She practically dragged her stylist out to see me last night. He worked his magic."

"Sounds like Zoe," I say with a quiet laugh.

Sofia glances away, her smile fading. "Yeah. She's a really good friend."

The pang sharpens. I can't tell if she feels it too, or if she's gently reminding me where the lines are now. "You seem different," I offer after a beat. "Happier?"

She smiles wider. "Yah know what, I feel happier. And Harry must sense it because he hasn't screamed once this afternoon."

"That's great, Sofia. I'm really pleased for you."

"And work is getting better. You were right—it was first day nerves. I even impressed Dexter today."

"Dexter?" I echo, the name catching in my throat. There it is, a sharp, unwelcome twist of jealousy. I straighten in my seat, forcing myself to breathe. I can't be jealous. I have no right to be. My heart pounds as her voice fades into background noise and the realisation crashes over me.

I can't like Sofia.

She's my girlfriend's best friend.

"And he even invited me for drinks on Friday," she says as I tune back in.

"Huh?"

"Are you okay, Ric? You look worried."

I shake my head. "I'm good. Sorry. You were saying?"

"Dexter, my boss, he invited me for drinks."

"Are you going?"

"I think so. I'm supposed to be meeting Zoe and Meg anyway, so I've asked my parents to have Harry overnight."

"It's probably not a smart move to date your boss, Sofia," I mutter, and she narrows her eyes.

"Who said anything about dating?"

"If you meet him for drinks, he might get the wrong impression."

"Thanks for your concern," she says, clearly confused, as am I. This is not the reaction I should be having. "But it's a work thing. It won't be just the two of us."

Our food arrives, and I use it as a way to get my shit together. I watch as she breaks some chicken up for Harry and blows on it.

“Does Harry see his dad?” I ask.

She glances up. “I don’t know his dad,” she replies, and it surprises me, which must show on my face because she breaks into laughter.

“I love saying that line just to see the shock.” She gives Harry some chicken, and he crams his fist into his mouth.

“I chose an unconventional way to have Harry,” she continues. “Artificial insemination.”

I raise my brows in surprise. “Why?” Then I groan. “Sorry, I’m being rude.”

“It’s fine, Ric,” she says, placing her hand over mine. I pull it back like she’s burned me, ignoring the tingles her touch leaves, and her frown deepens. “Are you okay? You’re acting odd.”

“Sorry, I’ve got work on my mind,” I lie.

“I’m here to listen if you need to talk,” she offers, and my heart swells a little more. She’s going through the shit at the minute, yet she still offers to listen to my worries.

“It’s fine,” I tell her.

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“I was panicking, if I’m honest,” she says. “I was getting to thirty and there was no sign of Mr. Right, so I thought, fuck it, why am I waiting. I knew I wanted children, so I paid privately and started a family myself.”

“Wow. That’s brave.”

“Or stupid,” she says with a laugh. “It was harder than I thought, but I was so set on proving I could do it, I forgot to ask for help. My parents were horrified and didn’t speak to me for the entire pregnancy.

They’ve only just started to come around to the idea.

Honestly, I think it would have been easier to say his father just didn’t want to know.
”

“Are your parents old fashioned?”

She nods. “They just want the best for me, but I think I shattered their image of a big white wedding and three kids.”

“I know the feeling. I love my parents, they’re amazing, but they don’t hide the fact they want more grandchildren.”

Her smile fades a little. “Do you want children?”

I nod. “Yeah. A few.”

“Does Zoe know?”

“We haven’t talked about it, but I think it’s pretty obvious I want them. And before you say it, I know she doesn’t.” I laugh, shrugging. “But if we work out, maybe she’ll change her mind.”

Sofia picks at the chicken, offering some more to Harry. “You two are serious then?”

I think over her words. “I don’t think we intended to be. It wasn’t the most conventional start to a relationship, but it’s going in the right direction.”

“Um, I heard about that. Isn’t it weird?”

“A little, but Jimmy doesn’t care, and he doesn’t make it awkward.

” We never set out to have a threesome, and it’s not something Jimmy and I have done since we were in college.

But we were all drunk at a New Year’s Eve party and somehow ended up in bed.

I’d called Zoe after to check on her, and we met for drinks. From then on, we never looked back.

“I couldn’t look him in the face again,” she admits.

“Yeah, I guess it was weird at the first family event.”

“How did you . . .” She trails off, her cheeks red with embarrassment. “Yah know, how did it come about?”

I laugh, and she blushes deeper. “We were drunk. Admittedly, it was a mistake that

I'd never repeat, but I wasn't thinking straight."

"I've never done anything like that." She covers her face, giggling, and I love the sound. "Oh god, why are we talking about this?"

"A threesome?" I ask, glancing at Harry, who is happily chomping on his fingers.

"I'm not very experienced." She takes a drink. "Ignore me. I don't know what's come over me. And why am I saying these things to you?" She laughs harder. "I think this glass of wine's gone to my head."

"What about relationships?" I ask.

"They never work out for me. I've never had a long-term. The longest was a month."

"A month?"

"I know . . . I don't know why I turn men off."

"I'm sure you don't. Maybe it's the type of men you're going for?"

"Probably. They always turn out to be idiots. Zoe is always trying to sign me up to dating sites."

"And you're not keen?"

"I just don't have the time right now. What about you? Have you had many relationships?"

I shake my head. "Not really. A few that lasted months. I feel like I want to settle down now, though. All my brothers seem to be, except Jimmy. I'm ready."

She smiles again. "Maybe I'll date Jimmy. That would be weird, wouldn't it? Meg and Hugo, you and Zoe, and me and Jimmy."

I give a half-laugh, her words bothering me more than I care to admit. "Don't tell Zoe that, she'll set you up," I say, meaning it as a warning.

Zoe

I sit on the doorstep, checking my watch. I arranged to be here for six, and it's now six-thirty and there's no sign of Ric.

When his car finally pulls up ten minutes later, I stand, arching a brow as Sofia climbs out. "You okay?" I ask, rushing over, wondering if there was some kind of emergency with Harry.

Ric gets out, wincing. "Crap, sorry, I forgot," he tells me before opening the back door and getting Harry out. He hands him to Sofia. "We went for dinner," he adds.

"Dinner?" I repeat.

"Is that weird?" asks Sofia, looking worried.

"Of course not," I say, shaking my head a little too fast. "You're neighbours." I frown, "Although I never go out with my neighbours."

"Oh god, you think it's weird," Sofia cries.

I feel guilty and take her hand. She's had a hard time of it, and Ric is just nice. "Of course, it's not. Don't be silly. You're my best friend."

"I'll leave you two to it," she says, kissing my cheek. "Thanks, Ric." And she heads

inside.

I follow Ric into his house, unsure if I'm annoyed or not. He goes through to the kitchen. "Wine?"

"No," I utter. I can't drink while on the pain medication.

"Are you pissed I'm late?" I shake my head. "Are you annoyed I took Sofia out for dinner?"

"Not annoyed," I say, shrugging, and he turns to me.

"I feel bad for her, Zoe. She was in the garden, we got chatting, and it slipped out. If it makes you uncomfortable, I won't offer again."

I feel like a bitch, so I shake my head, pushing up on my tiptoes and placing a kiss on his cheek. "No, it's fine. You're sweet to offer."

"You didn't tell me she had Harry through artificial insemination," he says, grabbing the kettle and filling it with water.

"It's not something that came up," I reply.

"Weird, though, isn't it?"

I shrug. "She was ready and there was no man in her life. I get why she did it. And these days, women are so independent, it's becoming the norm."

He stands before me, running his hands through my hair then resting them loosely either side of my face. "I'm sorry I was late. We got talking and time ran away."

I smile. "It's fine. Honestly. Thank you for being so kind to her."

The next morning, I arrive ten minutes late for breakfast with the girls. Sofia and Meg are already deep in conversation as I shrug from my jacket and sit down. "I ordered for you," Meg says, nodding at the espresso. I sip it gratefully. "How come you're late?" she asks.

"Only ten minutes," I argue.

"You don't even have kids, Zo, yet you always manage to be late."

I grin. "Well, Ric insisted on making me breakfast to make up for last night."

"Last night?" asks Meg, and Sofia winces.

"Yeah, he took Sofia for dinner and forgot he was meeting me," I say, shrugging.

Meg's eyes go to Sofia, and I don't miss the quizzical look which Sofia ignores. "Sorry about that again," she mutters.

"Relax. That's what I get for having such a nice boyfriend."

"Oh, so now you're labelling it?" asks Meg, laughing. I'm not sure why I've been so reluctant so far, but I finally feel ready.

"What do you mean?" Sofia asks, and I glance her way. "About Ric just being nice," she adds. "Has he said something?"

I frown. "No. I just mean he's good to take you to dinner, like he knows you've been down."

“Like I’m a charity case?”

I glance to Meg for backup, but she looks just as confused as me. “No, that’s not what I meant.”

“It sounded like you meant Ric’s just being nice because he feels sorry for me.”

I shrug, “I guess . . . I mean, he might . . .”

“That’s not what she means,” Meg cuts in, glaring at me for confirmation.

“Yah know, it wouldn’t hurt to start dating again,” I tell her. It’s not the first time I’ve raised it, but if she had her own boyfriend, perhaps mine wouldn’t feel the need to keep her company.

“Actually, I have a date after work,” Sofia snaps, and I arch my brows in surprise.

“That’s great.”

“Yeah, Sofia, that’s amazing,” Meg agrees. “Who with? Do we know him?”

She shakes her head. “Dexter.”

“Your boss?” I ask, a laugh almost escaping me.

Her cheeks colour slightly. “Yes. And?”

“Well, it’s just you hated him on Monday. You said he was a dick.”

“I can change my mind, can’t I?”

“Of course.”

“He asked me for drinks, and I said yes.”

“Wait, I thought we were meeting tonight?” Meg asks.

“I’ll join you when I’m done,” says Sofia, checking her watch. She pushes to her feet.

“I have to get to work. I’ll text you later to see where you are.”

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Sofia

Shit. Shit. Bollocksing shit. Why did I just lie to my best friends? They don't judge me for my non-existent dating life. In fact, they're the only ones who never, ever judge me for anything. And now, I'm lying to them to, what, make myself look better?

I get into the office, glancing at my reflection as I enter the lift.

I've borrowed more of Zoe's clothes to try and fit in, and today, I opted for a short tennis skirt with a knitted V-neck sweater.

It's giving cute and definitely not mumsy.

When I get paid at the end of the month, she's vowed to take me shopping so I can get my own clothes.

Dexter is perched on my desk, and he looks up as I approach.

His smile is wide, and I blush as his eyes roam up and down my body.

I dump my bag and sit in my chair. "This is the second time you've been waiting," I say with a smile.

"People will start to talk." I seem to have grown a second personality, one for work and the other for home.

And in work mode, I'm flirty and dangerous, completely the opposite to my mum life.

He grins and leans closer. "Maybe I want them to." He slides today's magazine edition towards me, and I glance down at my article on the second page.

"Oh my god, it made second page?" I ask, my smile so wide, it hurts my face.

"I told you it was good."

"Thank you," I say as my eyes scan the article.

"Keep it up and maybe you'll make the centrefold." He gives me a wink then heads off towards his office, turning back before going inside and asking, "Are you coming for drinks after work?" A few of the others look up, and I feel myself sitting taller. I nod, and he grins. "Good."

At the next desk, Amelia smiles awkwardly. She's made it clear she can't stand me, trying to avoid all conversation with me, but this time, she leans closer. "I love the skirt," she says.

"Thanks."

"There's some cute trainers in the stock cupboard that'd look great."

"Stock cupboard?"

She rolls her eyes, and I feel myself shrink back. "Hasn't anyone shown you?" I shake my head, and she pushes to stand. "Follow me."

We head out the office and down the corridor to a room beside the kitchen.

She puts a code into the keypad and the door opens to reveal shelves full of clothes and shoes.

“We get sent this stuff to review,” she says, “and we never send it back. But these,” she says, grabbing a pair of Fendi trainers in soft pink and cream, “would look so cute on you.”

I stare wide-eyed. “Are we allowed to wear them?”

“Wear them?” she asks, laughing. “Take them, they’re yours.” And she thrusts them my way.

“Maybe I should check with Dexter?”

She rolls her eyes in that way that makes me feel stupid. “Dex doesn’t care, trust me. He said we can help ourselves to it. Besides, these have been here for weeks.” She rummages around on a shelf and retrieves a cute pink bag. “And this would finish the outfit.”

I stare longingly at the Fendi bag and shake my head. “No, I couldn’t possibly.”

“Stop being so . . . straitlaced. Ask anyone in the office, they’ll tell you the same.”

“I just think Dexter should okay it.”

She crosses her arms and gives me a mean girl look. “I’m in charge of fashion around here and I’m okaying it. Are you saying you don’t think I have the authority?”

I shake my head. “No, not at all.”

“Then take the damn bag and trainers. They’re a gift.” She hustles me from the room

and heads back to her desk.

I go back to mine, and Lula, one of Amelia's crew, grins. "You're so right, Me-me," she coos, "Those shoes will look fantastic on her."

I smile, sitting at my desk.

"She doesn't think so," Amelia mutters coldly.

"That's not what I meant," I add quickly. "I'm so grateful."

Amelia taps her pen on her lip. "You never said thank you."

I feel the blush creeping across my chest. "Oh god, I didn't. Thank you so much."

"Put them on. They'll look great," adds Noah, another of her crew members. I noticed from day one these three in particular are close. They even make their coffees at the same time.

I change my trainers. She's right, they look amazing, and all three of them say so as I put Zoe's trainers in my bag.

By four o' clock, we're ushered from the office and down the road to the nearest wine bar. I put a quick call into my mum to check on Harry, and she tells me he's a superstar, which helps me to relax.

When I go inside after the others, Dexter passes me a glass of Champagne. "Thanks."

"You deserve it."

He directs me to the large table occupied by some of the other workers, and we perch

on two stools at the end. “So, how did you find your first week?” he asks.

“Good,” I say with a genuine smile. “It was hard at the start, but I’ve fallen into a good routine. And everyone seems . . . friendly.”

He nods. “I’ve got some amazing staff.”

“How long have you worked in journalism?”

“Ten years,” he says proudly. “I started as a junior at my father’s newspaper and progressed to reporter, but it wasn’t for me. I hated chasing the stories and wanted something more relaxed. I saw an ad for an article writer about five years ago for a men’s magazine and I never looked back.”

“You’re a writer rather than a journalist?” I ask, and he nods.

“I’ve always loved writing since I was a child.”

“Me too.”

“And how did you get into it?” he asks.

“Honestly, I have no idea,” I say with a laugh.

“I didn’t plan on it, but my parents pushed me to get a job after school, so I did an apprenticeship for a health magazine.

Then I moved to a travel magazine, which is where I met my old boss.

She was at a networking thing, and we got talking and she mentioned an opening here, so I applied. ”

“You got on well with her,” he says, nodding. “She was very insistent we keep you on.”

“She was?” I ask with a fond smile.

“I’m glad we listened,” he adds, winking. “You mentioned you have kids?”

“Just one. Harry.”

“Nice. How old?”

“He’s almost one.”

“Cute.”

“Do you have kids?”

He scoffs like the thought is ridiculous. “No. No kids. I love my life too much. What does your partner think of your second page article?”

I smirk. “I’m also single.”

He takes a sip of Champagne. “Interesting.”

Eric

Whenever we get the chance, my brothers and I meet at our local bar. It’s been the same ever since we turned eighteen, a ritual none of us can break.

I take a sip of my pint, zoning out as Jimmy and Hugo argue over who supports the best rugby team. Seb shifts closer. “Are you okay?” he asks, and I nod. “You’re too

quiet, and usually when that happens, it's because you're worrying."

I roll my eyes. Our youngest brother is so in tune, he can read a person at a glance.

"I'm fine."

"Things with Zoe all good?"

I laugh. "Yes, Seb, we're fine."

He winces. "Just fine?"

"Good then," I say a little more impatiently.

"I knew it was something to do with her."

"What's up?" asks Hugo.

"Ric's having woman problems," says Seb.

"I am not," I snap.

"Shit, things not good with you and Zoe?" Hugo asks.

"Knew it wouldn't last," adds Jimmy, laughing, "You both owe me a tenner."

My frown deepens. "You're betting on my relationship?"

"Jimmy called it, and you know we can't turn down a chance to get a tenner from him," says Hugo with a shrug.

"For your information, Zoe and I are good."

“So, what’s wrong?” Seb pushes.

I groan. “I might like someone else.” They all stare wide-eyed, waiting for me to continue. “I’m not telling you anything else in case you start betting again.”

“Does she, or he , know?” asks Seb.

“No, she doesn’t,” I say, making it clear.

“Do you think she feels the same way?” asks Hugo.

“No,” I mutter, shaking my head. “I don’t know. I haven’t thought about it.” Which is a total lie because Sofia’s all I’ve thought about since we had dinner last night.

“Tell her,” says Jimmy.

“I can’t.”

“If she feels the same, you can dump Zoe.”

“That’s a shit thing to do,” says Seb, hitting Jimmy over the head. “But you should end things with Zoe. You clearly don’t like her that much.”

“I do,” I say defensively. I’ve thought about that a lot too, and Zoe is perfect for me. Not too full on and not too needy. It’s probably why we’ve lasted a few months.

“If you did, you wouldn’t have looked at this other woman,” he says.

“Don’t talk shit,” says Jimmy. “He can like more than one woman. He isn’t married.”

“The thing is,” I begin carefully, “Zoe knows her, so I can’t do that to either of them.

Just forget it,” I say. “It’s nothing, probably just an urge.”

“An urge?” Seb repeats.

“Yeah, yah know, an itch I want to scratch. There’s nothing in it, just sex, and I can’t risk what I have with Zoe for a quick shag.”

“Makes sense,” he mutters, nodding his approval. He settled young with his wife, Katie, and he’s always loved her. He’s never played the field or gone elsewhere. He’s all about the happy, married life.

“I think you should put yourself first,” Jimmy advises.

“And that’s why you’re still single,” says Seb. “Ignore him. You’ve got a good thing with Zoe. Don’t risk it.”

“Are we just gonna ignore the fact that they know one another?” asks Hugo, grinning. “Which means we might know her.”

I roll my eyes. “Because you know all of Zoe’s friends?”

His eyes narrow. “So, this woman is a friend of Zoe’s.”

I groan. I’ve already said way too much, and I push to stand while draining the last of my pint. “Don’t go,” says Jimmy. “We need to know.”

“As much as I’d love to sit here and be strung up by you losers, I have places to be.”

Zoe

Meg checks her watch again. “She’s not usually late.”

“Maybe her date’s going well,” I suggest. I made sure Sofia dressed casual but nice, so she was ready for after-work drinks with her boss.

“Did she say where she was meeting him?”

“We can’t turn up,” I say firmly.

“But what if it’s not going well?” asks Meg, looking worried.

“She would’ve sent us a text message.”

“We don’t have to interrupt her, just check from a distance.”

I groan. “We can walk past the bar, but we’re not going in.”

Meg stands, smiling. “Okay, deal.”

We walk the five minutes it takes to get to the wine bar where Sofia told me she was going with her boss. Only as we approach, we spot Sofia with a group of people. “That’s weird. She said it was a date, didn’t she?” asks Meg.

I nod, equally as confused. “Let’s go before she sees us,” I say, turning around. “Maybe we got it wrong.”

We head back to the original bar we’d previously arranged to meet Sofia at, and it’s another half-hour before she shows up.

She’s smiling wide, which is great to see, and when she flops down in the chair at our table, she gives a happy sigh.

I exchange a grin with Meg. “About time,” I say, looking at my watch.

“Sorry about that. I was having such a nice time.”

“You could’ve stayed,” says Meg. “We wouldn’t have minded.”

“He had to get home,” she says, waving her hand dismissively.

“So, how did it go?” I ask.

“He’s nice. We chatted for ages.”

“And it was just you and him?” asks Meg, I give her a subtle kick under the table, because what does it matter if she was alone or with a group?

“Yeah,” says Sofia dreamily. Meg arches a brow in my direction, and I roll my eyes.

“I’m glad you had a good time,” I tell her. “Are you seeing him again?”

“We swapped numbers,” she says, standing. “I need a pee then I’ll get us a drink.”

Meg waits until she’s out of earshot. “Well?” she demands.

“Well, what?”

“Don’t you think it’s weird?”

“Maybe to her it felt like a date.”

“But why wouldn’t she just tell us it was drinks after work?”

I shrug. “I don’t know.”

“I’m just worried about her,” Meg admits. “She’s acting so out of character, and after all that stuff with Harry, I guess I’m extra worried.”

“Maybe she’s just getting her shit back on track,” I suggest. “I don’t think we need to worry.”

I watch Sofia as she carries a tray of drinks back to the table, and my eyes fall to her feet. Then I spot the handbag she dropped by the chair. As she sits, I point it out. “What’s with the bag and trainers?”

She lifts her foot to show us closer. “Aren’t they amazing?”

“They are,” I agree, “and super pricey.”

She waves her hand a second time. “They were from work. Apparently, brands send us samples, and we get to keep them.”

I frown. “Are you sure that’s how it works, because those trainers alone are a couple grand.”

“What?” screeches Meg, and I nod.

“Amelia said she was in charge of all that stuff being the fashion editor,” says Sofia with a shrug. “She practically begged me to take them.”

Something doesn’t sit right, and Meg must feel the same because she looks even more worried. “Maybe you should check though,” I say gently, “just to make sure.”

“Look, Amelia isn’t the kind of girl you check up on,” says Sofia, shaking her head. “Trust me, she’s the original mean girl type, and right now, she’s being nice to me, so I’m not questioning her.”

I take my drink and down half of it, wincing at the sweetness of the cocktail. “Just be careful,” I warn.

“Speaking of mean girls,” says Meg. “Ashley called me earlier to see if Dan had spoken to me today. Apparently, he wasn’t picking up her calls.”

“She’s got no shame,” I snap. “First, she steals your husband, and now, she wants to know his every move by asking you?”

“It’s my own fault,” says Meg. “When she gave birth, I was in the moment and stupidly said we should try to get along because our kids were now half-siblings.” She groans.

“It was a huge mistake because now she feels like she can call me to track Dan. I mean, seriously, I had enough of tracking him when I was married to him. Now, I don’t care where he is. It isn’t my problem.”

“Doesn’t Hugo mind?” asks Sofia.

The mention of Hugo’s name brings a smile to Meg’s lips. “He’s with me, and he thinks I should just tell her straight.”

“I agree with Hugo,” I say. “You need to set some boundaries.”

“How?” she asks. “I don’t want to cause any problems. She might make it harder for Dan to see Izzy.”

“If Dan lets that happen, then he’s a bigger prick than I thought,” I say. “Just start ignoring her calls. Maybe only answer if Izzy is staying with them?”

Meg nods in agreement. “You’re right. Maybe I’ll talk to Dan about it.”

“Isn’t Hugo out with his brothers tonight?” asks Sofia, changing the subject. Meg nods. “Why don’t we head over to meet them for a few?”

We’re all in agreement, so we head off to their local pub.

Hugo, Jimmy, and Seb are watching football on the large screen television. There’s no sign of Eric, and I’m disappointed, but I agree to have one drink, and then I decide to head off to his place to spend some time with him.

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Sofia

My head hurts. I groan when I move, trying to block out the stream of sunshine that's glowing through the gap in the curtains.

"Sof?" It's Meg calling my name, and I push to sit as she enters the bedroom. "Christ, you're not even up."

"What time is it?" I whisper, realising I need water.

She hands me a bottle, and I smile at her mindreading skills as I unscrew the cap and take a long drink. "It's almost eleven."

My eyes widen. I was supposed to pick Harry up an hour ago. "Shit." I grab my mobile phone and see two missed calls from my father. "They'll kill me."

"Relax. I'll go and grab Harry to save you the lecture. You get showered and be ready for when I get back." I frown, and she sighs heavily with impatience. "We're going to Charlotte and Harry's barbeque, remember?"

"Why am I going to Hugo's parents' barbeque?"

"Because you said you would last night when Hugo asked you."

By the time we arrive at the Chadwicks' place, my hangover is in full swing. I put Harry in his pushchair and follow Meg inside.

I like coming here. The few times I've been, they made me feel like part of their family, and I always leave here with a full heart .

. . and stomach, because Charlotte is a serious feeder.

But being around this family makes me realise what I've missed out on.

My parents were strict and old fashioned.

My mother wasn't loving or remotely maternal, which is why I vowed to do things differently with Harry.

We go through to the kitchen, where the large sliding doors are pushed fully open.

The back garden is a hive of laughter and chatter, instantly relaxing me as Charlotte approaches.

She wraps each of us in a hug before taking Izzy in her arms and then greeting Harry, who is babbling away in his pushchair.

The other thing about the Chadwicks is they love children.

"Get a drink," she instructs, pointing to the punch bowl on the side. I groan, shaking my head as Meg dives in.

"Charlotte's summer punch is famous," Meg tells me, sipping it and closing her eyes in delight. "Here, try a little."

"I don't think I can ever drink again," I say dramatically.

Hugo joins us, kissing Meg on the lips. He brings his gaze to me, smirking.

“Hangover?”

“A ridiculously bad one,” I mutter.

“Ric, get over here. We need one of your hangover cures,” he calls, and I wince as the noise shakes my brain.

Ric comes over, looking as fresh as a daisy and smiling wide with that killer grin. “Good afternoon. Heavy night?” he asks.

“Something like that.”

“The best thing is hair of the dog,” he adds, scooping some of the punch into a cup and holding it out to me. I shake my head, knowing I won’t be able to stomach it, plus I have Harry to think of.

“Just a few sips,” he encourages, and I groan as he holds it to my lips. I sip and almost smile. Meg was right, it tastes good and nothing like alcohol. I take the cup and have a few more sips.

“Told you,” says Meg knowingly.

I sit on the oversized beanbags. Harry went down for a nap, and I’m making the most of it by enjoying the sun. Tipping my face back, I feel a presence beside me within seconds. I smile when I open my eyes to see Ric.

“How was the date?”

“Good. No Zoe?”

He shakes his head. “She came over last night but left first thing. She had things to

do.”

I frown. “Family is important.” The words slip out before I can stop them, and I instantly regret them.

“It’s fine. She isn’t close to hers, so she doesn’t get it.”

“Talk to her, Ric. It’s important to you, and I think she’ll be upset if she thought you were mad she wasn’t here.”

“I’m not mad,” he says defensively.

“Okay.” I close my eyes. Zoe can be selfish. She doesn’t always think about anyone else, but it’s just the way she is, and I know if he explained this to her, she’d come.

“I’m really not mad,” he repeats, and I open one eye.

“Okay.”

“You’re saying that like you don’t believe me.”

I sigh, sitting up a little. “Do you want Zoe here?”

“It’s not her thing.”

“Do you want her here?”

He sighs too. “I guess.”

I laugh. “You guess?”

“I don’t know,” he snaps and then winces. “I don’t mind just chilling with everyone. When she’s here, she kind of makes me feel like she’d rather be somewhere else.”

“Oh.”

“It’s not a bad thing,” he rushes to add. “I just relax more when she’s not here.” He groans. “That sounds so bad.”

“Maybe I’m not the one you need to speak to about this.”

I go to get up, but he places his hand on my thigh, and I stop.

We both stare at where he touches me, and I clear my throat nervously to hide the fact that I felt something.

A spark maybe. “Aren’t we friends?” he eventually asks.

I relax back into the beanbag. Despite not meaning to, I have begun to see Ric as a friend, so I nod.

“Then let’s start again, and this time, we won’t talk about Zoe. ”

“It wasn’t really a date,” I admit. He sits straighter with a slight frown marring his forehead. “And I lied to Meg and Zoe about it, and now, I feel terrible.”

“Why did you lie?”

“Because I want them to think I have my shit together.” I give an unamused laugh.

“How stupid is that?”

“It’s not.”

“They’re my best friends. They don’t care if I have my shit together, but I was sick of seeing the worry in their eyes. So, I didn’t tell them it was a work thing. Everyone was there.”

“Was he at least there?”

I laugh. “Yes, and we did flirt . . . I think.”

“You think?”

I shrug. “It’s been a while, and I was never good at it anyway.”

“How did you leave it?”

“I slipped away unnoticed,” I say, wincing again as he stares open-mouthed. “Don’t look at me like that. I was trying to avoid the weird thing where I don’t know if we kiss or just leave.”

Ric laughs. “Kiss? It wasn’t a date.”

I feel my cheeks redden, and he immediately stops laughing. “Sorry. I wasn’t laughing at you, but you’re overthinking it.”

“I didn’t want to kiss him,” I announce. “I was worried he might try to kiss me, and he’s my boss, so it would’ve gotten messy.”

Ric grabs my hands and looks me in the eye. “I’ll take you on a date.” I pull my hands back and glance around to make sure no one heard. “Oh, I don’t mean a real one,” he adds, almost laughing again. “Like a fake one.”

“Why?”

“To help. I’ll assess where you’re going wrong . . . or right. Like a prep lesson.”

