



Unmasking You (Hidden Hearts #1)

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Category: LGBT+

Description: He was the wound that never healed

Jamie

A chance encounter at a charity event brings the past I thought I left behind rushing back—along with the one person I never wanted to see again.

Now, plagued by his presence, I'm drowning in memories. Some devastatingly bitter, some heartbreakingly sweet. Feelings I buried long ago are clawing their way to the surface.

I don't want to want him. I don't want to need him.

But when he touches me, the chaos quiets, and for the first time in years, I feel like myself again.

Do I turn away, unable to trust him again? Or is there a chance to rebuild something beautiful from the mistakes of our past?

Shane

I never expected to see him again, not with the weight of my guilt holding me back. I never imagined I'd have the chance to ask for forgiveness, to make things right.

But when the opportunity comes, I become someone I never thought I'd be—someone who lurks in the shadows, following him everywhere, just hoping for a fleeting moment to talk, to apologise.

Staying away from him is harder than I thought, and when the chance to protect him from pain arises, I don't hesitate—even if it means putting myself in harm's way.

Will I carry this guilt and these unrequited feelings forever? Or can we rise from the ashes of our past to build something new?

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I didn't know, but I should have.

I didn't know the one I had to protect myself from was the boy I loved.

I didn't know he was wearing a mask, and everything I thought was true wasn't.

I didn't know my life as I knew it would end.

I didn't know I would plan my own death... many times.

Jamie Wilson

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Chapter 1

Jamie

When the past and present collide, it's never a good thing, especially when it means locking lips with your school bully. And to make it worse—you like it.

I shake my head, rubbing my tired eyes, and lean back on the chair. I'm too old to be spending my nights solving coding issues, but that's what I'm good at—and what makes me rich—so I'm not stopping anytime soon.

Usually, coding keeps me so busy I can't think about my life, or what's missing in it. But with Shane Campbell's face appearing in my mind's eye every few minutes, bringing with it the rage that follows soon after, I'm constantly distracted. So much so that what I'm doing is taking me days rather than hours.

I'm expecting a call soon from Alexi, my best friend and partner in this venture. When it comes, I'll have to spill the beans about something I've been able to keep out of our conversations for the last two months. Not because he hasn't tried to make me talk, but because I haven't had the time to process everything that happened at the ball. Not yet.

I look at the black and green screen, willing the machine to give me answers, but it just stares back at me without giving me any clues. The lines go blurry when I try to refocus on it, and I close my eyes again to give them some rest.

My mind goes immediately back to the moments I want to forget.

The last couple of months have been a nightmare. Nothing is working, and I'm not concentrating enough to get the job done. I have a contract to respect, or rather my company has a contract to respect, and this app I'm working on should have been ready for testing two weeks ago. Instead, I'm still pulling all-nighters because my brain can't focus enough to produce.

Fucking Shane Campbell.

Two months and I still can't forget his lips on mine or his hands on my body.

What do I have to do to purge my mind of those feelings? He doesn't deserve them. Not a single one. He deserves my hatred, and that's what I should be feeling for him. What I feel for him.

Why did I ever choose to go to that ball? I'm a magician when I need to avoid those kinds of situations. I had so many reasons not to be there. I could have wired the money and been done with it. Or sent Alexi... I giggle. He would have complained about being restricted in a suit more than I did. Instead, I went to the ball, dressed like a penguin, convinced a mask could hide everything I am—and was.

I want to scream my frustration, but then the final moments of that evening filter into my mind. The shoving until Shane was sitting on his arse on the ground. The joy I felt in that moment, for the small revenge I got.

For the first time in my life, I came close to actually hitting someone. Only respect for myself and my abhorrence of violence stopped me from kicking and punching him. I loved how shocked his face was when he hit the floor, and even more when I was looming over him, as if no one had ever had the chance to loom over Shane Campbell before I did. I loved it even more when I removed my mask and shouted my name close to his face, reminding him of who I was.

So close our lips nearly touched .