I bite my lower lip. “What about Zoe?”

“She’s busy tonight. She won’t mind.”

I take a breath. “Isn’t it weird?”

“A friend helping another friend?”

“I feel like such a charity case.”

“Look, I’m good at this dating shit, and I’ve had a lot of practice. It’ll be fun. Humour me. And maybe I can set you up with friends. I know loads of singletons.”

Eric

Why? Why the fuck would I offer to fake date Sofia? I know why . . . because I fancy her, and being on a date, even a fake one, feels good. But deep down, it’s wrong. I know it is, which is why I didn’t mention it on the phone to Zoe earlier.

I take a breath and knock on Sofia’s door. She opens it, and I assess the jeans and jumper with a frown. She pauses and looks down at her outfit. “What?”

“It’s not giving ‘date’,” I say, stepping inside.

“But we’re staying here,” she replies. She didn’t have a babysitter for Harry, so it made sense to stay in.

“We’re pretending this is real, right? But I’ll let you off.”

She heads for the kitchen, and I follow. “I cooked chicken curry,” she says as the aroma hits my senses. “You mentioned before you love homemade curry.”

I lean over the large pan bubbling away. “Only if it’s made right,” I say in a teasing tone. I grab the spoon beside it and dip it in, tasting it. My eyes widen in surprise as she waits patiently for my review. “That’s amazing,” I say. “Where did you learn to cook like that?”

“My friend’s mum when I was in school,” she says, shrugging. “She was from India, and she taught us both how to make a real curry using her great grandmother’s recipe. It was years old.”

“It’s amazing. You need to show my mum how to make that.” I hold up a bottle of wine. “I got white.”

“Only a small glass for me,” she says, grabbing two wine glasses from the cupboard.

I pour us each a glass and take a seat at the kitchen island, watching as she drains the rice. “Okay, let’s go into this like we don’t know each other,” I say. “I’m Ric, and I’m a teacher.”

She smirks. “I’m Sofia, and I’m a writer.”

“Cool, what do you write?”

“It’s for a magazine. I recently wrote an article on a well-known romance novel.”

I smile. “Really? Have you got it?”

She nods, turning back to grab a magazine from her bag and handing it to me. “Second page,” she adds proudly.

“Sofia, this is amazing,” I say, forgetting the roleplay and showing my genuine happiness. I read the article, finding myself grinning with pride. “This is really good. You’re wasted there.”

She scoffs. “I doubt that. I mean, it’s not a top line magazine or anything, but it’s probably on my level.”

“Nonsense. It’s bloody brilliant.” She glows under my praise, and I fight the urge to wrap her in my arms as we head for the table. She places the dishes down in the centre, and I top up the wine.

Once we’re seated, she nods at the curry. “Help yourself.”

“I’ll serve,” I offer, scooping some rice and adding it to her plate, followed by the curry. “So, you can cook, you can write, what other talents are you hiding?”

“Umm, I could add mother, but I don’t think I’m quite skilled in that department yet.”

“You’re a mum,” I say, pretending to be surprised.

She grins. “Yep. Harry. Almost one.”

“It didn’t work out for you and the father?”

“No.” I stare, waiting for her to continue, but she remains silent. “Okay. Past relationships?”

She winces. “Is this part really necessary?”

“As a rule, I try not to ask about past loves on the first date,” I tell her, “but you started it by mentioning Harry.”

“Should I keep it to myself?”

I shake my head. “No. You need to pick out the guys who aren’t serious.”

“Who’s going to be serious on the first date?”

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“I don’t mean someone wanting to marry you after one date, Sofia,” I tell her, “but if he’s put off by kids, you need to know first off.”

“Fine,” she says with a sigh. “Harry’s dad isn’t on the scene. No, it’s just me and him.”

I furrow my brow. “Can I ask why you aren’t saying anything about how you conceived him?”

She glares. “Why would I mention that to a complete stranger?”

I smirk. “You’ve got a point.”

“He’ll think I’m some saddy who can’t get laid.”

I laugh, and she follows. “It’s not a bad thing, yah know.”

“What isn’t?” She takes a sip of wine.

“Being out of the dating scene.”

“Was I ever in it?”

“Some men would find what you did amazing.”

“Yeah, and some would run a mile.”

“Then they’re not the one for you. You’re independent. It’s a good thing.”

She scoops some rice onto her spoon, followed by the chicken, and closes her eyes in delight as she savours the taste. I can’t pull my eyes from the way she licks her lips.

“Do you cook?” she eventually asks.

I nod. “I like to cook. I’m not great at it, but I get by.”

“What’s your favourite thing to cook?”

“Banana bread.”

She laughs. “Lockdown special.”

“It’s easy.”

“What’s your go-to meal . . . after curry?”

I think on her words. “Roast dinner.”

“Really? I had you down as a steak kind of guy.”

“Nothing beats my mother’s roast dinner.”

“Ha, a mummy’s boy?”

He nods, smiling wide. “And proud.”

“You have a close family?”

“Mum, Dad, three brothers.”

“Three,” she says, acting surprised. “Who are you closest with?”

“All of them, each for different reasons. Jimmy is funny and relaxed. I can chill with him or party, he’s equally fun at either.

Seb is the youngest but wise for his age, wiser than all of us put together.

He keeps us in line, but he’s also good for advice, as is his wife, Katie, who we all adore.

And then there’s Hugo, oldest brother, the one we’ve all learned from.

He’s been through a lot but is happy again, and we have the beautiful Meg to thank for that.

He’s also my boss, the headteacher where I work. ”

“Umm, is that how you got the job?” she asks with suspicion.

I laugh. “Mainly, but I’m also a good teacher.”

“What do you teach?”

“English.”

“Interesting.”

“I think so. What about your family? Siblings?”

She shakes her head. “No, just me and my parents.”

“Are you close?”

“Not really. They’ve always worked really hard to provide a good life for me, and I appreciate it. They weren’t happy when I had Harry.”

I lean closer, the fake date forgotten temporarily while I drag information from her. “Because you decided to parent alone?”

She nods. “They said I was selfish, that Harry would need male influence.”

“Not strictly true. I know lots of kids who come from one-parent families and they’re doing just fine.”

She sighs heavily. “Sometimes I think they’re right.”

I reach across the table and take her hand. “They’re not, Sofia. You’re a good mum. Prove them wrong.”

She takes a breath, shaking out her shoulders then forcing a smile. “How am I doing so far?”

I grin. “Good. The conversation is flowing.”

“Would you date me?” Then she gasps, slapping her hand over her mouth. “God, I’m so sorry, that’s inappropriate.”

“If I didn’t have someone, definitely.”

She stares down at her half-eaten food. “Maybe I’ll ask my boss out?”

I nod stiffly. “Great idea.”

“Really?” she asks, looking up. “Because you said before it was a bad idea.”

“If you like him,” I say with a shrug.

“I don’t, not really.” She laughs. “He’s a bit arrogant.”

“Maybe I can set you up on a blind date?” But even the thought makes me want to punch something. Hard.

She stands. “I have dessert.” I grin, wiggling my brows to try to break the serious tone we’ve suddenly stumbled across.

She rolls her eyes. “I mean I made dessert.”

I help clear the table and then she pulls two desserts from the fridge. “It’s a strawberry fool. I created it with meringue, strawberries, and sauce.”

I take the first bite and groan in approval. “It’s a good job I’m not dating you,” I tell her, “because I’d be the size of a house.”

I follow her into the living room. “Film?” she asks, and I nod, taking a seat on the couch.

“Are we still fake dating?” I ask.

“I’m not sure I’d invite a first date for a film.”

“If it’s going well, you could.”

“But then I have the whole dilemma,” she mutters.

“What do you mean?”

“Do I sit beside him? Do we hold hands? What if he puts his arm around me? Do I snuggle into him?”

I twist to face her. “Relax,” I say. “You’re overthinking again.”

She takes a deep breath, nodding, and our eyes meet.

There’re soft flecks of grey amongst the blue, and the longer I stare, the more her pupils dilate.

I swallow hard. “You’ll be able to read the signals,” I almost whisper.

I find myself gently cupping her cheek and rubbing my thumb over her soft skin.

There’s longing in her eyes, and her breathing is heavy, much like my own.

“How?” she asks, and her tongue darts out to wet her lips.

“Well, when he’s this close, staring into your eyes . . .” I swallow again.

“Yes?”

My mobile shrills to life, and we jump apart. I grab it from my pocket and answer without checking. “Yeah?”

“Where are you?” It’s Zoe, and I silently groan.

“Everything okay?” I ask, standing and moving away from Sofia.

“Can you meet me? I really need your help.”

“Erm, sure,” I mutter. “If it’s important.”

“It’s life or death. I’ll ping you my location.” And she disconnects.

Sofia is staring blankly at the television, and I stand awkwardly by the side. We both know what was about to happen, and if Zoe hadn’t called . . . fuck. I’m not a cheat.

“Zoe needs my help,” I mutter.

Sofia forces a smile. “Okay. Great. Thanks for tonight.”

“I’m sorry,” I mutter.

“No, really, you’ve been a great help.” She stands and almost pushes me to the front door, opening it wide. “Have a great night.”

“Sofia . . .” I begin, stepping outside.

“Speak soon.” She closes the door in my face, locking it for good measure.

Zoe

I spot Ric the second he enters the private space in the bar. I rush over and kiss him on the cheek. “Thank you so much.”

“You said life or death,” he reminds me, looking around the busy bar suspiciously.

“It is. The life or death of my career.”

“Well, this place looks nice and busy, so I think it’s a success.”

“I’m two waiters down. I have no one to take my picture.” He stares at me for a silent minute, and I offer a weak smile. “Please don’t be mad.”

“I’m just confused, Zo. Why am I here?”

“To help your wonderful girlfriend.” I kiss him a second time and thread my arm through his. “Pretty please.” I spot the moment he relents because his shoulders slump. “I wouldn’t ask if I wasn’t desperate.”

“Fine. But be warned, I’ve never been a waiter before.”

“It’s easy. You just have to walk around holding a tray of food for the guests to take.” I grab his hand. “I’ll show you through to the kitchen.”

I wait for Ric to change into his waiter uniform when Carlton appears. He gives me an award-winning smile and places an arm around my waist. “Tonight is perfect,” he tells me. “You really are magic.”

I give a polite laugh. “Thank you.” And then I spot Ric, stomping towards us, glaring at me.

“Carlton, this is Eric,” I say with a wide smile.

Carlton eyes Ric, giving a slight nod but making no move to shake his hand. As far as he’s concerned, Ric’s the hired help.

Ric narrows his eyes. “Her boyfriend.”

I arch a brow and feel my cheeks colour slightly with embarrassment. “I’ll catch up

with you shortly,” I tell Carlton, and he leaves the kitchen. I turn to Ric. “What was that?”

“No, what was that ?” he counters coldly. “You two looked cosey.”

“Ric, he’s the client. This is his party.”

He looks ashamed and hangs his head. “Sorry, I’m just tired.”

I cup his cheek. “I know. It’s unfair of me to ask for your help. I won’t make a habit of it.”

He presses his lips to mine. “Ignore me, I’m being a grouch.”

“Where were you tonight, anyway? I wasn’t interrupting anything?”

He shakes his head. “Nothing important.”

Everything runs smoothly. And apart from Carlton touching me at every opportunity, I’m relieved it’s gone to plan.

I catch Ric passing, taking his arm. “Are you okay?” I can’t put my finger on it, but he’s distant and not himself. He nods. “Can you take a few pictures?” I ask, handing him my phone.

I hear the way he huffs as he dumps his empty tray on a nearby table, but he holds the phone up in my direction without further protest. After a few poses, I feel that familiar arm wrapping around my shoulders and offer a fake smile to Carlton.

“Let’s have some together,” he says, handing his phone to Ric. “It’ll be good for our socials.”

Ric clicks away, using both phones. He hands Carlton's back then stares at mine for a few minutes with a furrowed brow. Before I can ask, Carlton grabs my attention, showing me the pics. And by the time I look up, Ric's gone and my phone is on the table.

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Sofia

It's wrong, I know it is, but I can't get Ric out my head.

We almost kissed, and I wasn't going to stop him.

Zoe didn't even enter my head. Not once.

And I think he feels the same way. Not that I'd know because he's spent the last couple days avoiding me.

And I've avoided Zoe because what kind of friend am I?

The office is buzzing, and Amelia is in a great mood, which seems to brighten the entire team. By lunchtime, she drops by my desk. "Lunch," she says bluntly. "My treat."

"Erm, I've got my own," I say, pointing to my lunchbox, which she eyes with disdain. I force a smile. "But I could save that for tomorrow."

She smiles too and claps her hands. "Great, let's go."

We head for a little deli on the corner.

It's expensive, which is why I never come here, but Amelia doesn't bat an eye at the extortionate price of two smoothies.

I opted for the same as her, seeing as I'm not clued up on menus that offer things like boiled eggs wrapped in spinach for almost six pounds.

We sit by the window, and she immediately leans closer and smirks. "So, give me the gossip on you and Dex."

My cheeks instantly burn with embarrassment. "I don't know what you mean."

"Don't give me that. You two are always non-stop chatter."

"Just about work." She rolls her eyes, and I have the urge to impress her. "I mean, he's cute." Her eyes widen slightly, and I see a flicker of intrigue. "And I think he likes me."

"You do? Did he say that?"

I shake my head. "Not exactly."

"You should ask him out."

"Ask him out?" I repeat, my eyes bugging out my head. "He's my boss."

"Office entanglements are so in."

"They are?"

"I've heard he's an animal in the bedroom."

"You have?"

"Look, when was your last good fuck?"

My cheeks heat brighter. “Erm . . .”

“Because if Dex is offering it, take it.”

“I’m not sure . . .”

“I’ve never seen him talk to someone the way he talks to you,” she muses. “He must be into you.”

“Do you think?”

She nods with enthusiasm, and even though I currently feel like a teenager, I can’t help but smile while excitement bubbles away in my stomach.

It’s been too long since any man really looked at me like .

. . well, like Ric looked at me on Saturday.

And seeing as I cannot under any circumstances go there, maybe Dexter isn’t such a bad option.

A smile pulls at my lips as I stir my smoothie. “I might see if he wants to have a drink sometime.”

Amelia groans. “No, you can’t just ask him. You need to get him to ask you.”

“I’m not good at games. Or flirting.”

“I know him well. We’re practically best friends. I’ll speak to him, sound him out.”

“That’s not a good idea.” I don’t want to seem like a desperate teenager. “Anyway,

he's probably got a girlfriend. I walked in on him with someone—"

"He hasn't got anyone." She stands. "I have the best ideas, don't I?" I nod, also standing. "Oh my god, I can't wait to see your face when he asks you out."

I rush after her as she heads for the exit. "I don't think he'll want to go on a date," I try, panic taking hold.

"Trust me, with my help, he'll be begging on his knees."

We get back to the office, and Dexter is mooching around. He glances up, giving us a bright smile as we pass, and Amelia nudges me, giggling. I know I should act my age, but it's hard not to get swept up when she's finally making me feel accepted.

"Smile lots and undo the top button," she says, turning to face me and popping the button on my shirt.

I glance down, unsure, but she fluffs my hair and turns me to face my desk.

"Cross your legs in a sexy way," she whispers, pushing me to sit.

I cross my legs, glancing nervously to see if Dexter is within earshot.

He's chatting with one of the runners, so I focus back on Amelia, who thrusts a lip gloss in my hand.

"Try this," she says then proceeds to grab a bottle of perfume from her bag and spritz it in the air around me.

I cough, wafting my hand to clear the fog of sweet-smelling cakes or whatever the hell it is.

“Now, play it cool,” she instructs, glancing behind her.

“Pout a little. Push your chest forward and laugh at the things he says. He loves making women laugh.” I nod, secretly praying Dexter goes back to his office.

I’m getting in over my head. “And touch him at every opportunity.”

“Touch him?”

“Yes, like . . .” She runs a hand over my arm and throws her head back, fake laughing. “See, it’ll make him feel special.”

She begins to walk away, and I breathe a sigh of relief until she shouts across the office, “Dex, Sofia wants to speak to you.”

The entire office seems to stop, and I glare wide-eyed in her direction as she takes a seat beside Noah, who is watching the exchange with a smirk. “I . . . erm . . .” I swallow the huge lump that seems to be clogging my now dry throat. “I . . . well, it can wait.”

“No, it can’t,” says Amelia, giving me a pointed look.

Dexter heads my way with his hands stuffed in his pockets and his head slightly lowered. If I’m not mistaken, he looks embarrassed. Amelia is leaning against her desk with her arms folded over her ample chest, watching us like a hawk.

“Everything okay?” he almost whispers.

“It can wait. It’s not important.”

Amelia is nodding at me in a way that means she’s waiting for me to carry out her

instructions. Oh god, what the hell am I doing?

I run my hand over my leg, lifting my skirt slightly higher to show some more thigh. His eyes follow the movement, and somewhere in my clouded brain, I take it as a sign, so I push my chest out further. “Are you okay?” he asks.

“Yeah, I’m stuck on this article,” I say, tapping a button on my PC so the screen opens on the article I’m writing.

He places one hand on my desk and the other on the back of my chair, then he leans over me to read my article. “It’s finished,” he states, clearly confused.

I laugh. Loud. It’s a sharp, awkward screech, which makes him flinch. I slap a hand at his arm but miss completely and pat his back instead, like a clueless aunt at a party. Oh god. My mouth is so dry, it feels like I’ve been eating sand.

“Seriously, Sofia, are you okay?” he repeats, his brows knitting together in genuine concern.

I try to recover, to save at least a small piece of my dignity, by flicking out my hair and pushing my chest out like I’m suddenly Jessica Rabbit, but I misjudge the angle and headbutt him.

Like, actually headbutt him. Our skulls knock together with a dull thud that echoes all my bad decisions leading to this point.

I gasp in horror and jolt back, but my chair rolls a few inches before stopping dead against my bag.

The sudden halt launches me forward, and I slide right out my seat, landing on my knees in front of Dexter, like a damn sacrifice to the gods of humiliation.

And somewhere in the back of my mind, there's a little voice telling me it serves me right for acting like a damn teenager.

I freeze. Still kneeling. Still mortified. Still squarely in front of Dexter's crotch.

"Well, isn't this cosy," comes a voice slicker than a greased weasel in a business suit.

I don't need to look. I already know.

But I do, because the universe has no mercy.

Amelia leans against my desk like she's on the cover of Corporate Sociopath Monthly, one manicured hand holding up her phone, recording. Her screen is angled perfectly toward me. Kneeling. Flustered.

"Don't stop on my account," she says sweetly, camera still rolling. "Oh my god, Sofia, this is gold. Do you know how long I've waited for this moment?"

"Amelia," says Dexter, his tone warning.

She ignores him. "You were right," she says, flicking off the record button. "You really can't flirt."

"Wait . . . you filmed me?"

"For growth purposes, obviously. We all want you to win, Sofia." She winks. Winks.

"You told me to flirt with him," I cry, jumping to my feet and ignoring the way my knees crack in protest, only reminding me further that I'm older than I'm currently acting.

“That’s messed-up, Amelia,” mutters Dexter, pinching the bridge of his nose.

“Oh, please, I’m just the narrator. The chaos is all hers.”

“Delete the video,” I demand. I glance to Dexter, who nods in her direction, and she groans as if deleting my humiliation is a great inconvenience to her.

She taps her screen. “There. Gone. Much like your dignity.” She turns on her heel and saunters away.

Dexter clears his throat then also scuttles away to his office, where he can hide out while leaving me to die in my own humiliation.

Eric

“You’re not even here,” says Hugo, waving his hand in front of my face and forcing me to focus back in on the conversation.

“What’s going on with you?” asks Seb, nodding towards my untouched pint.

“I’m thinking of ending things with Zoe.”

Hugo sits straighter. “Why?” He’s worried how this will affect things with our newfound friend group. Zoe is a huge part of Meg’s life, so I can understand his concern.

“She’s been lying to me,” I mutter.

“She’s not cheating?” asks Jimmy, suddenly alarmed.

I shake my head. “I was already thinking of ending things, but then I saw an email on

her phone from a private clinic.” They’re all paying attention as I take a drink of my pint.

“So, I looked through her phone while she was sleeping.” All three gasp like I’ve committed the ultimate sin. “Trust me, I’m not proud.”

“So, what did you find?” asks Jimmy.

“I don’t think we need to know,” says Hugo. “We trust your reasons, but if you tell us, you’re really breaking her confidentiality.”

Jimmy rolls his eyes in annoyance. “Why are you always the fucking voice of reason? He’s our brother, and we should know all the information before we pass judgement.”

“She had an abortion,” I say, and they all stare at me wide-eyed. “It’s not the reason I want to end things,” I add, “but it’s part of it.”

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“Shit, I wasn’t expecting that,” says Seb, blowing out a heavy breath. “How are you feeling about it?”

I shrug. “I get it,” I admit. “We’re in a new relationship, and she’s clearly not ready. But it would’ve been nice to talk about it, make that decision together with all the facts.”

“Do you think you could’ve convinced her to keep it?” asks Seb.

“Honestly, I don’t know, but I think I deserved a conversation.”

“What was the other reason?” asks Hugo. “You said you wanted to end things before you found that out.”

“We’re not going in the same direction and the abortion confirmed it.

She loves what she does, and she works damn hard at it.

She’ll achieve her dreams. But they don’t include a house and dog with three kids.

It’s not fair on either of us to keep on this path when we both know we’re going to come to a fork in the road and go our separate ways. ”

“I’m sorry to hear it,” says Hugo, patting my shoulder. “When are you going to tell her?”

“Tonight.” I swallow the lump in my throat.

“Good luck,” says Jimmy. “We’re here if you need us.”

I slow down as I pass Sofia’s, hearing the usual screams from Harry. I groan. I’ve been avoiding her since our near kiss, but the urge to help her out is strong, so I head up the path and knock on the door.

Sofia yanks it open, and I take in her tear-stained face and unruly hair. Harry is tucked under one arm as he wails. “I’m busy,” she mutters.

I nod, understanding her reluctance to invite me in. “Need a hand?”

She eyes me for a second before giving a slight nod and going back inside. I follow, shrugging from my jacket and draping it over the sofa. I take Harry, and he begins to turn his screams down a notch so they’re more of a whimper. “He hates me,” she mutters, going into the kitchen.

“You’re stressed. He can feel it.” I place Harry in his highchair and offer him his juice cup, which he takes.

“How do I stop being stressed when he’s screaming all the goddamn time?” She groans, burying her face in her hands and turning her back to me.

I hesitate for a moment—just a second—but then close the gap between us and gently tug her into me, wrapping my arm around her shoulders.

She collapses against my chest like she’s been holding up the entire world.

“It’s too hard,” she whispers, her voice sounding muffled in the material of my shirt. “I can’t do it.”

“You can,” I murmur, pressing a light kiss to the top of her head. It lingers longer

than it should. “You’re doing amazing.”

“No, I’m not,” she snaps, her voice cracking slightly as Harry whimpers louder.

“Hey.” I release her just enough to pinch her chin between my fingers and guide her head back to look me in the eye. “You’re doing great,” I say again, more firmly. “Harry loves you.”

She snuffles, her lips parting slightly, and then she looks at me—really looks at me—and I feel the connection. Her eyes aren’t tired anymore. They’re heated, and they’re searching mine as if I hold all the answers.

“I’ve had the worst day,” she breathes.

My heart aches in my chest. I want to protect her, fix whatever it is that’s made her sad. I don’t think. I just move. Closer. My breath catches as our lips almost touch, close enough that I feel the ghost of hers against mine. I wait, frozen, ready to pull away at her demand.

But she doesn’t move.

Her eyes flick to my lips and back again.

And then she leans in, just barely, but it’s enough. Enough to break the rules.

Our lips meet, soft at first, almost hesitant, like we’re both waiting for the other to come to their senses and pull away. We don’t.

Instead, she exhales shakily into the kiss, like it’s the first breath she’s been able to take all day, and something in me shatters.

I deepen it without thinking. Cupping her face, my fingers thread through her hair. Her tiny hands clutch my shirt, screwing the material in her grip. She's holding on so tightly, like she's scared the world might slip away from under her.

It's not perfect. Not how I imagined it would be to kiss her. It tastes like salty tears and guilt and something we're not supposed to want. But it's real. God, it's real.

When we finally break apart, it's only to catch our breath. But she doesn't pull away like I expected her to. Instead, she rests her forehead against my chest, and for a moment, we just exist there in the silence after the storm.

She's the first to break it. "What did we just do?"

I don't have an answer. I'm not sure either of us know what comes next.

Zoe

"He's not picking up," I mutter.

Meg shrugs. "Well, go round and see him. But I'm sure you're imagining it."

I've just spent the last hour bending her ear about how Ric's being off with me.

It started after he took pictures at the party and went all quiet on me.

We spent the night at his, and all he wanted to do was sleep.

By the morning, he was borderline rude, practically hustling me out the door because he had things to do.

And now, he's ignoring my texts and won't answer my calls.

I pick my bag up. “I think he’s going to dump me.”

Meg grabs my hand, and I sit back down. “I’m sure you’re overthinking this.”

“Do yah think?”

“You really like him, don’t you?” she asks, smiling. I reluctantly nod, because as much as I hate to admit it, I really have fallen for him. “So, go and see him and ask him what’s going on.”

By the time I pull up outside Ric’s five minutes later, I’m a bundle of nerves.

I’ve never felt like this, and I’ve never had to ask a man why he’s ghosting me, because frankly, it’s never happened before.

I’m always the one to get cold feet first. If there’s even a hint they’re more serious than me, I dump them.

I don’t think I’ve ever even cried over a guy.

I take deep breaths as I approach the door and knock gently, maybe secretly hoping he doesn’t answer so I can get back in my car and pretend this never happened. But he does open the door. He looks flustered and stressed as he rubs his wet hair on a towel. “Zoe,” he says, looking confused.

I laugh awkwardly. “Who were you expecting?”

He glances past me, shrugging. “Everything okay?”

“Yeah, I just thought I’d see if you were okay.”

“Why wouldn’t I be?”

I sigh. “Never mind.” I turn and head back up the garden path.

“Wait,” he calls, and I pause, glancing back. “Sorry. It’s been a day. Come inside.” We head into the kitchen, and he flicks the kettle on. “We need to talk,” he mutters.

My phone buzzes, and I pull it from my pocket and busy myself to try to avoid what I know he’s about to say. “I’ll just have water,” I say, opening a message from Teddy. There’s a link with a text message.

Teddy: Holy crap, isn’t this your bestie?

“I’ve been thinking about us,” Ric continues.

I click the link and a video opens. It shows Sofia talking to a guy . . . she’s at work. “Wait,” I tell Ric, turning up the sound so I can hear. I stare open-mouthed as the video plays out, cringing when Sofia headbutts the guy. It’s a complete disaster.

“Is that Sofia’s voice?” asks Ric, coming closer when I nod. He watches over my shoulder as the end plays out then takes my phone from me and starts the video from the beginning. I bury my face in my hands, not needing to hear it a second time. “Oh, shit,” he mutters. “That’s terrible.”

“Oh god, she’ll die when she sees that.”

“She can’t see it,” he says, his eyes wide as he hands me the phone back.

“I can’t not tell her, Ric.”

He shakes his head. “No, she can’t ever see it. She’s already feeling like crap.”

I'm surprised at his words, and as if he realises he's said too much, he clamps his mouth closed.

"She is?"

"I only spoke to her in passing," he mutters, not meeting my eye. "But she mentioned she was stressed with Harry."

I check the video and see it's had thousands of views, then push to stand. "I need to show her. It's not fair if we all see it and she doesn't. Besides, she needs to get it taken down."

"Can't you do that?"

"I'm not the queen of social media," I snap.

"Really? You act like you are."

I bite back my response and head for the door. Whatever's going on, we'll have to sort it another time, because right now, my friend needs me.

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Sofia

The rapid banging on the door has me jumping to answer it before whoever it is wakes Harry.

Zoe is pacing, and my heart stops. Fuck. She knows.

“I need to talk to you,” she says firmly.

I give a slight nod, opening the door wide enough for her to enter. “You’ve spoken to Ric,” I mutter, bracing myself for her harsh words.

“Yeah, and he told me you were feeling down.” I pause, glancing up in surprise. “But that’s not why I’m here.”

“Okay.”

“It’s best I just show you, right? Because I don’t think I can put it into words. But once you’ve seen it, please don’t overreact. We can get it taken down, or maybe you know who posted—”

“Zoe, you’re scaring me. What’s happened?”

She takes a breath and gives a stiff nod. “Okay.” Then she thrusts her mobile phone at me. I take it warily, half amused by her crazy ranting and half relieved she doesn’t know about the kiss . . . yet. “Press play,” she adds.

The second Dexter and I come into view, my chest tightens and I feel sick. I slowly lower onto the sofa and watch as my earlier humiliation plays out. “Oh god,” I whisper, bringing my hand to my mouth as I watch myself fall from my chair. “No, no, no, no.”

“It’s not bad,” says Zoe.

I glance up. “It’s not bloody good, Zo.”

“Do you know who the poster is?”

I look at the name on the account and shake my head. “But I know who recorded the video.”

“So, you can get it taken down?”

I open the comments, and Zoe tries to snatch the phone away. I manage to avoid her and begin to read. The caption is blaring. HUMILIATED WHEN SHE MAKES A PLAY FOR HER BOSS! “This is bad . . . so, so bad.”

“Reading the comments will only make it worse,” says Zoe gently.

“It’s been viewed by half a million people,” I cry.

“Yeah, it’s really gaining views.”

“There’s so many laughing emojis,” I whisper, my voice breaking.

“Look,” says Zoe, taking the phone from me, “it’s all going to be okay.”

“How?” I cry. “And how did you see this?”

She bites on her lower lip. “My friend, Teddy, sent it. He recognised you.”

I bury my face in my hands. “Oh god, everyone’s going to see it.”

“Half the people I know hate this app. I never go on here,” she says, tucking her phone away.

“Have you shown anyone?” She hesitates, and I glare at her until she relents. “Ric saw it.”

I jump up. “Noooooooo.”

“He was there when I opened it and heard your voice. I’m sorry.”

“I can never show my face in public again.” The thought of Ric seeing it out of everyone makes it feel so much worse.

“What happened?” she asks.

I groan louder. “Stupid Amelia happened.”

“She’s your colleague?”

“She’s a bully. She practically talked me into asking Dexter out. I got carried away in the moment and fucked it up, and then she recorded the entire ordeal. I told her to delete it, and she said she had. Clearly, she’s a liar too.”

“Call her, tell her to take it down.”

“I don’t have her number. Besides, it’s only going to draw attention to it, and she’d love that.” I sigh. “The best thing to do is ignore it. Ignore her. She’ll get bored.”

The following day, I force myself to go into work despite wanting to stay home and hide. Doing that would only give Amelia more ammunition, so acting like it never happened is the best thing to do.

I hold my head up as I stroll through the office, despite feeling like everyone is whispering about me. I take my seat and stare at my computer as it fires up.

“Morning, Sof,” Amelia calls from her desk.

“Morning,” I mutter.

“Are you okay?” She approaches my desk, a stupid smug smile on her face.

“Why wouldn’t I be?”

She arches her perfectly plucked brow. “No hard feelings about yesterday. I was trying to help.”

“By helping me to make a twat of myself?”

She sniggers. “You did that all by yourself.”

“I think it’s best if we just stay out each other’s way,” I say firmly.

She gives a shrug. “Whatever.” She saunters back to her desk, where Lula and Noah giggle like children.

I throw myself into work, and by lunch, I’ve finished my article.

I press print and head over to the main office printer, where a stack of printouts is spilling from the machine.

I pick one up and stare at last night's social media post, the comments printed in black and white.

I slam the sheet back down and wait for my article, snatching it and heading for Dexter's office.

I knock and enter, glancing up just in time to see Amelia kissing Dexter like a cat in heat.

She turns, smirking as she wipes her smudged lipstick from around her mouth.

"Sorry," I utter, trying to back out. Christ, it all makes sense now.

She wanted to humiliate me because she's clearly banging him.

"Come in, we're done," she says, winking as she passes me.

Dexter adjusts his trousers and sits behind his desk, clearing his throat. "I just wanted you to run your eyes over my article," I mutter, placing it on the desk.

"Of course." He takes it, but I don't think he's reading a word as he stares at the document blankly.

"So, you and Amelia are . . ."

"This is great," he tells me, sliding it back across the desk. "I'll have it in the next edition."

"Are you dating her?" It's none of my business, but I need to know if she was planning my downfall all along or if this is just a coincidence.

“Sofia, I—”

“Because she told me you were into me.”

“She can be . . . difficult.”

“She set me up.”

“Why would she do that?”

“Because she thought I liked you and wanted to make me look an idiot.”

He presses his lips together in a thin line, like he’s choosing his next words carefully.

“We’ve been together for a while.”

“So, why would she do that to me? And why are you both hiding your relationship?”

He shrugs. “HR would be a nightmare. I’m her boss. It’s complicated.”

“She posted the video online,” I tell him angrily, and he winces. “Thousands have seen it.”

“Those things are soon forgotten.”

“Have her take it down or I will personally go to HR and tell them everything,” I snap, snatching the article and stomping from his office.

I pause outside, staring in disbelief because the social media comments have been stuck up on every surface in the office.

Everyone is staring at me. Waiting. Looking for a reaction.

The air is alive with excitement at the possibility that I might lose my head.

Instead, I calmly walk back to my desk and take my seat.

Seconds later, Dexter walks out his office and groans. “Jesus,” he mutters. “Amelia, my office. Now.”

She grins as she passes me. “He can’t get enough,” she whispers.

Eric

Hugo enters the classroom and stares at the chaos before clearing his throat in that authoritative way he’s got, which in turn has all the kids diving into an empty chair and sitting up straight.

The bell rings, and then the chaos ensues again as the kids rush to the door, almost knocking Hugo out the way.

He steps in farther, closing the door and approaching my desk. “What the fuck was that?”

I glance up. “Huh?”

“Out of every classroom in this school, yours is the one I can rely on to be in order. Yet today, it was like a zoo.”

“Oh, yeah, that. They were a nightmare all lesson.”

“Could that be because you’re staring into space like a lost astronaut?”

I sigh heavily. “It’s been a long day.”

“Is this about Zoe? If things are tough, I can give you a couple days off.”

I shake my head. “I haven’t had a chance to speak to her yet.”

“Get it over and done with then so you can teach again.”

“I kissed Sofia,” I blurt out, and he freezes. For a good minute, he just stares. “It’s a shit move, I know. But she was sad, and I was comforting her, and . . . fuck .”

“She’s the woman,” he mutters. “The one you were talking about?” I nod. “She’s Zoe’s best friend. She’s Meg’s best friend.”

I lean my head back and stare up at the ceiling. “You don’t need to tell me that.”

“What were you thinking?”

“I wasn’t. It was in the moment and—”

“Bullshit,” he hisses, pulling up a chair. “You said yourself you liked her. And now, you’ve taken it a step further because now she knows you like her.”

“She likes me too.”

“No,” he snaps. “No, no. It can’t happen, Ric. Never.”

I rest my head on the desk. “I can’t get her out of my mind.”

“She’s got Harry to think of,” he mutters.

“I know that,” I snap, lifting my head to stare at him.

“So, you can’t get involved and then just walk away, Ric. This isn’t just anyone. This is your girlfriend’s best mate, and she’s got a child to think about, and if you go there, you can’t just leave when you’re bored or when you want a fresh bit of ass.”

“I’d never do that.”

“You’re doing it to Zoe.”

“Me and Zoe were never gonna work.”

“You seemed pretty sure about her when we were saying that,” he snaps. “Just think about what it’ll do to their friendship.”

I narrow my eyes in frustration. Out of all my brothers, I thought Hugo would back me on this. “All you’re worried about is Meg.”

He pushes to stand. “Of course, I am. This will affect all three of them, and they’ve been friends for such a long time.”

“What if Sofia wants this too?”

He shakes his head. “She won’t. Not when she really thinks about what it’ll do to Zoe.”

“I think you’re blowing this out of proportion. Zoe won’t shed a single tear over me. She’s not like that.”

“Look, slow down and think about it. First of all, break things off with Zoe. Then let the dust settle before you even think about doing anything else with Sofia.”

I take a deep breath before answering the door. Zoe looks stunning, dressed in

summer shorts and a vest with her hair flowing freely. “Thanks for coming,” I mutter, leading her to the kitchen.

“I haven’t got long.”

“It’s about us,” I say, turning to face her before she can make an excuse to leave for work. “It’s not working.” She stares at me for a good minute, a range of emotions passing over her face. “It’s not you—”

“Oh god, please don’t use that ridiculous line because it clearly is me,” she snaps.

“We want different things.”

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“We’ve never even discussed what we want.”

I shift uncomfortably. Usually, I just ghost women.

It’s not something I’m proud of, but I hate this part.

I’ve never dated anyone for as long as I have Zoe, so ghosting wasn’t an option.

I owed her the face-to-face breakup, no matter how messy it gets, and something about her sudden rage tells me it’s going to be messy.

“Okay, do you want kids?” I ask bluntly, and she suddenly looks less confident. I place my hands on the worktop and fix her with an intense stare. “One, two, three? How many?”

“I haven’t thought about it,” she mutters.

“You have,” I snap. “You’ve thought about a lot, and you know damn well it’s not something on your radar.”

“Maybe not right now . . .”

“I’m thirty-six, Zoe. I want kids. I want to get married and settle down.”

Her eyes narrow suspiciously. “Why haven’t you mentioned this before? We’ve been dating for months, and you’ve never even raised the conversation about the future.”

“If you fell pregnant right now,” I begin, and she stiffens slightly, “what would you do?”

“Why are you asking me that?”

“It’s a general question. What would you do?”

“I don’t know.”

“Would you sit me down and tell me? Would you give me a chance to tell you what I want?”

Zoe

Alarm bells are ringing. The possibility that he could know my secret is making me nervous. Not because what I did was wrong, but because I’d hate for him to feel the pain I was trying to protect him from. I square my shoulders.

“No, I wouldn’t tell you.”

“Why?”

“Because it’s my choice.”

“So, you wouldn’t keep it?”

I shake my head. “Not right now. It’s not the right time for me.”

“When will be the right time?”

“Jesus, Ric, I don’t know. Why is this suddenly an issue for you?”

“Because you didn’t give me chance to fight for it,” he mutters, and my world tilts slightly.

I’m holding my breath whilst my mind races for the right words.

There aren’t any. “I would never have forced you to keep it,” he adds, staring down at the floor, “but I think I deserved a chance to say how I felt about it.”

Anger burns in my chest. How dare he make me feel guilty about one of the hardest things I’ve ever had to do. “Why?” I ask, and he looks up. “Why did you deserve a chance to fight for something I didn’t want?”

“Out of fucking respect, Zoe. Respect for our relationship.”

“It’s my body,” I snap. “My life.”

“And mine too,” he counters.

I shake my head. “That’s the thing, isn’t it?

Men make it about emotion. You would’ve talked me into keeping it, even though it’s not what I want.

Guilt would’ve made me reconsider. And so I keep it, suffer the body changes, the end of my career.

Give birth then breastfeed because of the pressure surrounding what society expects.

I would’ve sat here day after day, feeding, providing, raising our child.

And you, what would you have to change?” He stutters. “Exactly. Nothing.”

“That’s not true, Zoe. Having a child is huge, and it would affect us both.”

“But me more, yes?”

“I guess.”

“You guess?” I repeat, half laughing. “My life would go on hold. Having a child would be me making a lifelong commitment to put another human before myself.”

“And I’d make the same commitment.”

“But not the same sacrifices.” He sighs heavily, like my words are dramatic, and that only annoys me more. “You’d still get to go to work. That wouldn’t change for you.”

“So, I could provide for you and the baby.”

“I want to do that myself,” I cry. “My career is just taking off, and you’d be asking me to put that on hold for years while your life goes on untouched.

You’d be home for the fun parts like cuddles and bedtimes, but I’d be the one here, day in, day out, doing the main care. And what if you ever left?”

“I wouldn’t.”

“You’re leaving right now,” I cry.

“Because we’re clearly at different stages. We should’ve been having this conversation before you aborted our child, Zoe.”

I pinch the bridge of my nose and inhale slowly.

“I’ve watched Meg change her entire life to fit in with Dan and Izzy, and for what?

The first sign of perky tits and he was off.

He left them. It’s Meg who has no choice.

She can’t leave Izzy. And then there’s Sofia.

She decided to do it without a man and she’s struggling.

So, if those two can’t do it, what chance would I have? ”

His face softens as he takes a step closer. “Zoe, you’d be a great mum.”

“The difference is, I don’t want to be one.” I lean in and place a gentle kiss on his cheek. “And I’m okay with that.”

I leave and head straight for Sofia’s. I tap gently on the door in case Harry is asleep, and when she opens it, I practically shove my way inside. My heart is pounding, and I feel sick. I’ve never experienced a breakup like this. I don’t know how to react or what to feel.

Sofia is watching me with concern as I pace, so I stop and take a breath. “He’s dumped me. Eric has dumped me.”

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Sofia

I inhale sharply. Her words take me by surprise. Then she laughs, staring at me in disbelief. “He’s dumped me.”

“Did he say why?” Call me selfish, but I need to know if his reasons had anything to do with the kiss we shared last night.

“Different paths or some bullshit.” She begins to pace again. “Oh, and he knows about the abortion.”

“What? How?”

She thinks. “Actually, I never asked that question.”

“How are you feeling? You seem like you’re in shock.”

“I feel . . . numb. I didn’t see it coming. Not really. I mean, he was acting odd, and maybe last night I kind of wondered if this is where it was heading, but Meg said I was imagining it.”

“You spoke to Meg?”

She ignores my question and sighs heavily, suddenly looking tired before flopping down on the couch. “Did you sort the video?”

I join her. “Sort of. Turns out Amelia is shagging the boss herself, so it came from a

place of jealousy.”

Zoe takes my hand. “She sees you as a threat.”

I scoff. “I doubt it. You haven’t seen her. Anyway, I told him to have her remove it or I’ll go to HR about his inappropriate relationship with her.”

“Will HR be bothered?”

“He seemed to think so. He said that’s why they’ve kept it quiet.”

She sits straighter. “I should go,” she mutters. “I have a work thing.”

I glance at the clock. “It’s almost nine o’ clock.”

She laughs as she pushes to her feet. “Sofia, this is early. These days, the party starts at ten.”

I grin. “Wow, normally that’s my bedtime.” I follow her to the door. “If you need anything, I’m here,” I tell her.

She gives a small smile, and a hint of vulnerability shines through before she shuts it down. “Fuck him, Sof. I’m worth more.”

When I step into the office the next day, it’s unusually quiet. Everyone seems to have their head down working, which gives me instant relief. I hardly slept at all after Zoe left, tossing and turning and wondering what it means for all three of us.

I get stuck into work, losing myself in research until lunchtime. My phone beeps, and I glance at the text, my heart stuttering in my chest when I see Ric’s name.

Eric: I'm outside. Let's have lunch.

It's more like a demand than a question, but I grab my bag and head out. I'm intrigued as to what he wants to see me about so urgently that it couldn't wait until I got home.

He leans casually against the wall just outside the building, denim-clad and effortlessly cool, the afternoon light catching the edges of his frame.

His shirt clings just enough to give a hint at the shape beneath, and dark sunglasses shield those beautiful eyes that have been haunting my dreams lately.

The sight of him sends a flutter through me.

I try to play it cool as I approach, but my smile gives me away the second he locks his gaze on me.

He pushes off the wall and opens the glass door for me to step out.

"Thanks for coming down. Have you eaten?" he asks with a hint of hope in his voice.

I shake my head. "Great, let's grab some food."

We fall into step, heading towards the deli on the corner. "You're not at work?"

"Hugo gave me a couple days off to get my head straight."

"Because of Zoe?" I ask, and I feel him look my way.

He opens the door to the deli and waits for me to go inside before following me. We grab a table by the window, and he removes his shades, hanging them from his shirt

pocket. “Not because of Zoe,” he finally replies.

“She told me you’ve broken up with her.”

He gives a slight nod, not meeting my eyes. “How was she?”

“In shock, I think.”

He finally looks me in the eyes and opens his mouth to speak right as the waitress comes to take our order. I laugh when he clamps his mouth closed. “I’ll take an iced tea and—”

“Iced tea?” Ric repeats. “Tea wasn’t meant to be iced.”

I smile wider. “It’s my favourite.” I turn back to the waitress. “And a ham roll, no salad.” She scribbles it down then looks at Ric.

His eyes are still on me as he says, “I’ll take an iced tea and ham roll, no salad.”

I wait for her to leave before giving him a quizzical stare. “You ordered iced tea even though you don’t like it?”

“It’s your favourite, so I thought I’d give it a go.” I inhale sharply, trying to hide my smile as I turn to stare out the window. I shouldn’t be feeling these butterflies in the pit of my stomach.

“Why no salad?” he asks.

“I hate salad.”

He laughs. “How can anyone hate salad? It doesn’t taste of anything.”

“Exactly. It’s like water in solid form,” and I shudder, causing him to laugh harder.

“Water in solid form is ice. Salad is good for you.”

“Why are you here, Ric?” I ask. The words tumble out without me thinking them through, and I hold my breath, waiting for his answer.

“We kissed,” he almost whispers, staring down at his hands clasped together on the table. “And I can’t stop thinking about it.”

Our kiss was hot. It’s the only word I can think to describe it.

Like something we were both so desperate to do, we almost set alight.

It wasn’t perfect. It was teeth clashing and wet, and nothing like I’d imagined it to be.

But it was perfect for right then, in that stolen moment that should never have happened.

“Is that why you broke it off with Zoe, because we kissed?” I instantly regret the words, like I’m asking if he’s chosen me when that’s not what I mean at all. He cheated on my best friend. We cheated on her. And maybe the guilt is too much, because I know it is for me.

He shakes his head. “Me and Zoe weren’t going anywhere. We’re too different.”

“We can’t ever happen,” I blurt out, and we stare at one another for what feels like an intense minute before he gives a stiff nod. “It’s just . . . Zoe is my best friend and there are rules—”

“Rules? We’re not in school, Sofia. This is real. What we could have is real. And

you're saying no because of some rules that were probably created in high school?" His words hurt, and my expression must convey it because he gives his head a slight shake and exhales. "Sorry. I didn't mean that."

Our drinks and food arrive. "Actually, could I take mine to go?" I ask, and the waitress gives me an irritated glare.

"No," he says quickly before looking at the waitress and telling her the same. "It's fine, she'll eat in." Once she's gone, he turns back to me. "Let's just talk about it."

"There's nothing to say."

"Tell me you don't feel the same and I'll walk away."

"It doesn't matter how I feel," I snap. "I have too much to lose. Meg. Zoe. And then there's Harry to consider."

"Meg would understand. Zoe would come around. And Harry . . . we're good," he says with a fond smile.

"You know what I mean." I sigh. "Relationships for me are difficult. I can't introduce men to my child until I'm one hundred percent sure it'll work out."

"I can be sure for the both of us. Besides, I've already met him, and he adores me. You know he does."

"And when you leave?"

His smile disappears instantly. "Why does everyone assume I'm gonna leave?"

"Because it happens. Look at Meg."

“Jesus. Are all men judged by Dan’s actions?” he snaps. I’m taken aback, so I remain silent. “He’s a prick for what he did. I’d never be like him.”

I take a breath. “Maybe not. But yeah, Dan scarred us all because we thought he was perfect. He and Meg were so happy and in love. None of us saw it coming. Watching them break up was like watching everything you know that’s good in the world die.

And now, every man has the potential to do that kind of damage. ”

“I’ll prove you wrong,” he says firmly. “Because I want this, Sofia. I want you. I want Harry. And I’ve never been so certain about something in my life.”

Eric

“Dan fucking Headford is a cunt,” I say as I sit at the table with my brothers. They all look at me with surprise before Hugo laughs.

“And you’re only just realising that?”

Thursday night has been named curry night in the Chadwick household.

Mum always makes two curries from scratch, but there’s never any expectation to attend.

What doesn’t get eaten goes into freezer containers and is handed out to whoever claims it.

Tonight, we’re all in attendance, and as the women congregate in the kitchen, I take my chance to update my brothers on my disastrous love life.

“Well, it was coming,” says Jimmy, taking out his wallet and pulling out a piece of

paper. He opens it up and laughs. “Seb was the closest, guessing seven months,” he announces, taking a crisp twenty from the wallet and throwing it in Seb’s direction. Hugo groans and does the same.

I shake my head in annoyance. “I’m glad my love life has proven fruitful for you, Seb.”

“I’d like it to be known I had you down for a year,” says Hugo, patting my shoulder. “I had faith in you, brother.”

“Did anyone actually have me down for forever?” They break out into laughter, and I roll my eyes.

“So, why is Dan in the firing line?” asks Seb, tucking his winnings away.

“Seems we’re all measured up to that prick.”

“In what way?” asks Jimmy.

“What he did to Meg scarred not only her but her friends too.”

“Are we still talking about Zoe here?” asks Seb, confused.

“No, he’s talking about Sofia,” says Hugo, arching a brow. My other brothers stare wide-eyed. “I take it she turned you down?”

“Hold on, you asked Sofia out?” Seb whisper-hisses, checking to make sure the women haven’t heard.

“Jesus, don’t let your bed get cold, will yah?” asks Jimmy, laughing.

“It’s not like that,” I mutter. “I like her.”

“Like you liked Zoe?” asks Jimmy, his tone teasing.

“I told you to let the dust settle,” snaps Hugo.

“I needed to see how she felt.”

Seb scoffs. “Probably confused at a guess. One minute, you’re with her friend, and the next, you’re trying to get into her knickers.”

I scowl as the women approach. “What are you four plotting?” asks Meg, placing her arm loosely over Hugo’s shoulders.

“It looks serious,” adds Katie, lowering into Seb’s lap.

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“Seb’s got forty quid for you,” I tell her, smirking as he glares my way. We all know she controls the money, and I hear Jimmy snigger as Seb reluctantly hands over his winnings. “He won it betting on my disastrous love life.”

“Seb,” Katie mutters, shaking her head with disapproval. “We’re saving for a bigger house. We agreed no betting.”

“I knew I’d win,” says Seb pointedly.

“Disastrous love life?” asks Meg.

“He dumped Zoe,” says Hugo, and she gasps.

I frown. “Didn’t she tell you?”

There’s a knock at the door, and I hear Mum call out that she’ll get it as Meg winces. “No, so this might make the next part really awkward.”

Mum returns with Zoe, Sofia, and Harry, and I glare at Meg, who mouths an apology.

I remain seated, secretly seething as the rest of my family greet the women with warmth. My dad clips me around the head as a silent reminder I need to do the same, so I push to my feet and gently place a hand around Zoe before kissing her on the cheek. “Hi.”

“Sorry,” she whispers, and I notice her eyes look swollen, like she’s been crying. “I didn’t know you’d be here.”

“It’s my parents’ house,” I say, forcing a tight smile.

“Meg said it’s usually just the girls that turn up.”

I turn to Sofia, who’s busying herself with Harry, and kiss her cheek, my heart aching to linger this close to her for longer. “Hi.”

“Hi,” she mumbles, avoiding my eyes.

Harry reaches for me, and I can’t help the smile as I take him from her and head off into the garden. Meg follows. “I’m sorry. You were still together when I invited them, and I did tell them it was more like a girls’ night because you guys usually end up in the pub after work.”

“It’s fine,” I mutter, pointing to a bird to get Harry’s attention.

“She’s a big part of my life, Ric,” she adds sadly. “There will be things I invite her to that you might also be part of.”

“I know.”

“Make your peace with her. I don’t want things to be awkward.” I give a nod, and she heads back inside.

Minutes later, Sofia comes out. “She’s really broken,” she whispers as she takes Harry from me. “She’s spent the last two hours at mine crying.”

“Breakups are hard to navigate.”

“So is guilt,” she mutters, “and it’s eating me alive.”

“It was just a kiss,” I say. “Right?” I eye her for a long second before heading back inside.

Zoe

“Why did you come if you’ve broken up?” asks Meg.

I watch as Ric heads back inside from the garden and shrug. “Maybe I wanted to see him.”

“Why didn’t you call me?”

I wanted to call her. Last night, after I got in from work, it was almost three a.m., and I needed to be with someone who understood heartbreak. But instead, I cried myself to sleep, and that made me feel worse. Because why am I letting this man make me feel so sad?

“I needed to be alone.”

Meg gives my hand a sympathetic squeeze. “I’m so sorry it hasn’t worked out.”

“He knows about the baby.”

“How?”

I shrug, trying to keep my voice steady, but the weight of it presses on my chest. I’ve gone over it a hundred times. There’s no way he could’ve found out . . . unless someone told him. And only two people knew.

“Did you tell anyone?” I ask, the accusation sharp in my throat. “Like Hugo?”

Meg recoils, eyes wide. “No. I’d never do that.”

“I only told you and Sofia.” My gaze shifts instinctively towards the doorway, where Sofia is deep in conversation with Katie. The whispers are like static in my ears. I push to my feet.

Meg senses it before I even move. She grabs my wrist, her grip gentle but urgent. “Not here,” she whispers, but I’m already pulling away.

I cross the room, the tension following me like a shadow. “Did you tell him?” I ask loud enough to silence the conversation between the two. Katie blinks then excuses herself quickly.

Sofia turns, adjusting Harry on her hip. “What?”

“Did you tell Ric about the abortion?” The word lands like a dropped plate, shattering the quiet.

“Abortion?” Charlotte repeats, pausing with her spoon mid-stir. She looks up, startled, and her gaze flicks to her son. Ric nods once, barely, and I see the sadness in both their faces. They don’t need words to convey their disappointment.

My heart is pounding now, loud in my ears. I feel exposed, like every wall I’d built is suddenly made of glass. The room is silent as my worst fears play out. They all know what I did.

“I’d never do that,” Sofia says, her voice low, barely audible.

“Wait . . . you knew?” Ric’s voice cuts in, quiet but sharp. He’s beside us now, eyes locked with Sofia’s.

“She’s my best friend,” I snap, too fast and defensive. “Of course, she knew. I want to know who told you .”

He doesn’t answer. Just keeps his eyes on hers, but she won’t meet his gaze. I stare between the pair, trying to figure out why he thought she owed him my secrets. But Harry comes over like a saviour and pats his son on the shoulder. “Let’s get some air,” he mutters, then he turns to me. “Join us.”

I step out, crossing my arms over my chest. “It’s clear there’s things to discuss,” says Harry firmly, “but they should be in private. Don’t you agree?” he asks me, and I nod. “Good. I’ll give you some time.” He heads back inside, leaving us alone.

The tension is buzzing loudly, and somewhere between now and two hours ago, I’ve gone from complete heartbreak to anger . Who betrayed me?

“No one gave your secrets away,” Ric mutters, keeping his back to me. “I checked your phone.”

I stare in disbelief. “You did what?”

He turns to me. “I saw an email when I was taking one of the many hundreds of pictures you insisted I take. It caught my eye, so later, while you were asleep, I checked it. I saw the appointment confirmation and the email about aftercare.”

“That was private to me,” I snap. “You had no right.”

“It doesn’t matter,” he mutters. “It wasn’t the reason I ended it.”

“I’m sure it didn’t help.”

“I like someone else.”

I scoff. “Of course, you do. Sofia, right?” My insides burn with rage as he looks away, and that’s all I need. “She’ll never go there. She doesn’t feel the same.” I say it with a confidence I don’t feel. “Does she know?”

He shakes his head, and I want to scream at his sad, pathetic expression. “Keep it that way,” I mutter, turning on my heel and storming inside. I grab my bag and head for the door, ignoring Meg and Sofia calling out after me.

Right now, I need to be alone.

Sofia

“Can we talk?” I’m already wrestling Harry into his coat, so I don’t bother to look up as Ric looms over me. I can feel everyone’s eyes on us, including Meg’s.

“I need to get Harry home,” I mutter, standing.

“I’ll walk with you.” I want to point out the tension in the room. All the unanswered questions are clearly flying around the air, causing more awkwardness. Why can’t he read the room?

“Meg, I’ll call you,” I say. “Charlotte, thanks so much for having us. Sorry I didn’t get to try your famous curry, but Harry is tired.”

“Please take this,” she says, handing me a container full of curry.

I smile gratefully. “Thank you.”

The second we’re outside, Ric takes Harry from me. I glare, but he continues on like nothing happened, and I follow. “I told her I like you.” I freeze, and he turns to face me. “She needed a reason for me ending it.”

“And you couldn’t come up with anything else?” I snap. My heart is slamming like a hammer in my chest and fear grips me. I can’t lose my two closest friends. “You have no idea what you’ve done.”

“I told her you were unaware,” he adds, and I take a calming breath. That’s

something at least. “She needed to understand there were other factors for why I made my choice, not just the abortion.”

“It wasn’t my place to tell you,” I mutter, falling into step beside him.

“It hurt that you didn’t.”

“I wanted to,” I offer.

He shrugs, sighing. “It’s in the past.”

I glance up and see his stoney expression. “You’re upset?”

“Of course, I am, Sofia. She took the choice away.”

I frown. “It was never your choice to make. And look, you’re not even together anymore, so she made the right call.”

“I wouldn’t have left her if she was having my baby.”

I scoff. “You’d have stayed with her even though you didn’t love her? That’s exactly what she didn’t want.”

“Well, I never got to have that conversation with her.”

“Would you have honestly been happy, Ric?” I ask.

“If she’d have told you and decided to keep it, would you have been elated?”

” He shrugs. “Children don’t repair a broken relationship.

They might patch it up for a while, but it wouldn't last. I'm sorry you didn't get a say, but I agree with Zoe on this.

She had to make the right call for her."

We walk the rest of the way in silence, stopping outside my house. Harry is snuggled into Ric, fast asleep. "I'll come in and put him down," he offers.

"It's not a good idea."

He sighs and gently passes Harry to me, who doesn't stir. "I'm sorry for everything that happened tonight. I don't want to come between you and Zoe."

I nod. "Then don't." And I head inside.

I take Harry straight up to bed, not bothering to change him into his pyjamas. If I risk waking him, he'll never settle again, and honestly, I need some time to process the shitstorm that happened tonight.

I carefully remove his jacket and place the blanket over him, smiling at his sweet, carefree face. "I love you," I whisper.

I head downstairs and out into the back garden to make the most of the evening sunshine.

I love it out here. It's one of the reasons I brought the property.

I lay my sun lounger back and close my eyes.

"Drink?" I open one eye to see Ric looking over the fence, holding up a jug of iced tea and two glasses, like tonight never happened.

I sit up, frowning at his offering. “Iced tea?”

He grins, lifting one leg over the small fence, then the other. “I made it.”

“You don’t like iced tea.”

He places the glasses on the table. “I like it if you like it.” And he pours us each a glass.

“Recipes online were very contradicting, so I picked out the one I liked the sound of and went with it. I haven’t tried it yet.

” He passes me a glass, and I smile as I raise it to my lips.

He watches, like everything depends on this moment.

I sip, closing my eyes briefly as the sweetness of the peaches coats my tongue.

I take another, and his brows raise in anticipation. “Well?”

“I think that might be the best iced tea I’ve ever tasted.”

“Really?” He looks excited as he takes a sip. “Actually, that’s not bad at all.”

“Did you really make it?”

He nods. “I swear on Harry’s life.”

“Why?”

He takes a seat. “Because it’s your favourite,” he answers with a shrug.

My heart melts a little as I settle back in my seat and sip some more.

He's making this impossible. The butterflies in my stomach are fluttering, and it's hard to remember why I'm pushing this gorgeous man away when all I want to do is tell him how I really feel.

"How's work?" he asks.

My mind goes to Amelia and how she keeps dropping bitchy comments or sniggering whenever Dexter speaks to me. "Fine."

"And the video?"

I groan. "Let's not talk about that."

He smirks. "It wasn't that bad."

"It was awful." I smile too. "I'm mortified you saw it."

"He's a fool for not sweeping you off your feet right there and then."

I laugh. "I'll be sure to tell him."

My phone rings, and I rush inside to grab it, seeing Zoe's name flashing across the screen. I remain inside, accepting the call. "Hey."

"Sofia, I'm so sorry," she cries.

"Don't worry about it. Are you okay?"

"Yes . . . no . . . I don't know."

“Do you want to come round and talk about it? Harry’s in bed.”

“Everyone was looking at me like I’d killed their bunnies,” she wails. “They all hate me.”

“They don’t.”

“Charlotte definitely does.”

“She’s biased.”

Ric heads in, and I shake my head, pressing my finger over my lips because the last thing I want is for her to think there’s anything going on between us. But fuck, he looks good standing in my kitchen.

“I’m here if you need to vent,” I tell her. “Things will blow over.”

“Thanks, Sof. You’re a good friend,” she almost whispers. Guilt grips me so tight, I can hardly breathe. “Love you.”

“I love you too, Zoe.” And my eyes connect with Ric’s. He looks just as guilty as I end the call.

“You should go,” I say, barely above a whisper.

He doesn’t move. “Can’t we be friends?” he asks softly. “We’re neighbours.”

“I want to,” I admit, and the truth of it stings. He steps closer, closing the space like he’s been waiting for permission that I didn’t mean to give.

“We’re not doing anything wrong,” he murmurs. His hand comes up, a single finger

tilting my chin until I'm forced to look at him. "We're both single."

My heart twists. "She's my best friend." The words crack in my throat. They should be enough to stop this. This should be the end of whatever this is. But he's still looking at me like he sees more than I want him to.

"I know," he says quietly, "and I think about that every time I see you." That lands like a punch. My chest tightens.

"I didn't mean for this to happen," I say, stepping back even though every cell in my body screams to stay close.

"You didn't do anything wrong," he says again, like repeating it might make it true.

"We talk, that's all." But it's not just talk.

It's the way my pulse races when he's nearby.

The way I wait for a glimpse of him every time I step outside.

It's the kind of just talking that leaves guilt simmering under my skin.

"And the kiss?" He remains quiet. I shake my head, swallowing hard. "It all feels like a betrayal."

He looks down, nods, then meets my eyes again.

"Then I'll go." And just like that, the warmth between us cools.

He steps back, and the air feels heavier without him in it.

“You’re passing up the opportunity of happiness for Zoe when we both know she wouldn’t do the same for you.

” He heads out, climbing over the fence and disappearing into his own house.

I stare after him, thinking over his words.

Maybe Zoe wouldn’t do the same, but I’m not her.

Eric

I’m disappointed. Not just a little. The kind of disappointment that threatens to choke you if you don’t do something about it.

I feel like marching right back to Sofia’s, banging on her door, and demanding she give us a chance.

We owe each other an honest conversation.

Zoe and I weren’t even that serious. We were convenient, fun even, but it didn’t feel like this.

It’s nothing like how I feel when I’m around Sofia.

I run my hand through my hair and groan, pacing the living room like a caged animal. She feels it too, I know she does. The way she watches me whenever she’s nearby. The way her breath hitches when I get too close, and how her eyes lingered for just a second too long before I left.

Damn it. Before I talk myself out of it, I head through the back door again and step over the fence that separates our gardens.

I stand at her patio doors. She's inside with her back to me and her head hung low like she's got the world on her shoulders. I gently tap on the glass, and she spins to face me. She holds eye contact as she approaches, slowly sliding the door open.

"Ric, you can't be here," she almost whispers.

"Because you feel it too, Sofia. Ignoring it is an injustice to us both. I get it, Zoe was my girlfriend," I say gently. Her eyes flicker, hurt and hesitation evident. "I ended it because of my feelings for you. Because I couldn't keep pretending I wanted her when all I want is you."

She backs away, her breathing heavy with emotion. "It's not that simple."

I reach out, barely touching her arm, and she inhales sharply. "Then tell me you don't want this. Look me in the eye and say you don't feel the same."

She doesn't. She can't. But I don't miss the turmoil playing out on her face.

When she finally looks up at me, her eyes are wide and vulnerable, I don't wait.

I close the gap between us and I kiss her.

Soft at first, hesitant, like a question, but when she leans into me, when her fingers twist in my shirt and she kisses me back, it's not a question anymore.

It's everything we've been holding back. And it's real.

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Her breath is shallow against my lips, but she doesn't pull away this time. Not like before. Instead, she stays there with her eyes closed and her forehead resting against mine like she's trying to memorise every detail as her eyes roam my face. "I shouldn't want this," she eventually whispers.

"I know," I breathe, "but we do. It feels right."

"If Zoe ever found out . . ."

"She won't," I say quickly. "No one has to know right now. Just . . . say yes."

There's a beat of silence between us. It hangs heavy. She could still ask me to leave, and I would—this time for good—but I see that flicker of surrender in her eyes.

She nods once, barely, and it's all I need. I slam my mouth against hers, and this time, the kiss is bruising as I walk her backwards. There's no hesitation anymore. No asking. Her hands find my shoulders then slide into my hair, pulling me closer like she's been starved for this . . . for me.

We stumble back, all our earlier guilt forgotten. Her lips are warm and soft, just like I imagined, and as we fall back onto the couch, it feels like we're crossing a line we'll never come back from.

And neither of us want to.

She clambers over me, pressing her delicate hands against my chest as she pulls back, breaking the kiss.

I slide my hands around her waist, keeping eye contact as I slide them up under her shirt, running my hands over her soft skin.

Her chest rises and falls in time with mine, and when I gather her shirt, she helps me lift it over her head, throwing it to the floor.

She's naked underneath, and I move closer until my lips are almost touching her nipple. I glance up, "If you want me to stop—"

"I don't," she whispers.

I circle her nipple with my tongue, enjoying her sharp intake of breath. And when I suck her into my mouth, her fingernails dig into my shoulder, and she grinds against my straining erection.

She reaches for my shirt, clumsily unfastening the buttons as I continue to tease her. "God, I've thought about this long before I should have," she pants, tugging my shirt from me and discarding it.

"Me too," I admit, popping the button on my jeans before pulling my wallet out and taking a condom from it.

She climbs from me, making fast work of removing her clothes as I slide my jeans from me, kicking them to the pile of abandoned clothing.

And then I stop, looking at her and drinking her in.

Every curve, every inch is . . . "You're so damn beautiful," I say, my voice sounding gruff.

Her cheeks colour slightly, and I reach for her hand, tugging her to sit back over me

so I can pull her in for another toe-curling kiss.

My fingers trace down her sides and along her thighs until she's panting for air between clumsy kisses.

I rip the condom packet open and sheath my erection. And when she finally lines me at her entrance, sliding onto me inch by inch, we both groan like our worlds have tilted. Her hands grip my shoulders, her nails gently biting into my skin as she begins to ride me . Fuck . She feels good.

We move together, every thrust a silent confession.

We've both wanted this for too long. I grip her around the waist, turning us so she's lying beneath me.

The hunger in her eyes lights a fire inside me as I thrust harder.

Her lips roam my chest, then my shoulder, then my throat, with her teeth gently grazing my skin.

She comes undone first, crying out and arching her back.

I catch her nipple, dragging every ounce from her as she writhes beneath me.

I follow seconds later, groaning as I strain to empty every last drop.

I bury my face against her neck, breathing hard as we both come back down to Earth.

I drop down beside her, pulling her into my side and wrapping my arms around her tightly, like I'm afraid she'll regret what we just did.

We stay like that for a few minutes, catching our breaths as silence stretches out between us.

Eventually, she says, “We just made everything a lot more complicated.” She traces her fingers over my chest.

I kiss her forehead. “I’ll protect you from the chaos.” Because there’s no way I’m letting her go now.

Zoe

“Have you heard from him?” asks Meg as she places two coffees on the table.

I shake my head. “I should have known,” I almost whisper, stirring my drink. “I just wasn’t supposed to get the nice guy.”

Meg sighs, placing her hand over mine. “You deserve to be happy, Zo. Maybe Ric just isn’t it for you, but there will be someone out there. Someone who will treat you like the queen you are.”

I place the spoon down, mulling over my next words carefully. “He likes Sofia.”

She stares wide-eyed. “Of course, he doesn’t. Don’t be ridiculous.”

“I asked him, Meg. I asked outright, and he didn’t deny it.”

She looks shocked, which I’m glad about. At least it hasn’t been blaringly obvious. “Is that why he ended things?”

“Yes. No. Maybe.”

“And that’s why you thought she’d told him about the abortion?”

“I didn’t know at that point, but I only told you two. I shouldn’t have jumped to conclusions. And it turns out he found out from the emails on my phone.”

“Oh.” She frowns. “Wait, he went through your phone?”

I half laugh. “I’d be mad if I wasn’t so . . . sad.”

“Oh, Zo, I’m so sorry this happened. What a mess.”

“Sofia doesn’t know how he feels,” I say, “and I told him not to tell her.” Meg bites her lower lip, and I groan. “Does that make me terrible?” She shakes her head. “I don’t want to lose her, and I thought if she never knows, we’ll be fine. We can just carry on like Ric never happened.”

“You’re trying to keep your friendship, and he’s got no right trampling between you. Anyway, Sofia wouldn’t go there.”

“But if she knew . . . if she felt something too . . .”

“She wouldn’t,” Meg repeats more firmly.

I don’t reply because there’s a nagging whisper in the back of my mind telling me I might be wrong and that me preventing him from telling her is more to protect my own heart and dignity over our friendship. What kind of a person does that make me?

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Sofia

I watch Ric slide the door shut behind him before he hops back over the fence to his place.

Silence stretches out in his absence. My skin tingles where he touched me, and I can still taste him on my lips, feel his breath against my neck.

My body is a mess of need and want, but my mind .

. . it's already catching up to the reality of what we've just done.

I wrap the blanket tighter around myself, sinking into the corner of the couch, knees tucked to my chest. The air still smells like him, his spicy aftershave lingering. My phone buzzes.

I almost don't check it, because it'll be a reminder that reality is lingering and I'll have to face the shitstorm that will inevitably follow, but something in me twists as a flicker of guilt is already rooting in my gut. It's a feeling I'm certain will linger.

It only intensifies when I see Zoe's name there.

Zoe: Hey, are you around? I know it's getting late, but I really need someone to chat to. Love you x

My stomach drops and tears prick my eyes. Shit. She trusted me, and here I am, betraying her in every way possible. My heart pounds as I type out a reply.

Me: I'm here. You okay?

I'm not sure how to fix what I've broken. I'm not sure I even want to, but ignoring her won't help things.

Zoe: I'm just leaving Meg's. I'll be five minutes.

Fuck. I dive from the couch and pull my clothes on. Grabbing the air fresher, I spray copious amounts to disguise the smell of sex mixed with his aftershave.

Exactly five minutes later, her knock at the door makes me jump in fright. I glance around the kitchen one last time before opening it.

I almost smile at her dramatic entrance as she breezes past me wearing oversized sunglasses despite the sun setting almost half an hour ago, an iced latte in her hand. "I was with Meg, but Hugo turned up, and I can hardly slag his brother off in front of him."

I swallow down the retort which points out I'm her second choice and go with, "Hi to you too."

"Hi," she cries, dropping down on the couch in the corner of the kitchen.

The one I was just fucking her ex on. I wince, turning away and beginning to stack the dishwasher.

If I'm busy, she won't see the guilt pouring from me.

"I don't have time for hi when I've just been dumped by a man who wears socks to bed."

I blink. “Ric wears socks to bed?”

“No. Well, sometimes. That’s not the point.” She waves her hand impatiently. “The point is, he had the audacity to play down our relationship. He said we weren’t serious. Like, excuse me, what do you call exclusive dinners and me posting him twice on my stories?”

I stop what I’m doing and sit beside her. “I’m really sorry, Zoe.” If only she knew how loaded that apology is.

She shrugs, sipping on her iced latte like she’s unbothered, even as her voice trembles slightly. “Whatever. His loss. But I have been thinking . . .” She sits up. “I find it weird how fast he bounced. Do you think he’s seeing someone else?”

I keep my expression neutral. “You think there’s someone?”

Zoe eyes me carefully . . . too carefully. “I mean, no guy just flips his feelings off like that. And with you living next door, you must see him coming and going all the time.”

I frown. “I mean, yeah, I guess. We run into each other sometimes.”

Zoe snorts. “Come off it, Sofia.” I stiffen at her words, holding my breath and waiting for her to call me out, but she laughs. “You’re friends, I get it, and he felt sorry for you a few times—”

My brows furrow. “What do you mean?”

She waves her hand dismissively. “Have you ever seen anything suspicious? Does he have women around when I’m not about?”

I shrug, feeling the weight of her stare. “I don’t watch him, Zo. That would be weird and a little stalkerish. I’ve never even seen you coming and going, least of all other women.”

She taps her chin thoughtfully. “And you haven’t heard . . . anything ?”

“Like?”

“Yah know, noises.” She grins. “He can be vocal in the bedroom.”

I feel my cheeks heat. “Christ, no.”

She slumps back on the couch, her expression thoughtful before she changes the subject to tell me about their most recent fight and how she’d cried in the Uber home and smudged her makeup.

It was one of her most commented on posts.

But I can feel it lingering in the air, the unspoken words between us.

She doesn’t know.

But she’s guessing. Prodding for information. Letting me know she’s onto him.

And if we’re not careful, she’ll call us both out.

The following morning, Harry wakes with his usual squawking, and I wrap my dressing gown around my aching body before going to him.

It’s been so long since I’ve been with a man, I’m feeling the strain in all muscles.

I smile to myself as I lift Harry from his cot and smother him in kisses. My mood feels better. Happier.

I change his bottom, and we head downstairs. I almost scream in fright when I spot Ric standing at the window again. He holds up two takeout coffees and a brown pastry bag. I can't fight the smile as I unlock the door and let him in. "Good morning," he whispers, pressing his lips to mine.

Harry kicks his legs with excitement and reaches for Ric, who wastes no time dumping the breakfast and taking him from me.

"Good morning to you too, little man." And he presses a kiss to his head, melting my heart completely.

"I got us a croissant," he tells me, using his free hand to open the paper bag.

The smell is delicious, and my stomach grumbles. "And I got you a coffee."

"Thank you. You didn't have to do that."

"I know, but I go to the gym early and always call in to grab something at the patisserie."

I laugh. "Doesn't that counteract the gym?" Not that you'd be able to tell—his body is sculptured like a god's.

"I thought we could walk to work together," he suggests, his voice hopeful.

I sigh heavily as I place Harry's bottle in the warmer. "Ric, you know we can't."

"Tell people we're good friends."

“And if Zoe or Meg see us?”

“Zoe doesn’t roll out of bed before eleven, and Meg doesn’t get into work early.”

I give the bottle a shake. “Zoe came over last night.” He waits for me to continue, taking the bottle from me and sticking it in Harry’s mouth. “She’s suspicious.”

“Of us?”

“Not per say, but she thinks you’ve met someone.”

He sits on the couch with Harry on his lap. “I told her I like you. I didn’t hide that.”

“So, why is she asking me if I’ve ever seen you with other women?”

He shrugs. “I was honest to a point, Sofia. I told her I like someone and it wasn’t fair on her. She guessed it was you, and I didn’t correct her.”

My heart twists. “Why would she guess it was me?”

“Because I’ve hardly hidden it. I took you to dinner and forgot I was even meeting Zoe. I went to Meg to say I was worried about you. It’s clear as day.”

I’m already shaking my head, panic taking over.

He lays Harry on the couch and places a pillow beside him to stop him rolling, which brings a smile to my face.

He takes my hand and looks me in the eye.

“She asked me not to tell you. So, as far as she’s aware, you have no idea.

Maybe she was fishing to see if I had told you. ”

I groan, and he pulls me against his chest, kissing my head. “It’s all so complicated,” I complain.

“Just let the shitstorm settle. She’ll move on soon enough, and until then, we’ll lay low. No walks to work.”

I glance up. “And no tapping on my back door. What if she was here?”

“I’m a quick thinker. I’d have said I was checking on her.”

“My heart can’t take the anxiety, Ric. Please, no more surprise visits.”

I get to work on time, and even the scowl that Amelia throws my way can’t upset me today. It’s Friday, and I plan on seeing Ric later. Nothing can bother me.

“Hey, new girl,” she calls over, and I look up from my desk. “There’s a stationary delivery and you have to put it away.”

“Why?”

She smirks to her friends, and I roll my eyes. “Because you’re the new girl, obvs.”

“I’m not new though,” I remind her.

“Don’t shoot the messenger. Dex told me to tell you.”

I glance at the empty office. “And where is he?”

“How should I know? I’m not his keeper,” she snaps.

I groan and push to my feet. It's easier just to do it and question it later. I step into the store cupboard and sigh heavily. There're boxes upon boxes, and it'll take me all morning.

I turn to find the light switch right as the door slams shut, leaving me in complete darkness.

"Fuck ," I hiss, feeling for the door. I give it a shove, but it doesn't budge.

"Double fuck." I feel along the wall for a light switch, but there's nothing.

I try to navigate around boxes, stumbling a few times before giving up and going back to the door.

It's still firmly locked, so I bang, gently at first, but when no one answers, I start to feel panicked and bang harder.

"Hello? Anyone? I'm locked in." Nothing.

"Can anyone hear me?" Nothing. "Amelia? Anyone?"

I press my ear to it. All I can hear is the muffled sound of the office music. It's the techno shit, the kind that hurts my head, and today, it's muting my cries for help. Damn it.

"Hello!" I call, slamming my body into the wood. "Somebody help me!"

The music stops and I sigh in relief, banging hard. "Help, I'm stuck!" Then the sound of sniggering can be heard and my blood runs cold. "Is anyone there?"

"Is anyone there?" It's Amelia's voice mocking me. "Get a grip, Sofia. You're not in

prison.”

“The door’s jammed,” I call. “Open it from your end.”

“I can’t. It isn’t working,” she says, even though I hear nothing her side.

“Did you try?”

“Are you calling me a liar?”

I groan, resting my forehead against it. “I don’t have time for this, Amelia. Just open the damn door.”

“Take a nap. You look like you need it,” she says, and there’s more giggling, meaning she’s with her arse-licking friends.

“I’m serious, guys. This isn’t funny.”

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“We have to go now,” she calls, and the music turns back on and up.

I groan, feeling for the boxes and sitting down. I’ll just have to wait until she gets bored.

I’m not sure when I pass out, sprawled out on top of the boxes. But I wake with a start when light floods the cupboard and Dexter’s booming voice wakes me. “What the hell are you doing?”

I sit up, shading my eyes from the sudden brightness. “Thank god you’re back,” I say, standing and feeling flustered. “I was locked in.”

He gives me a doubtful glare. “Wait for me in my office. Now.”

I head inside, straightening my hair as I do, and when I glance out the window, he’s speaking with Amelia quietly.

But before I can jump in to defend myself, he joins me, slamming the office door closed.

“It’s almost three o’clock,” he snaps, and my heart stutters.

“Amelia tells me you’ve been in there all day putting ‘stationary away’.” He uses air quotes.

The realisation that I’ve missed almost an entire day of work makes me feel sick. I have so much to do. “She locked me in there,” I accuse, “and refused to let me out. I

must've nodded off."

He scoffs. "So, she locked you in, and you happily fell asleep? You didn't think to call for help?"

"I tried. She turned the music up."

Dexter pinches the bridge of his nose and sighs. "Look, Sofia, this is getting ridiculous. There are witnesses who say you never called for help. Who said you were going to put the stationary away and you never reappeared."

"Let me guess, Lula and Noah?"

"Amongst others."

"She's telling them to lie," I cry. "She even told me to put the stationary away. Said you'd given the order."

"How, when I was in meetings all day?"

I suddenly feel silly. He believes her. Of course, he does. "You're not impartial," I snap. "She's lying, not me."

"I'm merely looking at the evidence, Sofia. I found you asleep in the cupboard." He opens a picture on his phone and shows me. I immediately groan at the sight of me spread out, sleeping peacefully. "This is your first official warning."

"What?" I cry.

"If anything else happens like this, I'll have no choice but to take things further."

“That’s not fair,” I yell, rushing to the door and ripping it open.

I turn the music off, my face red with fury as I turn to face my colleagues, who are now all looking in my direction.

“Someone please say something,” I beg. “You all must have heard me calling for help.” Blank faces stare back at me.

“I’m getting a warning for something I didn’t do,” I add.

“So, you didn’t fall asleep in the cupboard?” asks Amelia, smirking as she crosses her arms over her chest.

“Well, yes, I did. I have a baby, of course, I’d nod off in the dark if left to it. But you locked me in there and refused to let me out.”

Her mouth falls open like she’s shocked, and she glances around the office. “Oh my god, you’re blaming me? Sofia, I was doing interviews most of the day.”

Tears fill my eyes, and I nod in understanding as I scan the room. No one is willing to stand up to the office bully. Not for me, anyway.

“You’ll need to stay behind and complete whatever you need to do,” Dexter mutters from behind me.

“I can’t. I have Harry to collect.”

“It wasn’t a polite request, Sofia,” he adds, heading into his office and closing the door.

I groan and head for my desk. I type off a text to Meg asking if she’ll collect Harry,

which thankfully she agrees to. Then I call the nursery to let them know.

Eric

It was Meg who approached me at work and asked me to come to dinner this evening.

It's not something she's done before, but I have a sneaky suspicion it's to do with the breakup, so I agreed.

And now, as I sit entertaining Harry, I regret it, because she's eyeing me suspiciously as she chops potatoes.

"What?" I eventually ask.

"I didn't see it when Dan first started cheating on me," she begins, and I brace myself in case she demands the truth. "Actually, that's sort of a lie. I suspected it because he was acting odd, but I don't think I thought he was cheating until I actually caught him in the act."

"Dan's a prick," I say, shrugging.

"Maybe I was hoping I was wrong, but when I think back, it was a gut feeling, yah know."

"Where is this going?"

Hugo enters the kitchen freshly showered, his tattooed torso glistening, and Meg practically melts as he places a kiss on her head. "Dinner smells good," he tells her. "Can I help?"

"She was just accusing me of cheating on Zoe," I say, and she rolls her eyes because

I've outed her to my big brother.

"Men don't often leave a good relationship unless it's for another woman," she says, shrugging.

I approach the kitchen island and rest my hands against the white marble Hugo imported from Greece because it reminded them of their first holiday together. "I was honest with Zoe, which is more than I can say for her."

"Not entirely honest because you snooped in her phone."

"For good reason."

"There's never a good reason," Hugo interjects, and I glare at him.

"She aborted my child and forgot to mention it." Meg opens her mouth to speak, but I cut her off by holding my hand up. "And I know—her body, her choice. I get that now. But I can still be upset about it." I narrow my eyes. "And I can still be pissed that my sister-in-law hid it from me."

"Not fair," she snaps. "She was my friend before I was your sister-in-law."

"I told Zoe the truth. I have feelings for Sofia. Once I realised, I ended it with Zo. That was the right thing to do because I can't be in love with her if I'm thinking about her best friend."

Hugo's expression softens. "He's got a point," he tells Meg.

"It's what happens from now that worries me," she admits.

"Zoe made it clear I'm not to tell Sofia. It's a selfish thing to do, but I respect her

wishes.”

“That’s not entirely true,” mutters Hugo, avoiding my glare.

“I almost told her, but I stopped myself,” I cut in before he can grass me up. He glances up, and I give my head a slight shake. He knows better than to break bro code before I’ve had a chance to explain things, so he reluctantly nods. It means my secret is safe for now.

The front door opens and Sofia bustles in looking stressed. Her step falters when she sets eyes on me, but she recovers quickly, turning to Meg. “I am so sorry,” she rushes out, rounding the island, and they embrace. “Thank you so much for picking him up.”

“It wasn’t a problem.”

“It won’t happen again.” And she goes to Harry, who reaches up for her. “Hey, baby,” she whispers, kissing him. “I missed you.”

“I’ve made enough dinner to feed an army,” says Meg. “Why don’t you stay?”

Sofia briefly glances my way before smiling in Meg’s direction. “Only if you’re sure.”

“Absolutely. Ric, help Hugo set the table,” she adds.

I follow my brother into the dining room and watch as he gets table mats from the cupboard. “You just made me lie to my future wife,” he states.

“It wasn’t a lie. I’m just not ready for Meg to know how Sofia knocked me back.”

“Why?”

“Because it will complicate everything. Zoe will know Sofia knows how I feel. It’ll put an unnecessary strain on their friendship because of me. Let’s just leave it and let the dust settle. They won’t be talking about the breakup by next week.”

He scoffs. “You’re underestimating how upset Zoe is,” he states. “She was round here last night talking to Meg, who said she’s never seen her so upset.”

“Because she’s not used to men walking away,” I snap. “She’s embarrassed. She’ll get over it. And the process will be a lot quicker if everyone stops telling tales.”

Dinner is a painful ordeal. I sit opposite Sofia so as not to arouse suspicion. If I was beside her, I wouldn’t be able to help myself from touching her. It’s like there’s an invisible pull between us, and that’s all I can think about.

After, Sofia insists on clearing up, and I jump at the chance to help, so I grab some of the empty plates and follow her to the kitchen.

The second we’re alone, I dump them on the side and grab her, pulling her to me and kissing her.

It’s exciting and breathtaking, with the pull between us crackling to life.

“Stop,” she whispers, giggling as I release her.

“I can’t wait to get you home,” I murmur.

“How come you’re here, anyway?” she asks, rinsing the dishes and passing them to me to load the dishwasher.

It’s the last thing I want to talk about because I know it’ll make her nervous if I mention Meg’s onto me too, so I shrug. “Hugo invited me after work instead of going

to the pub. The others couldn't make it. How come you were so late?"

She hesitates too, also shrugging. "It was a long day, and I had some urgent things to get off for print."

I smile. "The life of a journalist."

Zoe

I narrow my eyes. "What do you mean you invited them both for dinner?"

Meg suddenly looks unsure. "Well, I originally invited Ric so I could talk to him about you. But I had Harry unexpectedly, and so when Sofia came to collect him, I thought it would be a good opportunity to see if I could pick up on anything between them."

"And?"

"And no, she hardly even glanced his way. She was quiet, actually."

I give her my best 'I told you so' look. "Which is my point entirely."

"Because she's quiet, you think she's suddenly in love with your ex?"

I resent the judgement and pout. "Of course not, but she's acting odd. Quiet. Not texting me like she normally would. When you broke up with Dan, she was always calling in on you to check up."

"A little different—I was married to Dan for ten years. Plus, we have a child together."

“I don’t think we should make this a competition, Meg. My point is, she’s not acting like the caring best friend I expected.”

“Maybe she’s still struggling with Harry?”

“Maybe we need to drop by and check on her again.”

Meg narrows her eyes like she’s suddenly switched teams. “Check to see if you catch her with Ric?”

I scoff. “No, Meg. Check that Harry hasn’t driven her into the nearest river.”

She gasps, standing. “Oh my god, do you think she’s suicidal?”

I also stand and grab my bag as Meg shoves her feet into her trainers. “I think kids make you do silly things.”

“Hugo, I need to nip out. I shouldn’t be long,” she calls as we head for the door.

Hugo appears in the living room doorway. “Hold up. Where to?”

“To check on Sofia. Zoe thinks she’s suicidal.”

He frowns too, concern marring his features. “Shit. Should I call Ric to go round and check on her?”

God, this is backfiring. “Yes,” agrees Meg, “great idea.”

“No,” I cut in. “Jesus, I don’t think she’s killed herself,” I say, rolling my eyes. “We just need to work out why she’s so quiet.” They both visibly relax. “Now, if the fire’s out, can we make a move?”

Hugo takes Meg's hand and pulls her to him, kissing her on the nose. "I'll run you a bath for when you get home."

She blushes, and I groan. "Okay, people, enough. Some of us hate love." And I shove her out the door.

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Sofia

Ric's hand is tracing lazy circles on my bare hip, his breath tickling the curve of my neck.

We're tangled in sheets, limbs wrapped around each other, and a happy sigh leaves me.

It's easy to pretend when it's just the two of us locked away in our own bubble.

It's like the world outside of us doesn't exist.

The doorbell rings, and I freeze.

Ric goes still beside me. "Are you expecting anyone?"

I shake my head, my heart hammering in my chest. "No."

The buzzer sounds again. A second, more urgent ring, and then a voice.

"Sof, it's me and Meg."

Zoe . Shit.

I throw the sheets off and scramble for my clothes, adrenaline hitting me like a cold slap. Ric's already halfway out of bed, tugging on his jeans.

“Upstairs, spare room,” I hiss, grabbing his hoodie and tossing it at him. “And stay quiet.”

He gives me a look, half amused, half annoyed. “You want me to hide in your attic?”

I glare at him. “You want to face Meg and Zoe, explain why you’re naked in my bed?”

He doesn’t argue. I shove him towards the guest room upstairs just as Zoe knocks on the door, this time more dramatic. “Sof, babe, are you alive? You’re scaring Meg out here.”

Meg’s voice follows. “We just want to check in.”

I yank my hoodie on over my head, trying to flatten my hair as I take the stairs two at a time with my heart in my throat and my cheeks burning red. The second I open the door, Zoe sweeps in like a queen.

“Finally,” she says, all glossy lips and too big glasses. “You look . . . flushed.”

“I was napping,” I lie. “I must’ve dosed off when I put Harry down.”

Meg gives me a hug. “We just wanted to see how you were.”

I frown. “You saw me at dinner.”

She glances to Zoe, who’s made herself comfortable on the couch. “I know, but Zo and I got talking and we were worried you’re struggling again. You’re not yourself.”

“I’ve been tired,” I say, shrugging. “Work and Harry . . . it’s all new, remember.”

“And I’m in the middle of a messy breakup,” snaps Zoe, rolling her eyes.

Meg offers another sympathetic smile. We both know how Zoe can be. “If you’re sure that’s all it is,” she says.

“Men are trash, content is dead, and I’m sick of ruining my makeup,” Zoe says dramatically. “And my two best friends don’t even care.”

Meg rolls her eyes, and we share a smirk. “Are you alone?” she asks, her voice slightly lower, and I’m not sure if she meant to keep it so Zoe can’t hear. I glance in her direction, but she hasn’t heard. She’s too busy scrolling through her phone.

I clear my throat. “Uh, yeah. Just me and Harry.” Upstairs, I swear I hear a floorboard creak.

Please, God, don’t let them stay long.

Meg heads into the kitchen. “Hope you don’t mind,” she calls out, and I hear wine glasses clink. “You’ve got that sauvignon I love.”

I swallow, my heart sinking. “Sure. Help yourself.”

Zoe kicks off her shoes and tucks her feet underneath her. She takes a selfie, pouting. “Checking on my ghost bestie. Still hot, still alive,” she reads as she types.

“You’re so dramatic,” I mutter. “And I haven’t been ghosting you.”

She brings her eyes to me. “Your hair is wild,” she says. “Like bed-head wild.”

“I told you, I was napping.”

Meg returns offering us each a glass of wine. I take mine and down half of it to calm my racing heart. I keep glancing at the ceiling, listening for any sign of movement. I'm a bag of nerves.

Then, my phone buzzes on the coffee table.

Ric: How long are you going to be? I need round two!

I don't move fast enough. Zoe leans forward. "Ooooh, who's that?"

I snatch the phone and flip it face down. "No one."

Zoe raises her perfectly arched brow. "Round two? Sounds like someone's been busy."

Meg says nothing, but her eyes slide to me thoughtfully.

"It's just a joke from one of the girls in the office. About my boss."

Zoe grins, stretching like a cat. "Well, good for you. It's about time you dusted off the cobwebs."

She clinks her glass with mine, but her voice is sweet. Too sweet, like she's waiting to see if I flinch. Meg keeps her silence, sipping her wine but occasionally glancing at the stairs. That feels more like an accusation than words ever could.

I take another drink, suddenly desperate for it all to be over. For them to leave. For Ric to come down. For this secret to stop being so loud. But I smile like everything's fine and lie like it's the most natural thing in the world.

We're halfway through the second bottle when Zoe suddenly stands and stretches.

“Ugh, I need to pee. Be right back.”

My heart stutters. “Use the one down here,” I say as she heads for the stairs.

She waves a hand. “Your downstairs one stinks of nappies. It’s really gross to keep the nappy bin in there.”

She begins to climb the stairs. “Zoe.” I lurch forward, almost knocking over my wine. I stand, panicked, unsure how to stop her. “Where else am I supposed to keep them? Anyway, it’s cleaner down here. Upstairs is a mess.”

She pauses, her manicured nail tapping on the banister. “Sof, I’ve seen you cry while Meg crammed a tampon up your nose to stop a bleed. You think I care if your laundry’s on the floor?” She continues to climb.

Shit. Shit. Shit.

My pulse slams in my ears. I shoot Meg a panicked look, and she stares back over her wine glass like she’s waiting for the car crash to happen.

“Zoe . . .” I try again, but it’s too late.

She’s already on the upper landing. I stand frozen, heart hammering, praying Ric stayed up in the guest room.

Praying he didn’t sneak back down. Her voice floats downstairs. “Why’s your guestroom door shut?”

My mouth goes dry. “Because it’s messy. I don’t need you judging me. Hurry up before you wake Harry.”

Meg speaks for the first time. “You’ve got two minutes, maybe less.” I stare at her, my breathing heavy. She looks calm, yet her eyes look sharp, cutting. “You better hope she doesn’t open that door.”

“Meg . . . I—”

She holds up her hand. “Not now, Sofia. Not now.”

A flush. The sound of running water. Then the bathroom door creaks open, and I hold my breath, listening for her footsteps on the landing. When she appears, still scrolling on her mobile, totally unbothered, I want to cry with relief. “You really need to get scented candles up there.”

I let out a shaky laugh. “Noted.”

She plops back down on the sofa, sipping her wine, unaware of the way I’m gripping my glass like a lifeline. Meg keeps her eyes on me, piercing into my soul. She knows. Not everything—not yet—but enough that she’ll give me the third degree when we’re alone, and I’m not sure I can lie to her face.

After a few more minutes of idle chat and filtered selfies, Zoe stretches again and announces, “Okay, I feel slightly less dead inside now. Mission accomplished. But don’t go quiet on me again.

I need you. It’s exhausting being heartbroken.

” And she heads for the door. Meg follows, and I’m relieved the second they step out and I close and lock it.

I slump back against it, my head tipped back, eyes squeezed shut.

I hear a door upstairs creak then Ric's voice. "Are you okay?"

I open my eyes as a stray tear trickles down my cheek. "No," I whisper, "not even a little."

"I'll go . . . if that's what you want." I know he's just saying the words to test the water, but right now, I need space. I can't think this through with a clear head when I'm drawn to him.

"I'll call," I mutter. "Leave out the back in case they're lingering."

Eric

Fuck. Why is this so hard? Zoe's playing the broken-hearted victim, but seriously, I don't buy it. She was never that into me. No way.

I call Jimmy the second I get home. "What?" he answers impatiently.

"I need you."

"On my way." And he disconnects.

I pour myself a whiskey and wait. Jimmy is disconnected. He's single. He's not clouded by emotion or with a woman in his ear. So, when he arrives ten minutes later with Seb and Hugo, I groan.

Hugo recognises my disgruntled expression and pats me on the shoulder. "We were together when you called."

Jimmy takes the whiskey bottle and swigs straight from it before passing it to Seb. "They insisted on coming too."

“Right, well, this is sensitive, and I don’t need Katie’s bitch or Meg’s right-hand man, lecturing me.”

“That’s not fair,” says Seb, taking a seat at the table. “Katie doesn’t control me, yah know.” I arch a brow, and he relents, shrugging, “At least not all the time.”

“You clearly need to talk, so let’s talk,” says Jimmy, also sitting and dragging the chair beside him out for me. I reluctantly take it, and Hugo grabs three more glasses and a fresh bottle of whiskey from the cupboard.

“Forget it,” I mutter. There’s no point now, not when Hugo could run right back to Meg and tell her everything.

As if he’s heard my thoughts, he fixes me with a hard stare and says, “I’m your brother. What you say tonight in this kitchen stays between us.”

“Can I say it without judgement?”

He looks hurt. “I’d never judge you, Ric. I might give advice you’re not ready to hear, but I’m never judging.”

I sigh. “I’m falling for Sofia . . . and she feels the same.”

Hugo pours us all a drink. “That’s good. It’s what you wanted,” he says. “Isn’t it?”

“But Zoe told me I can’t pursue Sofia.”

“Maybe she knew deep down Sofia felt the same,” Jimmy suggests.

“Either way, I didn’t listen. And now, Zoe and Meg are on our case, turning up unannounced and hanging around asking questions.” The words sound angry as they

leave my mouth. “It’s making Sofia doubt us.”

“You’ve got two options,” says Jimmy. “Tell them straight—”

“Never gonna happen. It’s too soon, and Sofia doesn’t want to lose her closest friends,” I say.

“That leaves us with option two—show her it’s worth it, that you’re worth it.”

“How?” I ask.

Jimmy laughs. “Show her that Chadwick charm. Sneaking around for a quick lay isn’t making her see a future with you, and if she’s what you want, show her what you can offer her.”

“I never thought I’d say this, but he’s got a point,” Hugo agrees.

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I look at Seb. “And you? What do you think?”

“Yeah, Jimmy’s right. Sofia is a mother before anything else. She’s looking for security for her and Harry. If this is what you want,” he looks me in the eye before continuing, “and you have to want it, Ric, because fucking her around isn’t an option. Show her you’re the man for them both.”

“I just need to add that I agree with Seb,” says Hugo. “You really need to be sure about this, because if you blow up her life, ruin her friendships, and then walk away, she’ll never recover.”

I nod. “I’ve never been so sure about anything in my life. I’m ready to settle down, and I couldn’t see that with Zoe. But Sofia, she was made for me.”

I sleep on it, mainly because Sofia needed the break and a chance to get her head clear. But from today, we start again. From today, I’m going to show her I’m serious. She’s mine. Her and Harry.

I go to her front door and knock. The knot in my chest is tight, pulling with each second that passes. I practised what I wanted to say in the shower, keeping it light, easy, like none of it is unravelling around us.

She opens the door with tired eyes and a cautious smile. She looks unsure and defeated. That knot pulls tighter, threatening to choke me.

“Hey,” I say, stuffing my hands in my pockets. “Thought maybe you and the little man could use a day out.”

She blinks. “Ric—”

“I know,” I cut in, stepping inside before she can object. “Things are messy, but it’s going to blow over.”

She closes the door and leans against it, tilting her head slightly. “You don’t know that.”

“No,” I admit, “but I’m manifesting.”

She studies me for a long moment, assessing me, trying to find a catch. “You don’t have to pretend everything is fine,” she says gently.

“I’m not pretending.” I offer a crooked smile. “I’m just . . . choosing hope today.”

She inhales deeply before seemingly making her mind up and heading into the kitchen. I follow and spot Harry in his highchair rubbing his hands into whatever he had for breakfast. Sofia begins to wipe him clean. “What were you thinking?” she eventually asks.

I smile, knowing I’ve won. For today, at least. “The zoo.”

She glances back over her shoulder. “The zoo?”

“Yeah, yah know, that place with tigers and lions.”

She smiles. “Okay.”

I can’t fight the huge grin. “Okay.”

The zoo was a good idea. And it’s guaranteed to be Zoe free, which means Sofia feels

fully relaxed as we stroll side-by-side around the animals. Harry babbles excitedly from his pushchair, and when we get to the monkeys, I take him out and lift him so he can see them properly.

“These were my favourite animals as a kid,” I tell her.

“Did you come to the zoo often?” she asks as I hold Harry to the glass as an inquisitive monkey approaches. Harry kicks his legs excitedly, and I smile.

“Yeah. It was a treat every few years.” I laugh to myself as memories assault my brain. God, I haven’t thought about it in years. “We were a handful.”

Sofia nods, her eyes crinkling as she smiles. “I can imagine having four boys was a nightmare.”

“We’d run around like gremlins and Mum couldn’t keep up,” I confess.

“She’d be running from one to the other, while the third was getting into mischief elsewhere.

” I release a happy sigh. “One time, we were at the peacocks and the damn thing screeched so loud. It was like something out of Jurassic Park, and Seb dropped his ice cream in fright. Of course, he screamed the place down and set the entire monkey enclosure off. They were all screeching back, and we all ran off like the dinosaurs were actually descending. Hugo, the ever-responsible older brother, was yelling at us to stop running whilst Mum tried to console Seb.” I chuckle to myself.

“Pure chaos. And Dad still laughs now when Mum retells the story.” I glance to find her smiling too.

“You’ll have to ask her, she tells it way better than me. ”

“I can’t ever imagine that,” she almost whispers.

“Talking to my mum?” I ask. “The most caring and welcoming woman on this planet?”

“She is lovely,” Sofia rushes to add, “but when she finds out I’m the reason you dumped Zoe, she might not be so welcoming.”

I move Harry to my hip and run my hand through Sofia’s hair, resting it on the back of her neck. “Zoe isn’t in my mum’s good books right now. But if she were to see her on the street, she’d still stop and have a conversation about the weather or her favourite recipe of the week. She doesn’t judge.”

“I love being with your family,” she admits, peeking up at me through her lashes like she’s embarrassed. “Watching you all together makes me warm inside. You’re so lucky.”

I tug her to me, placing a kiss on her forehead. “I want you to be part of that too, Sofia. You and Harry.”

“It’s not that I don’t want to. I just . . .” She looks me in the eye. “I don’t want to be the reason Zoe’s hurting.”

“We were already coming apart, Sofia. You didn’t break me and Zoe. You just . . . made me realise what I actually wanted.”

She scoffs, running her hand over Harry’s soft hair. “A single mother with her life falling apart?”

“That’s not how I see you. You’re strong and gorgeous.

The sort of woman I want to raise my babies with.

” She inhales sharply, her eyes searching mine for the lie, but she won’t find it.

I didn’t realise how serious I was until the words left my mouth.

“I’m not letting you walk away just because things got complicated. ”

“It’s not just about complications,” she says, her eyes still searching. “It’s about trust. About loyalty . She’s my best friend.”

“I get that. I do. And if you need space, I’ll give it to you. But I’m here because I can’t shake the feeling that this,” I gesture between us, “is something real. And I’d regret it every damn day if I didn’t fight for it.”

She stays quiet, just looking at me, her expression unreadable. Her eyes flicker to Harry, who’s now looking up at me too with his little chubby hand raised. I move slightly closer so he can touch my face. “He adores you,” she whispers. “You’re so good with him.”

“Yeah, well, he’s an easy kid to love. Just like his mum.”

Her lips curve into a shy smile. “I’m scared,” she admits. “And I don’t want to lose everything at once.”

“You won’t,” I say firmly. “Not if I can help it.”

And for once, the silence between us doesn’t feel so heavy.

Zoe

The bar is too loud, too dark, and exactly what I need right now.

Music thumps in my ears like a second heartbeat, drowning out every thought I don't want to have. I'm three cocktails deep—something sugary and dangerous with a stupid name—and I laugh out loud at the joke I didn't even hear.

The guy beside me is tall, tattooed, and has a smile that says he thinks he's God's gift.

Perfect. I lean in closer, my fingers grazing the edge of his sleeve like I'm fascinated by whatever story he's telling.

I'm not. I don't even remember his name.

I don't care. What I do care about is forgetting.

About scrubbing out the echo of Ric's voice.

About pretending I hadn't witnessed the way his eyes tracked Sofia down in a roomful of people.

How he looked at her like she hung the stars.

Most of all, I needed to numb the stupid, relentless ache in my chest.

"Another round?" tattoo guy asks, his hand brushing my thigh like we're already shagging.

"Why not?" I reply, forcing a painful smile. "I'm celebrating."

He raises a brow while trying to grab the barman's attention. "Oh yeah? What's the

occasion?”

I down the last of my drink in one gulp and set the glass down a little too hard. “Freedom,” I mutter bitterly, “from men who lie and friends who unknowingly steal them.” He blinks, clearly unsure how to respond, and I laugh. “Don’t worry, I’m not about to trauma dump. Just keep the drinks coming.”

He grins, happy to oblige, but even as he leans in closer, I can feel the hollowness inside growing wider.

Louder. And then I catch my reflection in the mirrored wall behind the bar and stare at myself.

My painted lips and glassy eyes are watching me break, trying to help me hide it, but I see it. And I barely recognise myself.

I raise my next drink in a mock toast. “To best friends and the men we shouldn’t have kissed.”

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Sofia

Monday hits like a slap.

The second I step through the office doors, the hum of chaos wraps around me like static.

Phones are ringing off the hook, printers are jammed, and someone is yelling about a two o'clock deadline.

And, of course, Amelia is perched at her desk like a queen surveying her kingdom, iced latte in hand and a smirk that makes me want to rip her face clean off.

I slip behind my desk and drop my bag under it. I log in to find twenty unread emails. Two urgent. One from Amelia, flagged in red.

Before I can even open it, Amelia's heels click across the office like gunshots.

She pauses at my desk with a folder clutched in her perfectly manicured hand.

"Darling," she drawls, loud enough for everyone to hear, "I need a rough draft before the two p.m. meeting." She drops the file on my keyboard. "No excuses."

I flip the file open, run my eyes over the printed email inside, and frown. "This is addressed to your email," I say. "Dex asked you for a draft story."

"And I'm asking you," she says, leaning a little closer. "I thought you'd be up to it."

“I have a deadline to meet.”

“Look, this is more your thing,” she drawls, “Two p.m. sharp.”

“Amelia, I don’t have time.”

She crosses her arms over her chest, running her vicious tongue carefully over her lower lip. “Dex might be talked into giving you a second warning,” she says thoughtfully.

I scowl. “Why, because I refuse to do your work?”

“Darling, I know things have changed since you were last here, so I’ll spell it out. We’re a team. We all help one another, and if you’re not a team player,” she arches a brow and takes in a breath before releasing it heavily, “well, Dex would have no choice but to assign a buddy to you.”

“A buddy?” I repeat.

“Yes. Someone who is a team player. Someone who can take the lead.”

I laugh. “You?”

“Imagine, me and you, buddied. Day in, day out. And, of course, at the end of every day, I’d have to report back to Dex and let him know if you’re improving. If I can see a future for you here.”

I hear her message loud and clear and slam the file closed. “Two p.m.,” I repeat through gritted teeth.

“Perfect. I love it when we’re team players. Well done, Sofia.” And she saunters off

in the direction of the kitchen, where she'll probably gossip until the meeting.

I take a breath and re-open the file, glancing at the headline of the article. "Women to watch." How fitting.

I open a fresh screen on my computer and begin typing furiously. Not because Amelia forced me into it, but because this article is going to be brilliant. And it's going to have my name stamped on it.

By the time noon rolls around, I'm running purely on caffeine and spite.

My screen is now a sea of half-edits, notes, and quotes from big players in the fashion world.

On top of that, Dexter emailed me an hour ago to 'tone down the feminist angle' on an article I wrote on a best-selling romance that's being turned into a Netflix film.

I'm ready to scream.

So, when Meg appears in the lobby, her hair swept back, sunglasses perched on her head, and a takeaway bag in hand, my heart leaps into my throat. She's been calling me since Saturday morning, and I've not even texted her to explain my lack of communication. Although, I'm sure she's guessed.

"Lunch," she says, lifting the bag. "And before you say you're busy, I already threatened the security guard with a very real breakdown if he didn't let me through." I exhale, almost smiling. "You're lucky I'm not already in prison for strangling someone with my lanyard," she adds.

I lead her out onto the rooftop. It's half-patio and half-forgotten storage. It isn't glamorous, but it's quiet, and none of my younger co-workers dare step foot out

here in case the pigeons steal their lunch.

Meg hands over a sandwich and settles beside me on the bench. For a moment, we eat in silence, then she says gently, “You look like you’ve not slept.”

I give a soft laugh. “That’s because Harry is cutting more teeth.”

“I wanted to check on you after Friday,” she says, leaving the words hanging for a minute before adding, “I tried to call . . . several times. But I guess you already knew that.”

I pause mid-chew. “I’m fine.”

Meg gives me that look . That don’t insult my intelligence kind.

“She didn’t say anything?” I ask quietly. “Zoe, I mean. After you left.”

“No.”

I look away, focussing on the skyline. “Nothing happened. Not really.”

“But he was upstairs, hiding in your spare room like a dirty secret.”

My stomach twists painfully. Tears are threatening to fall, but I force them back.

They’ll only make my lies more unbelievable.

“We’re friends. I’m stuck in the middle of supporting Zoe and being friends with Ric.

Before they split, we were hanging out. He’d bring me pizza and help with Harry.” A small smile tugs at the thought.

“Yah know what hurts me more than anything, Sofia?” I turn to face her, waiting for her next words. “That you’re still lying to me now.” This time, my tears spill down my cheeks, but she makes no move to hold me. I see the disappointment pouring from her like a silent poison.

Meg crumples her sandwich wrapper and drops it into the paper bag by her feet. My appetite is gone, so I re-wrap my half-eaten sandwich. “I don’t want to hurt her,” I eventually say. “And I don’t want to lose either of you.”

“You know me better than that, Sofia,” she says, grabbing my hand. “I love you both. Ric too.”

“I just don’t know what to do.”

Meg offers a soft, knowing smile. “I stayed in a lie for far too long,” she says, “pretending I didn’t see it. Didn’t know he was shagging someone else.”

“Meg—” I want to tell her I’m not like Dan, that I wouldn’t cheat, but I clamp my lips closed because lying to her, to Zoe, is exactly the same.

“I thought if I ignored the signs, I wouldn’t have to face the fallout.

That uncovering the lies would break me.

But what really broke me was knowing I was right all along and not ending it sooner.

The lies just made me feel foolish, because deep down, I knew.

What I’m trying to say is . . . hiding it from Zoe won’t make it hurt her less.

And pretending it didn’t happen will only hurt you and Ric.

But lying to her when she already suspects will make her feel foolish.

And that is so much harder to get through. ”

“I’ll hurt her, won’t I?” I whisper, wiping more tears from my cheeks.

Meg nods. “But if this is real between you and Ric, don’t run from it just because it’s messy. Messy doesn’t mean it’s wrong.”

We both stare out over the city, letting the quiet settle our racing thoughts. “I think I’m falling in love with him,” I say, barely a whisper.

Meg gives a smile. “Then don’t wait. You have to trap these Chadwick men because they’re a good breed.”

I let out a wet laugh and drop my head on Meg’s shoulder. “I hate how wise you are.”

Eric

Today dragged. The kids were extra loud, extra dramatic, and the final bell didn’t come soon enough.

I drop my final English book on the pile of marked work and lean back in my seat.

All I can think about is her. Again. I smile to myself.

The weekend was everything I’d dreamed it would be.

There was no talk of Meg or Zoe. It was just us.

Me, Sofia, and Harry in our little bubble.

I even skipped Sunday lunch at my parents' house and afternoon drinks with my brothers because I didn't want our weekend to end.

I look up as Hugo steps in, stuffing his hands in his pockets. "You are alive then," he states dryly. "Mum texted earlier and asked me to check in on you seeing as you've ignored everyone all weekend."

"Your dramatic persona matches that of the pupils today," I say, smirking. "And you knew I was alive because you passed me in the hallway at break."

"I didn't notice. I was too busy chasing down Kyle Edge, who decided to rip his artwork up and leave class without a pass."

"The kid's got a lot going on."

He scoffs. "You get more and more like me every day. But Mr. Cranmer, being the battleaxe that he is, didn't see it that way and called for the highest punishment."

I grin. "Which meant you took Kyle to the pastoral care and let Maggie feed him cake?"

He laughs. "Absolutely. He had a bad weekend with his dad. The police were called, and his brother got arrested. It was chaos. The kid needed some time to relax."

"Good old Maggie."

"So, what pulled you away from the family this weekend?" he asks, perching on the edge of a desk. My smile fills my face, and he gives a knowing nod. "Thought so."

"I can't wait to bring her for Sunday dinner. I can't wait for Mum to love Harry like she loves Izzy and Chester."

“She treats all of them like her own grandchildren,” he agrees, even though Chester is her only blood grandchild. “So, what’s stopping you?”

“What do you think? Zoe .”

“She’s still pretty cut up,” says Hugo. “Tread carefully there. I don’t think she’s as strong as you think.”

“Please, she chose picking up her Gucci glasses over Mum’s birthday dinner. She didn’t give a crap about me. She’s enjoying the attention it’s giving her.”

“She went out Saturday night alone. Drinking. Alone.”

“Sounds like something she would do. Did you learn that from her constant Instagram posts?”

“No. Jimmy bumped into her.”

I roll my eyes. “Did she charm him into bed again?” The words leave my mouth before I can stop them. Too far, I know.

Hugo’s face hardens instantly. “What’s gotten into you?”

She’s vulnerable right now and struggling.

It’s lucky Jimmy found her because she was out of it.

Some random guy was propping her up, about to take her in a taxi.

Fuck knows if she’d have made it home alright.

Jimmy didn't let the guy stick around to find out. ”

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I'm instantly filled with regret, and I scrub my hands over my tired face. "Sorry. I'm angry because I feel like she's stopping me and Sofia from having a life together. If she was to tell Sofia to end it, she would."

"Then maybe that's something you'd need to face. Because if she'd let Zoe's pain stop her from being with you, that says something. Doesn't mean she doesn't care, but it might mean she's not ready."

"I can't let her go, man."

"It's not your choice. Yes, love her. Yes, treat her well and show her what you're offering. But ultimately, it's not your choice. It's Sofia's. And if she likes you, then she'll not allow Zoe to come between you."

"So, is Zoe okay?"

"Jimmy let her sleep on his couch. She's embarrassed by the whole thing. Asked him not to tell anyone, especially not Meg."

"Yet he did?"

"Because he's worried about her. And she had to be in a bad way for Jimmy to worry. He doesn't do worry."

"Should I go and see her?"

Hugo nods. "I think you should. Just check she's okay and maybe explain things

better.”

I groan, burying my head in my hands. “I honestly thought she’d be fine about the breakup.”

Zoe

Why do I do this to myself?

I flush the toilet, grimacing as the third load of vomit disappears.

I catch a look at myself in the mirror and groan.

Two nights of drinking has played havoc with my skin, and my glowy complexion is now dull with breakouts.

There’re faint traces of eye makeup smudged carelessly under each eye, and my hair needs a damn good wash.

The doorbell rings, and I wince at its harsh tone. I really should have maintenance look at it. I pick up the intercom. “Ms. Heart, there’s a gentleman in reception. Mr. Chadwick.”

My heart stutters. “Which one?” I ask, and he relays the question.

“Eric,” he replies.

“Send him up,” I say, slamming the intercom back and rushing to the mirror.

I run my fingers through my untamed hair, growling in frustration when it refuses to look presentable.

I give up and pile it on top of my head, securing it with a band.

I lick my fingers and wipe them under each eye then pinch my cheeks to give them a little colour.

I run to the bathroom and grab the mouthwash to hide all traces of my weekend antics, and then, as I rush back to the door, I spot the empty wine glass and grab it, hiding it in the shoe cupboard.

His knock startles me, and I stop behind the door, straightening a hand over my shirt, then deciding to release the top button. Eric had a thing for me in an oversized shirt and nothing else.

I take a breath and swing the door open. “A visit from my ex. That can’t be good.”

He gives a small smile that hardly lifts his lip at all. “I just wanted to check on you. Jimmy told me what happened Saturday.”

I roll my eyes and step back, leaving the door open. “Of course, he did. What else is there to gossip about but poor, drunk Zoe?”

He follows me inside, gently closing the door. My mind is filled with memories of when we’d tumble through that door together, me wrapped around him and us both desperate to get naked.

I drop down on the couch, lying back so my shirt rides up enough to show my tanned thighs. I work hard on leg days at the gym—they’re a work of art. “I was fine, Ric,” I say, tucking a cushion beneath my head. “I was just drunk. It wasn’t life or death.”

“You almost got taken home by a guy you didn’t know.”

“It’s a little late to be showing me your jealous side, Rick.”

He lowers onto the footrest and stares at me. “I’m not judging you, Zo. Just worried.”

I sigh heavily and push to sit, swinging my feet to the floor so my legs are slotted between his.

I lean forward, and his eyes dart down to where the shirt is now gaping at my chest. “Are you seeing anyone yet?” I ask.

The last time we spoke, it was when he told me he fancied my best friend.

Now would be the perfect time to reiterate my warning for him to stay away.

“I haven’t come to talk about me,” he mutters, and I see his avoidance tactic clearly. “If you’re okay then—”

“We had some good times together, didn’t we?”

His eyes pierce mine and my heart slams harder. “We did,” he replies with a nod.

“You’re the first guy I ever . . .” I sigh, hating how vulnerable I sound. “I ever allowed myself to see a future with.”

His expression becomes pained. “I never meant to hurt you.”

“Yet here we are,” I almost whisper.

He grabs my hand. “Look, don’t waste time being upset over me, Zoe. I’m not worth it.”

“I can’t help it,” I mutter, staring down at where his thumb strokes over the back of my hand. “And I hate that you’ve made me feel this way.” I lift my head. “Did you ever really see a future with me?”

He hesitates, and I withdraw my hand, not wanting to hear his answer as I try to stand. “Wait,” he says, placing his hand on my bare knee to keep me seated. “Maybe. But the longer we were together, the more the cracks started to show, and I realised we just wouldn’t work.”

“Why?” I ask, unable to stop myself.

He shrugs. “I’m a family man. They mean everything to me, and you hate all that stuff. You don’t like family meals or picnics in the park with everyone. And I love spending time with my niece and nephew, but I want my own kids now. I want a wife and two children, maybe even a dog. And you don’t.”

He’s right. I don’t want children. I don’t even like them, if I’m honest. I’d rather chop my hair off than get a dog, and that’s saying something.

And although his family is lovely, I’m not into huge get-togethers where they all talk about happy childhoods and plans for the future. But for him . . .

“If you’d have told me that you wanted me to spend more time with you and your family, I would have. And somewhere in the future, maybe I would have had your baby. I’d draw the line at a dog,” I say, and we both smile. “But you didn’t tell me. You didn’t give me a chance to change.”

He wipes a thumb over my cheek, and I realise a tear has escaped as he smudges it.

He offers a warm smile, one that feels like home, and I find myself leaning into his hand.

“But that’s just it, Zoe. I didn’t want you to change.

You’re perfect as you are. Unapologetic.

A little crazy. Strong. And you’re not afraid to say what you want.

You shouldn’t have to change for any man. ”

I swallow the lump in my throat. “I do know what I want,” I say with a nod, and then I lean forward, and before either of us register it, I press my lips to his.

It’s barely two seconds before he pulls back, a mixture of confusion and horror on his face. “No,” he says clearly. “Please don’t.”

I’m mortified, but I force out a tight laugh and push to stand. “Right. Of course,” I mutter, folding my arms over my chest. “I misread the signals.”

“Zoe—”

“No, it’s fine,” I say a little too quickly. “Thanks for checking in, but as you can see, I’m good. You can go now.”

He stands too, and I step back to keep distance between us. He frowns at the movement and then heads for the door. I don’t follow him. I can’t bear to do the whole awkward exchange, so I turn my back and stare out the window, closing my eyes in relief when I hear the door open and close. Shit.

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Sofia

The clink of cutlery and soft murmurs of chatter fill the air as I make my way towards the booth where Meg is already waiting. I slide in opposite her, and she greets me with a warm smile. “You okay?” she asks, taking in my creased blouse and tousled hair.

“It’s been one of those days,” I reply, trying to flatten my hair by the reflection in the window.

I don’t bother to bore her with the details of Amelia’s latest antics which involved me getting covered in coffee after she clearly tampered with the coffee machine.

I know this because she was in the kitchen for ages then demanded I make Dexter’s coffee.

She laughed so hard when I reappeared dripping wet and trying to avoid third degree burns, almost like she expected it.

Which led to me wearing my ‘spare blouse’ that I keep in the bottom of my bag for emergencies.

There’s not much I can do about the creases ingrained into it from being in there for so long, or the crumbs that seem to be stuck to it. I pick another off.

“Have you thought any more about speaking to Zoe?”

The truth is, I really wanted to run it by Ric first to get his take on things.

However, he was late getting home after work last night, which was probably a good thing because I was an emotional wreck after my day of Amelia sending daggers my way after my little stunt at claiming her article.

My article. “I know I’ve got to do it,” I say, nodding.

“And I will. I promise. I just . . . guess I want to enjoy a couple more dates with him before everything explodes around us.”

Meg gives my hand a reassuring squeeze. “I think you’re overthinking it.”

Zoe appears, sliding in beside Meg. Her large sunglasses are firmly in place, and her hair is pulled back into a sleek ponytail. She always looks great, even in the midst of heartbreak.

“I almost didn’t come. It’s taken me two full days to recover from the weekend,” she complains, waving the waitress over as she removes the glasses.

The waitress obliges, looking only mildly irritated. “What can I get you?”

“A margarita for me,” Zoe says.

Meg gives me a wary glance before adding a water and chicken salad. I go for orange juice and a sandwich. Once the waitress has left, Meg gives Zoe a side-glance. “You’re not eating?”

“God, no. Didn’t you just hear me? I’m in recovery.”

I smirk. “And a margarita is going to help that?”

Meg checks her watch. “At noon?” Her tone is slightly judgmental.

Zoe waves her hand dismissively. “Limes count as one of my five a day.”

Meg’s expression softens as she asks, “Is this still about Ric?”

I tense at her words, holding my breath while I wait for Zoe’s answer. “Don’t get me started on him.”

“So, it is about Ric?” I ask warily.

“It’s about half the Chadwick brothers,” she snaps. “They can’t keep a damn secret for a start.”

The waitress places our drinks down, and Zoe takes a large mouthful of hers before ordering another.

“Right, maybe you need to start from the beginning,” Meg suggests.

Zoe takes another long sip. “I saw Jimmy on Saturday night.”

“Oh god, you didn’t sleep with him, did you?” gasps Meg.

“No,” Zoe hisses before grinning, “although maybe if I hadn’t been so obliterated over his brother, I might have tried.”

“You got drunk over Ric?” asks Meg with concern. “This isn’t like you, Zo. What’s going on?”

Zoe sighs like the question is too loaded and her answer is too exhausting. “I just needed to let loose. It’s no big deal.”

“But now you’re meeting us for lunch and having drinks without the lunch,” she states.

“Christ, Meg, I’m hardly a raging alcoholic because I’ve had a fucking margarita instead of a poxy chicken salad. Who are you eating that for anyway? It’s not even a real lunch.”

Meg arches a brow but chooses not to reply and instead pours water into her glass.

“We’re just worried about you, Zoe,” I say gently, and she narrows her eyes on me.

“You’re worried, are you?” I nod, and she scoffs but doesn’t elaborate.

“Tell us about Jimmy,” says Meg, changing the subject just as our food arrives.

Zoe immediately takes some of my chips, and I relax a little knowing at least she feels hungry. She’s not a total wreck.

“So, I met this guy. Business type. Boring as hell. But he was fit, and so I agreed to go back to his. We’re just getting in the cab when Jimmy rocks up like the superhero I never asked for and basically told the guy to fuck off.

” She rolls her eyes in irritation. “Anyway, he put me in a cab with him and made me sleep on his couch. Complete gentleman. It might have been more exciting if he was less gentleman and more superhero in that moment,” she adds thoughtfully.

“Anyway, my point is, I asked him not to tell anyone because I didn’t want to have this judgy conversation with you both looking at me like I’m a drunken whore.

And he went right to Ric of all people.”

“Actually, he told Hugo too,” says Meg with a grin.

Zoe groans. “So, you knew already?”

“Yes. And you missed the part where you could hardly stand—”

“Because of my heels,” she cuts in.

“Or speak,” says Meg, her tone definitely judgmental. “Especially not coherent enough to give consent to a man you didn’t know.”

Zoe scoffs. “I knew him . . . enough.”

“What was his name?” Meg demands.

Zoe smirks, taking another chip. “Boring office guy. So, yesterday, guess who rocks up to my apartment.”

I stop mid-chew, already knowing what she’s about to say.

“Eric bloody Chadwick,” she says, and I force the half-chewed sandwich down my throat and discreetly push my plate away. Meg’s eyes shoot to mine briefly, but Zoe continues unaware. “He wanted to check on me and make sure I was okay. Sweet, really.”

Meg lifts a brow. “That’s . . . decent of him.”

“Mmm.” Zoe reaches for her drink. “We had a heart to heart.”

“Good,” says Meg, nodding. “So, you feel better about things?”

Zoe shrugs. “Sort of.” She finishes the drink and picks up the second. “But then things got complicated again.” She pops a chip into her mouth. “He kissed me.”

Silence.

I blink. “What?” The room feels like it’s closing in, and my ears ring so loud, it’s drowning out any background noise.

Zoe shrugs. “It was in the moment. I’m sure he’s embarrassed. I asked him to leave.”

“He . . . he wanted to stay?” I ask, the words barely a whisper. I feel Meg’s eyes on me, and they’re full of pity.

“I didn’t give him the chance to say,” says Zoe.

“Aren’t you eating this?” she asks, and I shake my head.

She takes a few more chips. “I guess I should call him, but I feel like he should sweat a little first.” She grins.

“I knew he’d come crawling back.” She slides from the booth.

“Those drinks are going straight through me.” And she wanders off to find the bathroom.

Meg grabs my hand. “Oh my god, Sof. I don’t know what to say.”

“I’m glad I didn’t tell her,” I mutter.

“No, now is exactly the right time to tell her,” she says firmly.

I pull my hand free, shaking my head. “Are you mad? He’s clearly changed his mind, and I’m not about to lose my friendship for a cheating scumbag.” Tears fill my eyes. “He thinks he can just keep swapping between us.”

“I’m sure it’s a misunderstanding.”

I let out a heavy sigh. “I’m such a twat.”

“No, Sofia, you’re not. He is if that’s what he’s done.”

“You just heard her,” I cry, rummaging in my bag for some cash. I drop it on the table. “I have to get back to work. Say bye to Zoe for me.” I rush off before she can argue.

Eric

Meg is waiting in my classroom when I return from my heated phone call with a parent. It’s been a day, and by the look on Meg’s face, it’s about to get a lot worse.

“If it involves a child in my tutor, it can wait until tomorrow because I am all out of teacher battery today,” I say, laughing. She doesn’t even crack a smile, and I frown. “Everything okay?”

“You kissed Zoe?”

I freeze, my eyes widening. “What?”

Meg crosses her arms, her jaw tense. “You kissed her, Ric. Are you out of your mind?”

“No . . . wait. That’s not what happened .”

She raises a brow. “Well, that’s funny because that’s exactly what Zoe told Sofia at lunch. Just casually dropped it between mouthfuls of fries like it was no big deal.”

I brace myself against the desk, hanging my head. “She kissed me . I stopped it. Immediately.”

“But you didn’t tell Sofia, did you?” Her voice is sharp. “Jesus, Ric. Her face . . . she was devastated. And the worst part? Zoe doesn’t even know what she’s done because this whole thing is one big secret that just exploded. Both my friends are broken because of you.”

“I know,” I mutter. “Trust me, I know.”

“Why would you even go to her apartment like that?”

Right then, Hugo strolls in. His smile fades as soon as he catches the tension.

“What now?”

“Because he told me to,” I snap, pointing at him. If I’m getting dragged into the fire, I’m taking him with me. “It was your brilliant idea for me to talk to Zoe.”

Hugo winces. “How did that go wrong?”

“Because he kissed her, ” Meg snaps.

“I didn’t kiss her,” I shout. “ She kissed me.”

“Why would you even let that happen?” Hugo demands.

I groan. “She kissed me. I pushed her off.”

“Does Sofia know?” he asks.

“Zoe told us. Over lunch,” Meg mutters. “It’s all such a mess.”

“Why are we still here talking about it?” asks Hugo. “Go and see her. Explain you’re a twat and beg her to forgive you.”

Sofia opens the door halfway, peeking out like she’s afraid to let me see her. She stays quiet, her mistrusting eyes waiting for me to explain.

“I didn’t kiss her,” I say, my voice raw.

She blinks, her mouth hardly moving as she mutters, “I know what she said.”

“She’s twisting it. Please let me explain.”

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She steps back wordlessly, letting me in.

Harry's toys are scattered over the floor, and there's a cartoon playing quietly from the television.

Harry bounces in his chair, his chubby legs kicking harder when he sees me.

"Hey, little man," I say, tugging his toes.

He gives a gummy grin then takes his attention back to the bright colours on the television.

The cosy normalcy only makes the tension worse as I follow Sofia into the kitchen.

I linger in the doorway, afraid to push her too much in case she explodes. "She kissed me," I repeat, "and I pulled away and left. We didn't even talk about it."

"Tell me the details," she whispers, her arms still crossed like a barrier to keep me out.

"I went over because . . . Hugo told me she was in a bad way Saturday night. Jimmy had to pull her out of a situation with some guy trying to take her home. I just wanted to check she was okay. I swear, that's all.

"I take a breath. "We got talking. I explained why we'd never work, and I think she got the wrong idea. "

“How? What did you say?”

I sigh. “I can’t even remember.”

“You rushed here to explain your side, so explain,” she yells, taking me by surprise.

I stuff my hands in my pockets. “I told her I was looking for a wife. That I want kids and a dog. All the things she doesn’t want.”

“What did she say?”

I avoid her eyes, focussing on the clock behind her. “That she would have changed for me.”

More silence weighs us down. She turns, busying herself with some dishes in the sink. I move closer. “I told her she didn’t need to change. She just needed someone who wanted the same things.”

“How did she get the wrong idea, Ric?”

I wince. “I said some things . . . just to make her feel less . . . sad.”

She grips the edge of the worktop and soap suds run down to the floor. “What things?” When I don’t immediately answer, she adds, “I could just get Meg to ask her.”

I swallow the lump in my throat that’s restricting my breathing. “I said she was perfect as she was. Unapologetic. Strong.”

She gives me a side glance like she’s wishing me dead. “Where were you sitting? Where was she sitting?”

I look up to the ceiling, silently praying to the gods. “She was on the couch, and I was on her footstool.”

“Opposite her?” I nod. “Close?” I nod again. “Touching?”

“Yes,” I say, my voice laced with anger at how stupid I’ve been and how ridiculous this all sounds. “Yes, we were touching but not like you’re thinking.”

She spins to face me. “And what am I thinking, Ric? What do you think I’m picturing?”

“I was just trying to be nice. She’s sad and it’s my fault.”

“And now, I’m sad, and that’s your fault too.”

I groan. “I know. I fucked up, Sofia.”

“You did.”

“But if you just give me a chance.”

“Why should I? You’re going back and forth between us. Is this a game to you?”

“Christ, no,” I say, desperation lacing my tone. “I didn’t mean to give Zoe the wrong idea. Fuck . I just wanted to do the right thing, and I made it worse. I’m sorry. I’m so sorry.”

“What do you actually want, Ric?” She looks tired, and guilt hits me. I step closer, hooking my finger around hers.

“I want a wife. I want kids. And I really want a dog.”

Her eyes meet mine, and they glisten with unshed tears. “I don’t know if I can keep doing this.”

“I want those things with you, Sofia. I want a life with you and Harry. We had the best weekend. I want that life every day.”

“I told Meg about us on Monday.”

I nod. “I gathered she knew by the way she ripped me a new arsehole after school.” Sofia gives a small smile. “I’m sorry, Sofia. I really didn’t mean to make it all worse.”

“I have no right to feel betrayed,” she whispers, and more tears gather on her lower lashes. “When I’m the one betraying her.”

“Our weekend was so perfect. I wish we could just lock the world out and be like that forever.”

I close the gap between us, and she rests her head against my chest. “Me too.”

“Why don’t you sort Harry, and I’ll make us some dinner?”

She glances up. “That does sound nice.”

“And then we can watch a film, and I’ll rub your feet.”

This earns a bigger smile. “Umm, you really feel bad, don’t you?”

I nod, placing a kiss on her lips. “Maybe I can stay over and spend the night making it up to you?”

She laughs. “I mean, that might be a good start.”

I cup her face and tip her head back to give me access to her mouth. “Just a start? I better get a move on.”

Zoe

When the rest of the world is winding down for the weekend, I’m just getting busy.

I can’t complain. My job is amazing, and I love what I do.

Even now, as I search through boxes for the missing shimmered backdrop with my client’s name sewn across the front, which I had specially made for her ‘One Million Followers’ party, I’m smiling.

The last couple weeks have been . . . hard.

But my weekend on a self-sabotaging bender opened my eyes.

Or at least Jimmy Chadwick’s intervention did.

And since then, I’ve thrown myself into work.

The last two weekends have been packed with social media events.

The weekdays have been spent promoting my business and filming for my own channel, which I’m growing each day.

Things are certainly looking up, and best of all, I’ve managed to avoid Ric.

After I tried—and failed—to seduce him, I realised that maybe I’m not the problem at

all.

I'm strong, like he said, and I have something great to offer.

If he can't see it, then that's his problem. There are plenty more fish in the sea.

I finally lay my hands on the backdrop and hand it over to my helpers, who rush off to pin it up.

I saunter into the main event room and look around. Yep, my hard work is certainly paying off. I'm good at what I do, and after a few snapshots for my own channel, I leave my team to finish off.

It's Harry's first birthday, and I promised I'd nip in for an hour before my client's event starts.

Sofia's house is exactly how I imagined—chaotic and loud. Kids are running around tripping on E-numbers, and as I dodge them to get into the kitchen, I'm already thinking up an excuse so I can leave early.

Izzy rushes to me, clamping her little arms around my legs. She's one kid I actually like, her and Harry. "Aunt Zoe," she cries excitedly, and I realise she too has consumed too much sugar.

Meg looks up from her mobile and smiles, reaching for me and placing a kiss on my cheek. "I've snuck wine in," she whispers, pointing to the cupboard under the sink.

I grin, grabbing a mug from the shelf and rooting around for the wine. "I can only stay an hour," I explain. "I'm so busy."

"We've hardly seen you," Meg complains.

“I’ve been manifesting a dream place in Spain. Apparently, it requires money to buy it, so I have to do the boring bit and earn it.” She laughs, clinking her mug to mine.

“You better not be drinking alcohol,” says Sofia sternly as she enters the kitchen with Harry on her hip. We both place our hands over our mugs at the same time, laughing when we realise we’ve made it so obvious. “Christ, can’t you two follow the rules, just for once?”

“It’s a kids’ party,” says Meg. “There are no rules.”

I kiss Harry on the forehead and fight to get his present out my bag. “It’s a truck,” I say with a shrug. “I asked the guy in the shop.”

Sofia smiles. “He’ll love it. Thank you.”

“Can we get some more meat out here?”

I look up at the sound of Ric’s voice and my heart rate doubles. Damn, he looks good in shorts and a shirt. His shades are perched on his head, and he’s sporting a nine o’clock shadow over his square jaw. Our eyes connect, and I immediately look away.

“Yep, coming,” says Sofia, grabbing some packs from the fridge and heading outside.

“What’s he doing here?” I ask.

Meg frowns. “Erm, he’s her neighbour. He’s Hugo’s brother. Take your pick.” And then she heads out too, leaving me with a bad taste in my mouth. What am I missing?

I find myself watching Ric and Sofia.

They’re comfortable around one another. Too comfortable. Like they share secrets.

They throw each other lingering looks when they think no one is watching, and I even saw him trail his hand over her back as he passed her.

I sigh heavily. I'm imagining it, because there's no way Sofia would do that to me. No way.

Before I leave, I head up to the bathroom to freshen up.

My eyes scream tired as I examine them in the mirror. The black residue left by my very expensive eyeliner doesn't help, and I vow to complain to the company that promised me the forty-pounds price tag guaranteed long-lasting and smudge-free. Lies.

I look around for makeup wipes, knowing Sofia uses them. I crouch down and open the bathroom cabinet. It's full of crap. Nappies, spare toothpaste, and a man's electric shaver. I frown, taking it out to examine it closer. There are definitely signs of thick chin hair. A man's thick chin hair.

I place it back and pull out the basket from the bottom shelf. A toothbrush. Aftershave. Dread fills me. It's the same aftershave I bought Ric as a gift.

I put everything back exactly how I found it and head for Sofia's bedroom, makeup wipes forgotten.

I stand in the middle of the room and look around. Nothing stands out, but the things in the bathroom were hidden, so maybe . . . I pull open a drawer. It's full of Sofia's underwear. The second drawer has her clothes. There's nothing belonging to Ric, or any man for that matter.

I head for the wardrobe and pull the double doors open.

There, hanging neatly amongst her clothes, is a couple men's shirts.

I raise my shaking hand to the first one and pull it closer, burying my nose into the cotton and closing my eyes as I inhale deeply.

Pain ripples through me at a slow rate, making sure I feel every spike of betrayal.

Footsteps rush up the stairs, followed closely by a second set. Heavier. Louder.

I don't have time to think, so I jump into the wardrobe and pull the doors closed, praying it's just people using the bathroom.

Sofia

“Why are you following me?” I whisper, giggling like a schoolgirl as Ric wrestles me into the bedroom and kicks the door closed.

He peppers kisses along my neck, nuzzling against my skin and pressing his erection against my stomach.

“Ric,” I pant, pathetic and weak, as his hands roam under my top to cup my breasts. “We can’t.”

“Five minutes. Ten max.” His mouth finds mine in a bruising kiss. We can’t get enough of each other. “I hate sharing you,” he whispers, tugging the button on my jeans.

“This is dangerous,” I say, shoving my jeans down my legs.

“Wreckless,” he agrees, lifting my top and dropping it on the floor.

“We were almost late to our own party.” Harry took a nap, and we got carried away. Luckily, it was Meg who turned up first and shouted up the stairs and not Zoe. Zoe . Shit. Seeing her today brought the guilt back. Guilt we’ve been able to avoid because she’s been so busy.

“No one will notice we’re gone.” He kicks his shorts off, pulling his shirt dramatically so the buttons fly off in every direction. I laugh at his desperation.

“Zoe—”

“No,” says Ric, clamping a hand over my mouth and spinning me away from him so my back is pressed to his front. I giggle against his hand. “Don’t ruin this moment. Please.” He bends me over the bed. “Let’s just stay in our happy little bubble and pretend Zoe doesn’t exist.” And he eases into me.

I groan, gripping the sheets in my fists. I’ll never tire of this.

Ric sticks to his word. Ten minutes later, we’re both lying on the bed, staring up at the ceiling while we catch our breath. “Three positions in ten minutes. Record,” I say, smirking.

He slaps a hand against my thigh then pulls it over him and lays me against his chest. He draws circles on my back, and I close my eyes. “I’m going to tell Zoe,” I announce. His fingers stop, and I hate that I’m ruining the moment, but there never seems to be a good time these days.

“Okay,” he says slowly, drawing it out.

“It’s time. We can’t keep lying to her.”

“I know.”

“But?” I lift my head to look at him.

“But I don’t want her to ruin it, and I think she will.”

“She deserves to know the truth. We can’t sneak around forever.”

He groans. “These last few weeks have been so nice. Exactly how I imagined it

would be. And drama free.”

There’s a knock on the door, and I dive up to grab the sheet. “Yeah?” I call, praying it isn’t Zoe.

“It’s just me,” says Meg softly. “When you two have finished, there’s a party going on downstairs.”

I smirk, and Ric laughs. “We’re coming,” he tells her.

Meg tops up my mug. I gave in to the idea of wine once one of the little girls pulled the tablecloth and sent the birthday cake to the floor. I laughed. What else was I meant to do, scream and tell her that it had cost me fifty pounds for a cake that looked nothing like a truck?

“Why do we bother with these parties?” I ask. “I mean, it’s not like Harry has a clue what’s going on.” I check my watch. “He went to bed an hour ago, so he’s not even here. Can I kick the guests out?”

Meg lets out a laugh, swirling the last of her drink. “Well, at least the kids are gone and you’re left with your most loyal friends.” She raises her glass in a mock toast. “Present company included. Minus Zoe, obviously . What time did she bail, anyway? She ghosted without even a goodbye.”

I shrug. “Didn’t really see her.”

Meg arches a brow. “Probably because you were too busy shagging her ex.” She gasps and slaps a hand over her mouth, snorting. “Too soon?”

I crack a smile. “A little.”

“Well, it’s not not true.”

“I made the decision to tell her,” I say quietly. “I told Ric.”

She leans in, interest piqued. “And?”

“He wasn’t exactly thrilled. He thinks if Zoe finds out, she’ll blow everything up.”

Meg scoffs. “Only if you let her. She doesn’t get to light the match and hold it to your happiness. I think you’ll find it freeing. She’ll be upset, it’s expected, but I think she’ll forgive you. In time.”

I nod, stealing a quick glance at Ric manning the grill like he’s hosting Masterchef: Backyard Edition. “Maybe. Either way, it’s got to come out because every time I see her, I’m rattled with guilt.”

Jimmy cracks open another beer and flops into a deckchair next to Meg with a satisfied groan. “I vote we make this a weekly thing. Family BBQs, questionable burgers, and watching Ric be all lovey-dovey.”

“And hiding it when Zoe is around,” adds Seb, laughing. “Things were so tense.”

Ric shoots him a warning look. “Jealousy doesn’t suit you, little brother.”

“Not jealous,” says Seb, placing his arm around Katie protectively. “Just emotionally allergic to awkward situations.”

Meg leans in with a fake whisper. “Did Hugo tell you about the time Ric wrote poetry?” Ric groans dramatically, flipping a burger. “One time, he left a haiku on the fridge.”

“It was about coffee,” mutters Ric.

“It was a declaration of undying love,” Hugo shoots back, “to coffee. ”

Everyone laughs, and Hugo snorts into his drink, causing another round of laughter. The air is easy. There’s no tension, no tiptoeing—just us, being natural, being happy.

Seb tosses a few marshmallows on the grill with reckless abandon, earning a huff from Ric. “Anyone remember that camping trip Dad took us on when we were kids?”

Ric groans. “Where it rained for three days straight, and we ended up sleeping in the car?”

“Where you had to sleep in the car,” Hugo corrects, “because you dropped your tent poles in the river.”

“It was a fast-flowing river,” Ric defends. “Everyone said so. Besides, it wasn’t my fault—Jimmy dared me.”

I giggle, imagining the chaos these four boys must have caused as kids. “Please tell me there are photos.”

“Oh, there’s a video,” says Hugo darkly.

“Do not show her the video.”

“When you come to Mum’s for dinner tomorrow, I’ll get her to dig it out,” Hugo promises.

“Christ, don’t do that. It’ll drop us all in the shit because she’ll be showing everyone’s most embarrassing moments,” says Seb.

“Aww, baby, I think you were cute naked in just wellies,” teases Katie.

“I was three years old,” he cries.

I sidle up beside Ric, resting my head on his shoulder. “I’m invited to your mum’s?”

He places a kiss on my head. “Of course, babe. Family. Every Sunday.”

“I don’t want to intrude.”

He turns me to face him, kissing me on the lips. “You’re my family, Sofia. You and Harry. So, every family event requires your attendance. Sunday dinner. Saturday games night at least twice a year. Pub quizzes. Everything.”

My heart swells. “Thank you.”

“What for?”

“Giving me the family I’ve always dreamed of.”

Eric

Sunday dinner at my parents’ house has always been a kind of controlled chaos—kids screaming, chairs scraping, someone always forgetting the gravy.

It’s messy and loud and full of love. And for the first time, Sofia’s in the middle of it.

Not as a guest. Not as someone I need to explain. She’s just here , like she belongs.

Mum is stirring gravy while rocking Harry on her hip. She occasionally kisses his cheek as she tells him a story about the three little pigs.

“He’s a happy kid,” Dad says thoughtfully.

Sofia scoffs. “You should see him when he’s in a mood. He screams the entire street down.” Then she gives me a side glance. “But he’s been a lot happier recently.” I smile, lacing my fingers through hers and kissing the back of her hand.

She hovers just behind me nervously, like she’s expecting judgement from my parents. It’ll never happen—they’re not the sort of people to judge.

Mum rolls her eyes and moves past me, wrapping Sofia in a tight hug. “Come on, love. Don’t look so terrified. It’s not like you haven’t been here before. We don’t bite.”

“Sorry,” says Sofia, with a small laugh. “I’m not used to this.”

“To what?” she asks, releasing her.

Sofia looks around. “A big family. The chaos. The warmth.”

Mum gives her a gentle look. “Well, you better get used to it.”

Dinner is predictably loud. Jimmy’s telling a story about his latest work disaster, Hugo’s trying to get Izzy to eat her peas, and Seb’s stealing roasties off everyone’s plates when he thinks no one’s watching.

But Sofia’s not just watching anymore. She’s laughing.

Adding in her own quips. Cutting Harry’s food without missing a beat.

She looks like she’s always been here. At one point, I glance down the table and find Dad watching her.

Watching us. He gives me a small nod. Approval.

I never realised how much I wanted it until I had it.

Later, after the kids have been bribed into the living room with ice cream and Disney+, I find Mum clearing the dishes.

“She’s lovely,” she says, not even looking up.

“She is.”

“And Harry,” she grins, “that boy’s a heartbreaker. Don’t mess this up.”

I laugh. “I’m trying not to.”

“Well, if you do,” she warns, narrowing her eyes in mock seriousness, “we’ll be keeping them both anyway.”

And those words warm my heart.

We get back to Sofia’s, where it’s quiet and less intense. I put the kettle on, and when I go into the living room, Sofia’s on the couch with Harry curled into her side, milk-drunk and half-asleep from too much dessert and attention.

She gives a sleepy smile and toes off her shoes.

“Big day,” I murmur, taking Harry’s coat off the back of the couch and hanging it.

“We loved it,” she replies softly. “I think Harry would’ve eaten your mother’s entire trifle if he could.”

“She hasn’t stopped making it since the nineties, so I’m glad someone appreciates it.”

Sofia chuckles, brushing a hand through Harry’s curls. “Your family is . . . something else.”

“You mean loud?”

“I mean wonderful.” She looks at me, her eyes glassy. “It felt like . . .” She hesitates.

“Like home?” I offer.

She nods. “Yeah, like home.”

I scoop Harry up and hold my hand out for her to take, pulling her to stand. “Let’s get this one to bed.”

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I carry him upstairs and lay him in his cot. Sofia took his pyjamas over to Mum's, so she changed him before we left, knowing he would go straight down when we got home.

He closes his eyes immediately, and I smile as I lay a blanket over him. I back out the room, watching as Sofia runs a hand over his cheek. "Love you," she whispers.

I stand in the doorway, watching the two of them, this quiet, domestic moment I never knew I'd crave so much.

And it hits me—this is the life I want. Not in the distant 'maybe someday' kind of way. In the right now 'don't let this slip away' kind of way.

Sofia joins me in the hallway, and I reach for her hand, tugging her gently to me. "I meant what I said before," I tell her. "You and Harry . . . you belong. With me. In all of it. The chaos, the noise, the too many potatoes, and my mum's obsession with overfeeding everyone."

Her eyes search mine. "Even if Zoe finds out?"

"I'm not pretending that won't be hard," I admit. "But I'm not letting you go. Not after this. Not after tonight." She nods slowly, but I see the flicker of doubt in her. "We'll face it," I say. "Together."

And when she kisses me, soft and slow, I know it's not just about love anymore. It's about choosing it. Every day.

Zoe

I shouldn't have been there. I down my half glass of white wine.

I shouldn't have snooped. I grab a glass of Champagne off a passing waitress.

Looking around the room of people I don't know, I wonder what the fuck I get out of all this.

Why am I still here when this isn't my party and these aren't my people?

A passing girl stops, smiling wide. "Oh my god, you're the party queen," she exclaims, her voice full of fake excitement. "Can we get a selfie?"

I nod, forcing a smile as she leans into me with her phone held high, snapping away.

She shows me the shots, and I nod in approval.

She has no idea she's captured the weekend my heart shattered for a second time.

Everyone who looks at that picture won't see my pain.

But isn't that the point of all this? I down the Champagne, wincing as the bubbles tickle my throat.

It's a show, a pretend life with fame and recognition.

But behind the camera is a different story.

We're all just falling apart, some faster than others.

I got the answers I wanted , I think bitterly.

It's what I wanted, wasn't it ? I sat in the dark for twenty minutes, knees to chest, listening to them.

Laughing. Whispering. Moaning . The sound of her breathless giggles made my stomach turn, and the way he said her name, Christ , so low and tender, like she's his everything.

"O.M.G., it's you," says another influencer, sidling up to me for a picture.

She doesn't even bother asking for permission, just begins flashing her camera while she wraps her arm around my waist, pulling me tightly against her.

I smile. Of course, I do . "I love your work. I'm about to hit a million myself and I'd love you to organise my party.

" I hand her a business card, and she bites on her lower lip like she's been given the best gift ever.

"I'm thinking something glitzy. With animals.

" I give a slight nod. "Like monkeys?" The demands just get crazier.

How the hell will she keep monkeys under control?

"It can be done," I say carefully, wanting to seem willing to create her dreams. "However, think about how it might look to some of your followers. Animal rights is huge, and if you upset that community, it could ruin you."

She gasps. "I didn't even think about that. I don't want to get cancelled."

“Give me a call and we’ll go through some ideas,” I tell her, posing for another picture with someone else.

I move nearer to the exit. It’s acceptable to slip away now that everyone appears to be drunk and enjoying themselves.

Usually, I stay as late as everyone else, swept up in the party.

Tonight, all I want is to go home and . .

. cry. Because since I left Sofia’s, I haven’t.

I threw myself into this event, ignored my aching heart.

Why does betrayal sting so much more than anything else?

They’ve built their goddamn fairytale ending on the ashes of what Ric and I had.

And what, now I should smile and give my blessing?

I’m not happy for her. I should be, and if it was anyone else, I’d be elated.

But why him ? Like there aren’t enough men in the whole of England, so she had to steal mine. The one guy I actually fell for.

I get back to my apartment and throw myself on my bed, not bothering to get undressed, or even kick my heels off. I stare up at the ceiling and allow the tears to leak slowly from my eyes. I can’t even call my best friends because they’re both in on it.

Betrayed by the three people I love most in the world.

I open my phone. No calls. No texts from Sofia asking to meet so we can talk.

And that's her plan, right, to meet and tell me everything?

Will she tell me the actual truth? That they've been fucking for weeks?

That Meg, and probably Hugo, know all about it?

I'm sure all the Chadwicks know too. I suddenly sit up, questions plaguing me.

Has she slotted into his family in the way I couldn't . . . or wouldn't?

They think I'm so stupid. So naïve.

But if there's one thing more destructive than a lie, it's a perfectly timed truth. And it's about time they heard a few of mine.

Sofia

“If there’s one thing more destructive than a lie, it’s a perfectly timed truth.”

I frown. “What does that mean?” I ask Meg, placing the phone between my ear and shoulder while I get Harry’s bottle ready.

“At a guess, I’d say Zoe suspects something.”

“And she posted that on her socials?”

“Yep, this morning. I’m going to call her and see if she’s okay.”

Ric comes up behind me, wrapping his arms around my waist and resting his chin on my shoulder.

“Okay. Let me know what she says.”

“And maybe arrange to see her, tell her about you and Ric,” Meg suggests before disconnecting.

I place my phone on the counter and turn in his arms. He kisses my nose and takes Harry’s bottle from me, shaking it vigorously. “That’s not a happy face.”

“It’s Zoe,” I mutter, “She posted something cryptic on her socials. Meg think’s she might suspect something’s going on.”

Ric rolls his eyes. “Or she posted something random she saw on a Gandhi quote and reposted it, and you and Meg are reading into it.”

“If there’s one thing more destructive than a lie, it’s a perfectly timed truth.”

He shrugs. “Maybe not Ghandi, but definitely attention-seeking. I bet there’re loads of comments on it asking if she’s okay.”

I shake my head. “She’s not like that.”

He scoffs. “She doesn’t like attention? Who are you kidding?”

“Can you stop?” I snap, and his expression softens. “She’s still my best friend, and you’re wrong about her. She pretends to be outgoing and outspoken, but she isn’t.”

“I’m sorry. You’re right. I shouldn’t speak about her like that. Give her a call. Check on her.”

My mobile rings, and I grab it. It’s Meg.

“False alarm,” she says, laughing. “She’s fine. She just liked the quote.” I make eye contact with Ric and smile in relief. He rolls his eyes again and goes off to feed Harry. It’s funny how easy we’ve slipped into the routine of family life.

“In fact, she invited us to The Ivy for lunch. Her treat.”

“Today?”

“Yeah. She’s got a table booked.”

“I had plans with Ric,” I mutter feebly, hating to be that girl.

“I think this would be the perfect time to tell her, Sof.”

Ric sticks his head around the door. “Go,” he whispers. “I’ll take care of Harry. Get it done so we can stop creeping around.”

“Settled,” says Meg. “Meet you outside The Ivy at one?”

“Okay.” My stomach fills with nerves. But she’s right, it needs to be done.

Zoe is waiting outside, poised like she’s stepped out of a magazine spread.

Her cream wool coat skims the hem of the black dress beneath it, tailored to perfection.

Her sunglasses rest on her head like a crown, and a designer bag hangs effortlessly on the crook of her arm.

She smiles as I approach, polished and unreadable.

We air kiss, her perfume blooming in the space between us.

“You look amazing,” I say.

“I know.” There’s something about her tone—flat, offhand. Off. I glance past her, scanning for Meg. “I called Meg and cancelled,” Zoe says lightly, slipping her arm through mine.

My steps falter. “Why?” She doesn’t answer. She’s already speaking to the host, her voice smooth as silk.

We’re led through the restaurant, her heels clicking a little too confidently on the tile.

I slide into my seat, trying to shake the weight in my chest.

She orders a bottle of wine. The good kind. The kind we usually save for birthdays or breakups. She turns to me with a soft, sugar-sweet smile. “I thought it’d be nice. Just us. We never get real time together anymore.”

Now, I know something’s wrong.

I reach for my glass but hesitate. “Actually, I wanted to talk to you,” I say carefully, watching her face for a flicker . . . of anything.

Nothing. She’s composed. Controlled.

Zoe raises her glass and drains half of it in one go before topping it up again, all in a single, elegant motion. She leans back, eyes steady. “To tell me about you and Ric?”

The question hits like a slap. My breath catches and my throat tightens. She doesn’t blink.

“I mean,” she says, tilting her head slightly, “that is what you wanted to talk to me about . . . isn’t it?”

I stare at her. For a second, I forget how to breathe. She knew. She knows .

I open my mouth then close it again. There’s no point pretending. “It wasn’t planned,” I say quietly.

Zoe lifts her glass again, swirling the wine like she’s waiting to be impressed. “It never is.”

Her voice is calm, but it’s the kind of calm that comes before something shatters.

“I didn’t want to—”

“I’m sure you didn’t,” she cuts in too quickly. “Neither did he, right? Just one of those things. Chemistry. Timing. Sparks.” Her eyes meet mine. “Accidents.”

I flinch. “Zoe . . .”

She finally leans forward, resting her elbows on the table, the wine glass still between her fingers. Her expression is unreadable, but her voice softens . . . dangerously so.

“I told him not to tell you. Not because I was trying to protect myself. I was protecting us . You and me. Our friendship.”

“I know,” I whisper.

She laughs, but there’s no humour in it. “Guess it didn’t matter.”

The silence stretches between us. It’s out there now, and all I have to do is damage control. “I wasn’t trying to hurt you,” I say, the words barely above a whisper.

She nods slowly, looking down at her glass. “Yeah. That’s the thing about hurt, though. It happens anyway.”

“We weren’t trying to hurt you,” I repeat.

She gives a small, unamused laugh. “We,” she repeats, shaking her head in silent anger. “You know what really hurts?” she asks quietly. “The lies. You’ve been sneaking around together, playing happy families, knowing what this would do to our friendship. Knowing and not caring.”

“I care,” I cry, glancing around when the other diners begin to look over. “I do,” I add

more quietly. “It just sort of happened, and then I didn’t know how to tell you.”

“When did you stop being my friend?” she asks, and I feel like I’ve been punched in the chest. She leans forward. “Do you know why you found it so difficult to tell me, Sofia?” I remain silent. “Because you knew it was wrong. You knew I’d be upset.”

“I didn’t want to lose our friendship.”

“Then you shouldn’t have fucked my ex-boyfriend,” she hisses, venom lacing her words, making me recoil.

“You and I, we’ve been through everything together.

First kisses, bad breakups, job rejections, hangovers from hell .

. . and this is the thing that breaks us?

Him ?” Tears fill her eyes, but she immediately blinks them away and straightens her shoulders, like she’s already rebuilding her walls.

I reach across the table instinctively. “Zoe—”

She pulls her hand back like I’ve burnt her. “Don’t.”

“It doesn’t have to be a big thing,” I mutter. “Not everything has to be a drama.” I regret the words instantly, but it’s too late to pull them back, so I brace myself to ride it out.

I risk a glance, and she’s now leaning back in the chair, watching me. “I loved him,” she admits. “Love him,” she corrects, and our eyes connect. “And just because he decided we wouldn’t work doesn’t mean I can just turn those feelings off. So, please

don't sit there and make out I'm overreacting."

I nod. "You're right. I'm sorry. You have every right to be upset. I should've told you straight away, but I was scared I'd lose you."

"You've said that already," she mutters, her tone bored.

"It's true," I say. "You're one of my best friends, Zoe. And you said it yourself, we've been through so much together. Surely, we can get through this."

"Best friends don't do what you did," she says, topping up her wine. She holds the bottle up to a passing waiter, and he nods, rushing off to get another.

He returns seconds later with a fresh bottle. "Are you ready to order?"

"Two of the lobster," she replies without looking at the menu. "And get us a bottle of Champagne. Expensive."

I frown slightly, not understanding where this is going.

Once he's gone, I lean closer. "I know I've been a crap friend—"

"Do you love him?" she asks, cutting me off. I nod, and she looks away like my admission is too painful for her.

"I wouldn't have done it if I didn't have feelings."

"Thank the lord for small mercies," she mutters sarcastically.

"I just meant . . . it's not all been for nothing. We're not just hooking up."

“Is that supposed to make me feel better?” she snaps.

“I don’t know how to make it better,” I admit, scrubbing my hands over my face. “I wanted to tell you. It was just never the right time.”

She rolls her eyes. “Did you do anything behind my back?”

Lying now would make it even worse, but I know telling her the truth will break her. “Not really.” She gasps, unable to hide the pain from her expression any longer. “We kissed. We immediately regretted it. And he ended things with you right away.”

“It’s like I don’t even know you,” she cries. “What happened, you saw me happy for once and decided you wanted it for yourself?”

I shake my head, aware that people are looking. “No. Not at all. It wasn’t like that.”

She slams her hands on the table. “If you’re serious about making this right—”

“I am.”

“Then end it.” My world slows to a standstill as I process her words. “You can’t have both, Sofia. So, choose. Me or him.” Then she pushes to her feet and storms out, right as the waiter brings out two dishes of lobster, and the waitress follows with an open bottle of Champagne. Fuck.

Eric

“What do you mean she cancelled?” I ask, placing my mobile on the worktop and hitting the speaker button so I can change Harry’s nappy.

“She texted me twenty minutes before and cancelled,” Meg repeats. “But then Hugo

mentioned he'd spoken to you and that Sofia still went. I tried calling Sofia, but she hasn't picked up. Do you think Zoe knows?"

"Yes," I snap. "She must." I pull Harry's trousers back on. "Where were they going?"

"The Ivy."

"Okay, I'll head over to check on her."

"Are you sure? I can go."

"No. I told her we'd face Zoe together."

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I get to the restaurant twenty minutes later and head inside. The host stops me at the door, and I shift Harry in my arms. “There was a table booked for one o’clock in the name of Heart. Are they still here?”

“I believe one of the diners is, yes,” he says. “Follow me.”

Sofia has her head down on the table, shoulders trembling, hair falling like a curtain around her face. The host throws me a quizzical look, but I offer him a tight, polite smile, the kind that says, Please don’t ask .

I slide into the booth beside her and wrap my arm around her gently, like I’m afraid she might break.

She startles at the touch then lifts her head. The second she sees it’s me, she collapses into my chest with a sound that cracks right through me, a sob pulled from somewhere deep, raw and painful. Her hands fist my coat. Her whole body is shaking.

Harry, blissfully unaware, grabs a fistful of her hair and tries to shove it into his mouth.

I hold her tighter and press my cheek to the top of her head, trying to steady her breathing with mine. “Shh. I’m right here.”

My eyes scan the table—the untouched food, the bottle of Champagne, a half-empty glass of wine. I wince. “It didn’t go well?”

“She already knew,” she chokes out, dragging the sleeve of her jumper across her face. “She didn’t even let me explain. She just . . . she ordered everything and left. The bill’s almost three hundred pounds.”

“I’ll cover it,” I murmur, already reaching for my wallet. “It’s all going to work out.”

“She hates me,” she whispers, like saying it aloud makes it more real. Her voice cracks on the last word.

“She’s just upset,” I say gently, rubbing slow circles into her back. “It’ll settle down.”

“You weren’t there,” she says, lifting her head. Her eyes are red-rimmed, her mascara smudged like shadows beneath them. “You didn’t see the way she looked at me.”

I place my card on the bill and wave the waiter over. “Clear this away, please. And . . . take the Champagne to another couple. On me.”

The waiter gives a small nod, retreating quickly.

I turn back to Sofia. She’s still staring ahead, hollowed out. Her hands are in her lap now, clenched so tightly, her knuckles are white.

“Sofia,” I say, gently tipping her chin so she meets my eyes. “It will blow over. I promise.”

But the look she gives me stops my heart.

It’s not just heartbreak. It’s loss . That helpless, crumpling grief that comes from knowing you might not be able to put something back together again.

And for the first time, I panic.

Zoe

Meg opens the door and her smile falters. I wonder if Sofia's already called ahead of my arrival with a sob story, playing the victim.

"Should I just stay out here?" I ask, my tone light and teasing.

She laughs a little louder than usual, like she's nervous, and opens the door wider. "Of course, come in."

"Sorry I cancelled last minute," I say, following her into the kitchen.

"I've just opened a bottle," Meg says, holding up a beer. "Do you want the same?" I nod, and she grabs me one, flipping the cap off and handing it to me. I follow her into the garden.

"I thought it would be better to see Sofia first," I say, folding my arms. "She had a few things she needed to get off her chest."

Meg's step falters. As she lowers herself into the chair, guilt washes over her face like a tide she can't fight.

"I left her at The Ivy," I add coolly, "with a three-hundred-pound bill." Meg winces, her eyes finding mine. I smile, sharp and humourless. "It's the least she deserved."

I let the silence stretch for a beat then tilt my head. "Aren't you going to ask me why?" Her mouth opens, and I laugh. It's hollow. "Of course, you're not, because you already know."

Her face crumples. "Oh god, Zoe, I'm so sorry."

“Shall I tell you how I found out?” I ask, slowly turning my chair to face her, each movement deliberate, precise.

“Not from her. Not from him. Not even from you .” She flinches before I’ve even said it.

“No. I found out because I heard them.” My voice shakes now, the memory still raw. “I had to listen to them fucking.”

Meg gasps, a hand flying to her mouth.

“But you know how that feels, don’t you, Meg? Hearing the man you love fuck someone else?” Her face hardens, and I smirk. “Oh please,” I sneer. “Don’t even try to play the victim. How could you lie to me?”

“I told her to tell you,” she says quickly. “It wasn’t my place. I was stuck in the middle.”

“No,” I snap, “ I was stuck in the middle. Everyone knew but me.” My chest is heaving now, the words rushing out like floodwater. “I thought you were my friend. And if you’d just had my back, just once , maybe I wouldn’t feel so completely, pathetically betrayed.”

“I am your friend,” she says, but it sounds more like a plea.

“I was there for you when Dan fucked off, remember? I backed you a hundred percent. No questions. No grey areas. And what did you do?” I gesture wildly. “You practically patted Sofia on the back and handed her the green light.”

“That’s not how it was,” she mutters, staring at the table.

I laugh again, a different kind this time. Sadder. Smaller. “No. Of course not. She fits into your little family now, doesn’t she? You and Hugo, her and Ric. Matching Christmas jumpers. Board games with the in-laws. I never stood a chance.”

“I was angry at first,” she says quietly. “But I’ve seen them together, and they’re . . . in love.” My throat tightens. The words hit harder than I expect. “I know that’s hard to hear,” she adds gently, “but they are. And you can’t force Ric to love you instead. No one can.”

I push up from the chair, jaw clenched, throat burning. I set my beer down too hard on the table. “We’ll see how much she loves him.”

Meg blinks. “What does that mean?”

“I gave her a choice,” I say, my voice like ice. “Me or him.”

She stands too, alarm spreading across her face. “Zoe, come on. Why can’t she just have both?”

“Because she can’t !” I yell louder than I mean to. “It’s me or him.”

Sofia

By Monday morning, I'm practically a zombie. I haven't slept, not really. I just lie there, staring at the ceiling, Zoe's voice on repeat in my head like a song I never asked to hear.

It's me or him.

Four little words, and somehow, they've managed to hollow me out completely.

I asked Ric to sleep at his place last night.

He didn't want to go—his face fell like I'd physically punched him—but I needed space.

Needed to breathe without his warmth clouding my thoughts.

He kissed my forehead before leaving, whispered, "I love you," and I think I said it back, but honestly, I can't remember. My mind's been buzzing ever since.

Now, I'm at my desk at the magazine, surrounded by the gentle hum of typing and the distant clink of coffee cups, the comforting chaos of normalcy. But nothing feels normal. Not today.

I stare blankly at my screen, fingers hovering above the keyboard, trying to remember what I'm supposed to be writing. My coffee's gone cold. My inbox is full. And I can't stop hearing Zoe's voice.

You don't get to have both.

Guilt creeps in again, cold and clinging. I keep glancing at my phone, hoping for—and dreading—a message from her. But there's nothing. Just silence. And it's so much worse than shouting.

I rub my temples and glance at the time. It's only nine-forty-seven. God, help me.

The worst part is, I don't even know what the right choice is. I love Ric, I do, but the thought of losing Zoe, of that friendship just disappearing like smoke, makes my chest ache. She's been there through everything, and now, she's just . . . gone.

Torn in two. That's how I feel. Like I've split myself down the middle, and no matter which half I choose, something vital will be left behind. God, I just want someone to tell me what to do.

A notification from Dexter pops up on my screen. My office now. I groan, glancing over to see where Amelia is. She's not in her seat. I don't even recall seeing her at all so far.

I trudge into the office, bracing myself for whatever mountain of work Dexter's about to throw at me, especially if Amelia's isn't around. But when I push open the door, she's already there.

Dexter leans back in his chair, unusually relaxed. Amelia stands on his side of the desk, arms folded, a smug little smirk on her face.

My stomach drops. What the hell is she up to now?

"Take a seat," Dexter mutters, not looking up.

I do as I'm told, trying to still the sudden flutter of nerves in my chest. "Is everything okay?" I ask carefully.

"Not really, Sofia." Dexter clasps his hands and rests them on the desk.

"Over the weekend, Amelia and I came in to do a stock check." I frown, unsure where this is going.

"Every few months, we go through the cupboard and take inventory of the products we've been sent to feature," he explains.

"Items we still need are put aside. The rest are packaged up and returned to the client."

My breath catches.

The trainers. The bag.

"We're missing some items," he says.

"Missing?" My voice comes out small.

"A pair of Fendi trainers, size five, and a Fendi handbag."

My eyes flick to Amelia. She's still smirking, like she's been waiting for this exact moment.

"Amelia mentioned seeing you wearing trainers matching that description on a recent staff night out," Dexter continues. "Along with the bag."

"Yes, that's right." I sit up straighter, forcing the words out. "It was my first week

here. Amelia showed me the stock cupboard and told me to take them. I asked if we should check with you, but she said she was in charge of fashion and it was her call.”

Even as I speak, I know how it sounds. Like a weak excuse. Like I’m grasping.

Dexter narrows his eyes.

Amelia gasps, the picture of false outrage. “I did no such thing.”

I roll my eyes. “Oh, come on. This is ridiculous. I’ve never stolen anything in my life. She practically shoved them at me. Said it was part of the job.”

“She’s lying,” Amelia mutters, placing a hand on Dexter’s shoulder like she’s the wounded party.

“I’m not,” I say firmly, meeting Dexter’s gaze, “and you know it.”

“Do you have the items?”

I nod. “Yes, they’re at home.”

“I’d really like to deal with this and not involve the police.”

“The police?” I cry.

“Of course, you’ll need to return the items ASAP. And seeing as you already had a warning, I have no choice but to let you go.” The words sound muffled as the ringing in my ears intensifies.

“You’re firing me?”

“It’s that or a criminal record,” Amelia pipes up.

I glare at her. “This is what you’ve wanted all along,” I cry, standing.

“Why? Because you thought I wanted him?” I yell, waving my hand in Dexter’s direction.

“Well, I don’t. Men are nothing but trouble.

So, you’re welcome to him.” I spin on my heel and crash straight into a woman holding a toddler.

She arches a brow as I mumble an apology.

“Marie,” says Dexter, sounding panicked. I glance back, and Amelia looks less confident, putting space between her and Dexter.

“Don’t stop on my account,” she says.

“Sofia was just leaving,” Dexter rushes to say.

Marie eyes me. “Who’s welcome to him?” I don’t reply, unsure who this is or why she’s asking me questions. “Is he shagging the office tramp?”

I inhale sharply, my eyes widening. “Don’t ask her. I’ve just fired her. She’ll say anything,” he snaps. “Sofia, get out.”

Marie blocks my path. “Is my husband fucking the office tramp?”

I swallow the lump in my throat. I have enough drama of my own and I don’t need this, but she’s his wife . He’s married. Shit . “Yes,” I say clearly. “if by tramp you

mean Amelia.” Then I step around her and leave, smiling smugly.

The sound of yelling can be heard from the office as I pack up my desk. I tune out, my head full of panic and my heart aching.

Minutes later, Amelia appears, stopping at my desk. “Are you happy?” she hisses, folding her arms over her chest. “Your little stunt got me fired.”

I smirk. Finally, some good news. “I think it was your little stunt that got me fired,” I tell her.

“Karma is a bitch in Fendi trainers,” I sneer.

“Now, fuck off and don’t ever speak to me again.

” She looks taken aback as I throw the last of my things into my box and snatch it from the table.

“You’re lucky I haven’t smashed your face in for all the crap you’ve pulled. Bullies never win.”

Eric

The day’s dragged, and all I’ve thought about is Sofia and where her head is at. The second the bell rings, I’m out the door with the kids. I need to get back first and make dinner. Show her just how much I love her.

I pat the pocket with the plane tickets. A week in Bali, just the three of us. If the mood is right, it’s the place I’ll ask her to be my wife.

Maybe it seems rushed or even out the blue, but it feels right, especially with the

threat of Zoe hanging over us. Whatever she said to Sofia yesterday is already driving a wedge between us.

I'm surprised when I step into Sofia's house and find her curled up on the couch with a blanket over her while Harry watches a cartoon. She sits up looking surprised. "Hey," I say gently. "Are you sick?" I place my hand on her forehead.

"No. I got fired."

I gasp, sitting on the couch. "Fired? Why?"

"It's a long story," she whispers. And I hate it, the way she's already shutting me out.

"Well, I thought I'd cook dinner tonight," I say, standing abruptly, too loud in the silence.

"Actually—"

"I got us steak," I cut in fast, not wanting to hear whatever she's about to say. I head into the kitchen, forcing normal, grabbing the shopping bags like it's just another evening.

Sofia appears in the doorway, the blanket wrapped like armour. Her eyes are swollen, her skin pale, but she's never looked more real. More heartbreakingly her .

"Ric, please."

"And I know you're not mad on vegetables," I go on, ignoring the break in her voice, "but you need to eat better, and asparagus is—"

"We need to talk," she says quietly.

“It goes well with red meat, and I thought maybe wine too.” I reach for the rack. “I forgot to grab a bottle, but I’ll replace what we drink.”

“Stop,” she says, firm this time. I freeze, bottle midair. “Please,” she adds, her voice cracking. “You’re making this harder.”

I set the wine down carefully then cross to her in two quick steps. I take her hand, desperate. “Then don’t say it,” I plead. “Don’t say the words.”

Her eyes fill again. “I have to.”

“No, you don’t,” I whisper. “Not to me.”

She swallows, tears spilling now. “It’s all I’ve thought about. I wish it was easier.”

I shake my head. No. No, this isn’t how we end. “Pick me,” I say, voice breaking. “Please, Sofia. Choose me.”

She closes her eyes, sobs wracking her. “I can’t.”

My heart cracks. “I love you,” I say, pushing the words out like they’ll save us. I glance past her to where Harry sits on the rug, oblivious. “I love him. I love you. Don’t do this.”

She’s still crying, but she doesn’t take it back. She’s not choosing me.

Something inside me slips, a tether snapping. “This doesn’t make sense,” I say, stepping back like the extra space will help me breathe. “You said you loved me. You said you wanted this.”

“I did,” she whispers.

“Then why are you throwing it away?” My voice rises, cracking under the weight of everything. “Because she gave you an ultimatum? Screw that. She doesn't get to do that. She doesn't get to rip this apart.”

“She's my best friend, Ric.”

“And I'm what? Just someone you can cut loose when it gets complicated?” I laugh, but it's hollow, broken. “You don't get to make me a maybe. Not after everything.”

“I don't want to hurt anyone,” she cries.

“You already have,” I snap, but then I see her flinch and I hate myself. I drop my head into my hands, swallowing down the burn in my throat.

Source Creation Date: July 31, 2025, 2:41 am

Silence hangs between us, heavy and unforgiving.

Then I hear Harry babbling softly behind her.

I move past Sofia, kneeling down on the rug.

Harry's sitting there in his little sleep suit, one sock half off, chewing on his plush giraffe like none of this is happening. Like his world isn't about to change.

I scoop him into my arms, and he giggles— giggles —grabbing at my shirt like he always does. That little warm hand curls into my collar, and I nearly fall apart.

“I love you, mate,” I whisper, pressing my forehead to his. “I love you so much.” And a loud sob escapes Sofia. I kiss his cheek, then the top of his head, breathing him in like I'll never get to again. Maybe I won't. “I'm so sorry,” I whisper, mostly to him, maybe to her too.

Then I pass him back to Sofia with shaking hands, my heart tearing open at the seams. She cradles him instinctively, her body still trembling, and I back away like I might shatter if I don't.

“Don't call me unless you're choosing me,” I say, my voice low and uneven. “Because I can't go through this twice.”

Then I turn and walk out, not because I want to, but because if I stay a second longer, I won't have the strength to leave.

Zoe

“She did it,” says Meg through the phone.

I tap my card against the payment machine and take my caramel latte. It’s been five days since I saw Sofia or Meg, and to be honest, I was beginning to think she’d made her choice. “Should I buy balloons and make an official announcement?” I ask, my voice dripping with sarcasm.

“I’m not calling to fight,” she mutters, “but she’s not picking up my calls or answering text messages.”

“You don’t expect me to go round there, do you?” I half-laugh as I step out into the street. “Console her?”

“Yes, actually, I do. This is what you wanted, Zoe. The least you can do is help with the cleanup.” It’s just like Meg to make me feel bad for this clusterfuck. “Forget the reason she’s heartbroken and just focus on the fact she is. Meet me at hers in ten minutes.”

I roll my eyes and disconnect.

Ten minutes later, I pull up outside Sofia’s. My eyes are drawn to Ric’s, but there’s no sign of him. Meg pulls up a second later and climbs out. I join her on the path. “It’s three-thirty. Won’t she be at work?”

“She got the sack,” says Meg, making her way to the front door.

I rush after her. “What? Why?”

“Suddenly you care?”

I narrow my eyes. “Of course, I do.”

She knocks, firm and sharp. We both wait, holding our breath. Nothing. The curtains are drawn. No movement. No sound. Just the faint hum of traffic down the road and the uncomfortable weight of silence.

I step forward and pound harder. “Sofia, open the damn door!” Still nothing . “She’s in there,” I mutter, jaw tight. “I know she’s in there.”

Meg gives me a look then glances around. “What if she’s unconscious or something? What if she’s collapsed from sadness, like in *Pride and Prejudice* ?”

“Meg, this isn’t a Regency novel.”

She ignores me. “We should try the back.”

We head around the side of the house and reach the garden gate. Locked .

Meg groans dramatically. “Great. Should I call the police?”

“And tell them what? ‘Hi, officer, we think our friend might be ignoring us’?”

“I don’t know. Maybe they could do a welfare check?”

“She’s fine, ” I insist, rapping my knuckles on the gate. “She’s just . . . sulking.”

Meg taps her chin then eyes the fence like it personally insulted her. “Okay, give me a leg up.”

I blink. “We’re not climbing over her bloody fence.”

“Well, we can’t exactly shout emotional support through the letterbox,” she hisses.
“What if she’s face down in a tub of Ben & Jerry’s and her phone died?”

“That’s not a crime.”

“She could be crying into an empty bottle of gin.”

“She likes gin.”

Meg rounds on me. “Why are you being so chill about this? Don’t you care?”

I shrug. “Of course, I care.”

But I don’t move. Because the truth is, I am scared. I’m scared she won’t bounce back. That I broke something in her I can’t fix. That the woman behind that door, my best friend, is in pieces . . . because of me.

“She just needs time,” I say, quieter now. “She’ll call when she’s ready.”

Meg studies me, frowning. “You’re worried.”

“I’m Zoe Heart. I don’t do worried.”

“But you are. You’re scared she’s lying half-dead in there, and then it’ll be too late to undo your ridiculous demand.”

“Ridiculous,” I cry. “She’s shagged my boyfriend.”

“Ex-boyfriend.”

I grab the top of the gate and lift my leg for Meg to give me a hand up. She shakes

her head in irritation, crouching slightly and clasping her hands together. “Why did she get fired?” I ask as I heave myself up. Months of Pilates has paid off.

“I have no idea. She’s not answering my calls, remember.”

“I don’t know why you keep sniping at me,” I snap, dropping down on the other side of the gate. “I didn’t see you demanding we all support Ashley when she was shagging Dan.”

“That was completely different,” Meg screeches. “For a start, Dan and I have a child together. We were married for ten years. You and Ric had a fling—”

“For six months,” I cry, unbolting the gate and shoving it open. It catches Meg’s knee, and she cries out, jumping back in surprise. “That’s like ten years for me.”

Meg rubs her knees, her eyes fixed to me but filled with anger. “He was a bed warmer and you know it. If someone richer, prettier, or more muscled came along, you’d drop him like a hot potato and not think anything else of it.” She stomps past me. “You’re just mad he dumped you first.”

I scoff. “That is so not true,” I yell. “I love him.”

“You love yourself. You love the look of being on his arm. You don’t know what love is.”

“Oh, listen to you, missus perfect with her perfect life. Christ, I thought you and Dan were insufferable, but you and Hugo . . .” I grip my head, and fake scream. “And don’t get me started on the whole blended family bullshit.”

“So, now you have a problem with my family dynamics?”

“No. Just how you handle it all so damn perfectly.” My voice is sharp, laced with fury.

“Who the hell befriends the woman who shagged her husband ? Not just shagged but stole him. Right from under your nose. Had a kid with him. And you,” I shake my head, laughing bitterly, “you helped bring that kid into the world.”

“I’m not her friend,” Meg snaps through gritted teeth. “And I couldn’t let her give birth alone.”

“Yes, Meg. Yes, you could. ” My eyes burn with rage. “You could’ve walked out, told her to get fucked. Dan wasn’t there because he’s a dick and that’s the life she chose . . . the life she stole. But no, you had to be you. Too fucking perfect.”

Meg’s jaw tightens, eyes blazing. “You think that was about being perfect? That was me surviving. That was me clawing my way through the mess he left behind.” She takes a breath, trembling with the effort to stay calm.

“You’re right,” she spits. “Maybe I should’ve walked away.

Maybe I should’ve let her scream through labour alone, terrified and broken.

But I didn’t. Because I’m an adult. Because sometimes, being the bigger person isn’t about being good, it’s about not letting bitterness swallow you whole. ”

I open my mouth to speak, but Meg barrels on.

“I looked at her, and I didn’t see the woman who destroyed my marriage.

I saw me. Younger. More naïve. In ten years, she’ll be where I was.

Hollowed out. Broken. And it'll be too late to fix anything.

” She swipes at a tear but keeps her voice steady.

“And yeah, I hate her,” she says, her voice low now, trembling.

“Does that make you feel better? I fucking hate her for what she did to my family, but hating her doesn't bring Dan back.

It doesn't undo what he did to me.” She looks me dead in the eyes.

“Just like punishing Sofia won't bring Ric back to you. ”

Sofia

I rest my head against the back door and listen as my two best friends tear strips off one another. It falls quiet, and I pull the blanket around me a little tighter before opening the back door. “Well, now the entire neighbourhood knows your life story, you should probably come inside.”

Relief floods both their faces. “We’ve been worried,” says Meg, following me into the kitchen. Zoe lingers by the door.

“I’m fine. Just taking some time.”

“Ric told Hugo you lost your job.” The mention of his name makes my heart ache, and I turn away slightly.

I haven’t stopped crying since he left on Monday.

Just seeing the way he held Harry . . . I take a breath.

“Anyway, now you’ve seen me, you can go.

” My words are harsh, I’m aware, but I don’t want to see anyone. Even talking is an effort.

“Sofia,” Meg whispers, looking hurt.

“I just need to be alone, Meg. I’m sorry.”

“Unfortunately, it doesn’t work like that,” Zoe announces, stepping in and closing the door. “Haven’t you heard the saying that misery loves company?”

“Harry’s sleeping. I’m tired. I just want to be left alone.”

“I’ll get ice cream, and you pick a film,” she tells Meg, ignoring me.

I groan, knowing there’s no way I’m going to win this, so I head into the living room and flop down on the couch. Maybe I’ll get some sleep if there’s background noise.

I wake with a start and look around. That same ache hits my chest when I realise it’s not a bad dream. Ric really is gone, and I am unemployed.

Meg glances over, smiling, “Hey, sleeping beauty.”

“Harry?” I whisper, my voice raspy from my sleep.

“He’s bathed, fed, and back in bed.”

I look around. The place is spotless. “Zoe?”

“She had to go.”

I push to sit up. “Does she hate me any less?” I ask.

Meg shrugs. “She’s coming round.”

“I did what she wanted.”

“I know. I don’t think she knows how to respond to your heartbreak.”

“I don’t,” I utter. “How’s Ric?”

Meg looks away, “Not great. He’s at work but he’s not himself.”

Tears fill my eyes, and Meg immediately rushes to me, wrapping her arms around me. “He was so hurt,” I sob. “And he held Harry while he begged me not to end it.”

“Oh, Sof,” she whispers into my hair.

“He told us he loves us. I’ll never find anyone like him again. He was it for me.”

“It’s all gonna work out,” she whispers gently.

I sob harder. “I didn’t just lose him, Harry did too.”

“I know. It’s shit. I’m so sorry you’re going through this.”

I wipe my eyes and sit up, breathing in through my nose and out through my mouth to calm my racing heart. “How did she find out?”

Meg bites on her lower lip. “She said something about hearing you. She was in your wardrobe.”

“Hearing me what?”

She hesitates. “You and Ric . . . yah know . Doing it. I think it was at Harry’s party because she knew I knew too. It explains why she left so abruptly.”

I bury my face in my hands. “Shit.”

“What happened at work?”

I groan, “A long story.”

“Which I’m dying to hear.”

Realising she’s not going to let it go, I cross my legs and shrug. “Amelia took a disliking to me. She’s had it in for me for weeks.”

“Okay, but that doesn’t explain why they fired you.”

“Remember the Fendi bag and trainers?” She nods. “Apparently, staff aren’t allowed to take them home.”

“So, just tell them it was a mistake.”

“I tried. She’s fully denying ever telling me to take them.” I rub my hands over my tired face. “She’s done other stuff, besides the social media video humiliating me. She locked me in the stationary cupboard.”

“Christ, Sofia. Why the hell didn’t you tell me?”

“What could you do about it? She’s a bitch. Anyway, I got payback. Turns out she’s shagging the boss, and he’s married. His wife walked in on our showdown and it sort of slipped out.”

“No,” Meg gasps, smirking.

“Yep. She got fired too.”

Meg laughs. “Well, at least that’s something.”

“On reflection, I don’t think the job was for me anymore. I felt old and out of touch.

I'm gonna start looking for something else."

"I'll help. We could get Zoe on the case. You know she loves all that. It might be a good way to start rebuilding bridges."

I reluctantly nod. I guess a part of me resents her denying me Ric, but it's done now, and we have to move forward. Otherwise, I chose her for no reason.

Eric

"He's got to start facing things." It's Jimmy's voice that wakes me.

"Give him a break," Hugo replies in a hushed tone.

"He's had a break. It's been a week. When's he gonna go home? He can't avoid seeing Sofia forever," Jimmy hisses in reply.

Sofia . My heart twists painfully. She's all I can think about. Her and Harry. It gets to seven p.m. and I find myself remembering his bath times and how we'd all somehow end up soaked. Or first thing, when I'd usually be in the gym, I remember how I'd grab her breakfast.

"All of you should step aside." That's my dad's voice. Great . Why the hell have they bothered him with this? "Your mother will talk some sense into him."

I groan loudly. "You called Mum on me?" I push to sit up as Mum marches in and pulls the curtains back, letting in the bright sunshine I've been avoiding all week. It blinds me, cutting through my retinas like sharp knives, and I shield my face. "Jesus," I hiss angrily, burying my face in my hands.

"Not my doing," says Hugo, holding his hands up in defence.

“Brother, I love you, and I feel your pain as if it were my own. But we can’t keep taking shifts to babysit your broken arse. And you can’t keep slumming it on Hugo’s couch. Even Izzy is sick of seeing you walk round here like a zombie,” says Jimmy.

“I don’t remember you saying this when Hugo was a mess.”

“Hugo’s wife died,” snaps Jimmy. “Don’t even compare your breakup to us all losing Liz.”

Guilt eats away at me, and I lower my head in shame. “Sorry, Hu, I didn’t mean that.”

Hugo pats me on the shoulder. “It’s fine. We say shit when we’re hurting.”

“Out you all go,” Mum says lightly. “And Hugo, wash your mouth out.” He grins, kissing her on the cheek before they all leave so I’m alone with her.

She closes the door then takes a seat on the armchair opposite me. “So,” she says, smiling, “tell me everything.”

I lean back in the couch, suddenly feeling like a teenager in trouble again. “We broke up.”

“I know that much, but what’s happened since then?”

I shrug, scrubbing my hand over my messy growth. I don’t know when I last showered, let alone shaved. “I’ve been here.”

“And how’s that making you feel?”

I narrow my eyes. “Great, Mum. I’m almost tiptop,” I say sarcastically.

“Exactly,” she says. “So, why are you still doing it?”

I sigh heavily. “Because I can’t face anything.”

“So, the plan is to spend the rest of your days here, living on Hugo’s couch? Avoiding daylight? Not washing or taking care of yourself?”

“Obviously not,” I mutter.

“Son, we all love you and we’re worried. You can get through this, even though it doesn’t feel like it right now.”

“I live next door,” I whisper. “I can’t see her doing life, getting on. I’m not ready.”

“Ric, she’s probably feeling the exact same way. But hiding won’t make it better.” She sighs before asking, “What things in life made you happy other than Sofia and Harry?”

I think over her words. “Work,” I admit. “The gym. Seeing my brothers at the bar. Sunday dinner with you and Dad.”

“Right, so I suggest you start there. Do those things again. And before you know it, you’ll be doing life again. It won’t make you forget your pain. It won’t make you forget Sofia or Harry. But it’ll keep you moving, one step at a time, until one day, the pain is just . . . less.”

I raise my head and look her in the eyes. “I really love her, Mum.”

She grabs my hand. “I know you do, Ric. And she loves you too. But right now, it’s not your time. That doesn’t mean to say it’ll never be, it just means not right now. So, do the things you love, get your life back, and worry about the rest later.”

“And if it doesn’t work out? If it’s never our time?”

“We’ll cross that bridge when we come to it.”

Another week passes. Two weeks since I walked away. Since Sofia chose Zoe.

And Mum was right. Doing the normal everyday things is helping me to feel some kind of normal again.

I’ve even managed to avoid seeing Sofia, which has been a task in itself.

I’ve been leaving for work extra early and hitting the gym first thing.

Then I’ve stayed late to mark books and get organised for the following day.

I’ve not been this organised with lesson plans since I was newly qualified.

And I can’t deny that hearing Harry crying in the evenings has pulled at every heart string. I’ve had to fight myself not to go round just to check they’re both okay. But it won’t do us any good. Not when I’m starting to make progress.

So, tonight, as I get the round of drinks in, I force thoughts of Sofia out of my head and concentrate on being here, in the local bar with my brothers, just like any other Friday night.

As I place the tray on our table and each of them take a drink, I sit down. “I just want to thank you all for getting me through these last couple weeks.”

Jimmy hits me on the shoulder and I wince. He’s so heavy handed. “That’s what brothers are for.”

“You’re first heartbreak is always the hardest,” says Hugo. “But you’re coming out the other side. We’ve all noticed.”

“And when you’re ready, I’ll be right here to help you get back on the horse,” says Jimmy, grinning. “Until then, you’ll just have to watch me work alone.” And he pushes to his feet and heads off to talk to a couple women at the bar.

I laugh, rolling my eyes. “Do you think he’ll ever settle down?”

“No, let’s bet on it,” says Seb.

“Katie will have your balls,” Hugo says, grinning, “but I’ll have by forty. Maybe even married.”

“Never,” I say, shaking my head. “He’ll still be single well into his forties. I reckon he’ll meet a lady in his sixties. They’ll both meet travelling or on holiday.”

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Seb laughs harder. “He’ll be on one of those over-sixty holidays, the ones where they travel by coach to Spain.”

“Ric, come over here,” calls Jimmy, and I groan, looking to the others for help. They look away, making it clear I’m in this on my own.

I head over to Jimmy and the two women. Both are beautiful, but my head’s not in it, so I merely nod in greeting as Jimmy throws his arm around my shoulder.

“This is Eric. He’s a teacher too.” The women bring their attention to me.

“This is Scarlett and Jen. They’re teachers at the all-girls school.

” I nod, offering a friendly smile. “Scarlett teaches English too,” he continues, and I inwardly groan.

That’s my cue to keep Scarlett chatting so he can work on her friend.

But I’m not in the mood, and my head and heart are still very much with Sofia.

Before I have a chance to politely walk away, Scarlett leans closer and smiles.

“I don’t know about you, but I’m not on the pull,” she says quietly while Jimmy talks to Jen.

Relief floods me. “Me either.”

She visibly relaxes. “Thank God. Now, we can both relax. How long have you been teaching?”

Zoe

I hate crappy, old bars. Especially this one because I know the Chadwick brothers come in here a lot.

But my new client insisted on meeting here.

She’s in her sixties and wanting to throw her granddaughter a surprise twenty-first party to remember.

It’s not something I’d usually take on, but apparently, her granddaughter has been a follower of mine for a while and she’s always dreamed of a party like the ones I organise.

I spot her immediately, sitting by the window. As I enter, I keep my head lowered, determined not to bump into the Chadwicks.

Sofia and I are finally getting to a better place, and right after here, I’ve promised to give her a makeover for a job interview she’s got.

I make quick work of booking the client in for a glitzy birthday bash.

I go through my portfolio, and she only gets a few samples in before she’s agreeing to one of my most expensive packages.

I’m so relieved to have wrapped up earlier than planned that I don’t see Eric until I almost crash into him.

“Sor—” I stop dead as he automatically steadies me.

“Zoe,” he mutters, barely more than a breath, and then his gaze flickers past me, searching. For her.

It used to sting, that automatic scan for someone else. But this time, it doesn't bite as deep. I frown, puzzled by the strange softness in my chest. Maybe time really does have a way of dulling old wounds, smoothing over the jagged edges.

“She’s not here,” I say, a little too sharply, and his eyes snap back to mine, disappointment written plain across his face.

“Ric, did you want a whiskey chaser?”

Two things happen in quick succession. Ric flinches, just barely but enough to make my radar ping. It’s not the flinch of surprise. More like guilt, or something close to it. And then I notice her—a stunning blonde with legs for days and a gaze that’s locked on him like she’s already claimed him.

Before I can say a word, he’s turning, quickly, desperately, his eyes silently pleading with me.

“Zoe, it’s not what you think.” I shake my head, unable to hide the disappointment, and then I turn on my heel and head for the door.

“Zoe,” he calls, chasing after me. “She’s no one. Barely an acquaintance.”

We break out into the carpark, and I spin to face him. It’s so abrupt, he almost crashes into me. Anger radiates from me, and he takes a step back, eyeing me with caution. “You said you were in love with Sofia,” I yell.

“I am.”

“Sure looks like it, Ric,” I spit, his name leaving a bad taste in my mouth. “She’s in pieces, and here you are, doing your usual trick and moving on to the next unsuspecting victim. Does she have a good-looking friend for you to move to next?”

His face crumples in frustration. “It’s not like that.”

“You just keep moving on, Ric, leaving chaos and destruction behind you.”

“It wasn’t my choice to leave Sofia,” he shouts angrily, and I swallow my next insult as he steps closer, pointing a finger at my chest. “You made her choose.”

“I did her a favour, clearly.”

“You were looking out for yourself, as usual.”

I cross my arms as if that will keep him away and square my shoulders. “It doesn’t matter, because you’ve shown your true colours. After this, Sofia won’t want anything to do with you.”

He growls angrily, turning his back and heading for the bar.

“Whatever, Zoe. Do your worst. Make her life as miserable as yours. Let her miss her chance at happiness just because you haven’t had yours.

And when you meet someone, which you will,” he says, facing me from the doorway, “and she’s left alone, remember, that’s all on you. ”

His words strike something in me, and I stare at the door as he disappears inside, slamming it closed. I glance around to see if anyone witnessed the showdown then

march right in after him.

He's yelling at Jimmy for fucking his life up, and Jimmy is promising he'll tell Sofia what happened. But when his eyes land on me, he stops midsentence and nods so that Ric looks round too.

His eyes burn into me like angry daggers. "Can we talk?"

"Zoe, can I just say that it was my fault," Jimmy rushes to tell me.

"Shut up," Ric snaps, and Jimmy takes a step away. "If you're going to rip more strips off me, Zoe, don't bother. I already know I'm a piece of shit."

I shake my head. "Maybe I was wrong."

Sofia

Zoe is fussing, moving around like she's got ten things on her mind, none of which she's willing to explain. It makes no sense. There's a buzz in the air, something unspoken, not quite tension but not quite nerves. Excitement?

Meg lifts up Harry's little overnight bag and gives it a shake. "Is this the one?"

"Yep," I nod slowly, still watching Zoe out the corner of my eye. "It should have everything you need for a couple hours."

"Mind if I grab some extra clothes and stuff?" Meg asks, all casual, but there's something about the way her voice goes up a notch.

I narrow my eyes. "What's going on?"

They exchange a look. It's quick but not quick enough. I catch it, and now, I'm really suspicious.

"Okay, full disclosure," Zoe says, exhaling as she places the curling iron down and sits beside me with the kind of deliberateness that means this is a thing. "To make up for everything, I'd like to take you out. Special dinner. A few drinks after, if you're up for it."

I hesitate. I've got an interview in an hour with a writer's magazine, something that could actually turn into my dream job. A new beginning.

Zoe's eyes sparkle. "And maybe we'll be celebrating your new job."

"And I'm happy to have Harry overnight," Meg adds, like it's the most natural thing in the world. "So you can fully relax."

I glance at my baby boy as he pulls himself to stand against the couch, his fingers gripping the edge like he's willing himself to stay upright.

His eyes flit to mine, and my heart clenches.

He's been off lately, clingier, a little quieter.

I know it's not just the teething or the sleep regression. He misses Ric. Just like I do.

I smile tightly, feeling the heat of my friends' kindness, and push away the feeling that thinking about Ric brings me. "Okay," I say simply.

"Okay," Zoe repeats with a huge smile on her face. She picks up the curling iron and begins sectioning my hair.

Eric

I'm nervous. Doubts are plaguing me. Not about her—never about her—but about Zoe.

What if she's changed her mind?

What if all that talk of new beginnings and forgiveness was just that? Talk.

I hear them before I see them—giggling, the light kind that makes something ache in my chest—and then Zoe appears, leading Sofia by the hand.

Sofia stumbles a little, blindfolded, clutching Zoe's arm. "I'm not sure what you're up to, Miss Heart, but you're making me nervous."

"You said you wouldn't question me."

"I trust you. Just . . . you said we were going to a few bars, and now, I'm blindfolded like I've been kidnapped."

Zoe laughs. "All will become clear."

Then she catches my eye—brief but loaded—and gives me a small, knowing nod. My heart stutters.

They stop in front of me. Zoe steadies Sofia then turns her gently so her back is to me. "Okay," she says, lifting the blindfold with care.

Sofia blinks, adjusting to the light, glancing around. Before she can turn, Zoe holds her lightly by the shoulders to keep her facing forward.

"I was wrong," she says. Her voice is steady, but I can see the tension in her hands.

Sofia laughs, awkward and unsure. "Zoe, what are you talking about?"

Zoe draws in a breath. "Sofia, you're the sweetest, kindest person I've ever met. And I don't know if you'll ever forgive me for the way I came between you and Ric."

Sofia stiffens. "Zoe—"

"It wasn't my place to stand in your way. You deserve happiness as much as anyone. And what I did, what I said, it was selfish. It's something you'd never do. Not to anyone."

“It’s me who was in the wrong,” says Sofia.

Zoe shakes her head, smiling. “It’s all in the past. I want to draw a line under everything, which is why I brought you here. The zoo was too far, and this was the next best thing.”

Sofia chuckles. “My back garden?”

Zoe nods, also smiling. “I asked Ric where your best memories were made, and apart from the zoo, he said he hopped the fence one time. It was your first kiss. And now, you should see for yourself how much he loves you.”

Sofia starts to turn. Slowly. Cautiously.

And then her eyes find mine.

I’m on one knee. The ring in my hand glints in the soft light, held up like a quiet offering. A diamond, yes, but it’s more than that. A promise. A plea. A surrender.

“I love you,” I say, my voice thick. “So, so much. When we’re apart, I can’t function.

These last few weeks without you? They’ve been . . . hell. I can’t do life without you, Sofia.

I don’t want to. And I don’t want to be the guy you talk about someday, the one who broke your heart.

I don’t want to be a sad chapter in your story.

I’m not here to rewrite our history. I just want to be your next chapter. ” I take a breath. “Will you marry me?”

For a second, everything is still. Sofia doesn't move. Doesn't speak. She just stares.

At me. At the ring. At everything this moment means.

Her hand flies to her mouth, eyes wide, glassy. "Oh my god," she breathes. It's not rejection—it's disbelief.

I hold my breath. Waiting. Hoping.

Then she starts to shake her head, not in a no , but like she can't believe what's happening. Her voice trembles when she finally speaks. "Ric . . . are you serious?"

I nod slowly. "More serious than I've ever been."

She glances back at Zoe, who also has her hands over her mouth as happy tears slip down her cheeks. She nods, maybe in approval, maybe in encouragement.

Sofia turns back me and laughs, a soft, tearful sound. "You idiot," she whispers, dropping to her knees in front of me. "You beautiful, ridiculous idiot."

And then she kisses me. Hard. Hands in my hair, ring forgotten between us, as her yes pours into my mouth.

She pulls back just far enough to murmur, "Of course, I'll marry you."

Sofia

I can't stop my tears of happiness as I pull back and stare at the ring Ric's clutching. I hold out my shaky hand, and he slides it onto my finger.

Cheers erupt, and I jump in fright as everyone appears from the kitchen. Ric's family. My parents. Meg. And my gorgeous little boy, who's kicking his legs in excitement,

like he can sense how both our lives are about to change for the better.

Ric stands and holds out a hand for me to take. He kisses me again, every ounce of love poured from him to me as he runs his hands through my hair. “I love you,” he whispers.

“I love you too,” I reply, sniffing through my tears.

He heads to Harry, scooping him into his strong arms and peppering kisses over his cheeks. Then he presses his nose into his wispy hair and closes his eyes as he inhales deeply. My heart swells with even more love. He’s missed Harry just as much as we’ve missed him.

Meg and Zoe wrap me in a three-way hug. We’re all crying, which causes us to break out into a fit of giggles. “I love you two so much,” says Zoe. “I’m sorry I’ve been such a cow.”

“We love you just the way you are,” says Meg.

“I meant what I said,” Zoe says, looking me in the eyes. “He was always meant to be yours.”

I run a hand over her cheek, rubbing away her tears. “Thank you so much. Your blessing means everything.”

“I want front row seats at the wedding. And I get to approve the wedding planner,” she says firmly. I smile through watery tears, nodding.

We spend time hugging each and every person here. It’s all our most special people in the same room for the first time. And as I watch my parents chatting happily with Harry and Charlotte, I realise this is good for them too. We’re all going to be part of the same family.

Ric wraps his arm around me. “How did the interview go?”

I laugh, my recent interview forgotten in all the madness. “I got it. I start in a month.”

“Perfect, because we fly to Bali on Monday.”

I gasp, turning in his arms. “What?”

“I planned it ages ago, but then shit happened. I was going to propose there, but now seemed so perfect.”

“It was. I couldn’t have asked for a better proposal.”

And it really is perfect. Our family and all the people we love together. But most of all, my best friends.

I watch as Zoe laughs at something Meg is telling her. “How did you manage to convince her?”

Ric follows my gaze. “I didn’t. It was all her. She had me call everyone together while she sorted your makeover. I think she realised how happy we are together and how sad we are apart.”

I turn in his arms, smiling up at him. “I hated being away from you.”

“Good, because that will never happen again, Sofia. This is our fresh start, me, you, and Harry. Nothing and no one will ever come between us again.”

He presses his lips to mine, and the world around us fades—the past, the hurt, all of it. This kiss isn’t just a promise.

It’s a beginning.

For once, I believe it. I believe him . Because we deserve this. We deserve forever .
And as he holds me closer, the future stretches out before us, bright, unwritten, and
finally ours.

Our happily ever after.

Always.