Oh, for all the gay deities... I'm back thinking about him and savouring his taste on my lips.

What the heck is wrong with me?

I should kick myself in the head so that I get some sleep and maybe wake up with a brain that actually functions.

The familiar sound of paws hitting the floor makes my lips turn up, and I open my eyes and turn my head to welcome the recent addition to the family. I love the smile and the feeling her presence gives me. My little queen.

With her long white coat, two small black-as-the-night eyes, and a red ribbon adorning her small face, she appears at the bedroom door. She looks at me, and after a wag of her tail, she goes on, sniffing everything in the room, almost as if she's looking for another scent so she can claim ownership of the place.

"Queen Lizzie." My smile gets bigger when she raises her nose, like a real queen, and continues ignoring me as if I'm not worthy of her attention.

She replies with something that's a mix of a bark and a quack.

My smile deepens. "Darling, come here." I try coaxing her with my sweet words, but she ignores me once again.

It could be because I smell. When work absorbs all my attention, I even forget to shower. I couldn't ignore her barking, though, or her nips at my ankles to demand attention when she needed to eat. I ignored her when she wanted to go out, and now she's doing the same to me.

“Come on. Let’s get something to eat,” I say to my little lady when my stomach rumbles.

She doesn’t ignore me this time. Instead, she comes closer and presses her head against my hand.

“Oh, now you like me, girl.” As I stand, the tiredness I felt before is nothing compared to what it is now that I’m no longer sitting. I need food and sleep.

I open the fridge, and my thoughts go back to Shane and all the reasons I have to hate him. My fridge is full of high-end meals for one from Waitrose and half-empty bottles of sauce because I don’t want them to go off before I can get through them.

I could eat out or order in, but that’s even sadder because people would know how pathetic my life is and how lonely I am. Notwithstanding the money I have and the himbos I could buy with it. I’ve never been one for that, and even if I was once, it had been pulled out of me with kicks and punches.

I’m in a vicious cycle I can’t seem to shake myself out of.

“Ruby, where are you when I need you the most?” I say to the empty room.

“I was very busy making the most of my honeymoon.”

I spin around with a scream, hand on my heart to avoid it coming out of my chest, and if not for the fridge door keeping me upright, I would have ended up on my arse. When I get a glimpse of Ruby’s suggestive face, I’m reminded of the wicked things I wish I was doing but I’m not.

You know why. I ignore the thought. I don’t want to go there... ever. Instead, I concentrate on my bestie.

“Stop doing that,” I say with a stern face, that morphs into a smile before we embrace as if we haven’t seen each other in a long, long time, instead of just the two weeks she was having fun between the sheets with her new husband. Second honeymoon, they called it.

“How are you?”

“Messed up.”

“I’m sorry, babe. With all the men walking the planet, you just had to find him in your path.”

“Just my luck,” I say, my voice dripping with sarcasm.

“When are we going to kick his backside?”

“Don’t tempt me. But we both know he would probably kick mine.” I glance at her, surprised by her new behaviour. “Since when is it backside and not arse?”

“Since I’ve married a rich-as-fuck man,” she says, looking at the tall man who walks in behind her.

“Babe, I married you for that faulty mouth of yours.” Her husband laughs as he wraps his arms around her waist.

“I love you too, babe,” Ruby says to her handsome husband, making me more than a little jealous inside.

“I’m very happy for you two, but please, don’t rub it in.”

“Okay, I’ll leave you to it,” Ruby’s husband announces. “I have things to take care of

in the office.”

“Bye baby,” Ruby says to him while planting a heated kiss on his lips.

How good would it be to have someone love me that much? As if it’s ever going to happen for me. I only meet people like Shane, and my last encounter with him really opened my eyes and crushed my dreams of someday meeting a unicorn. One who could have helped me forget my past. Someone to give me a chance to see the future I’d imagined so many times before it was taken away from me.

I pull things out of the fridge and place them on the counter. I need to keep busy, and baking is what helps me calm down.

“What are you doing?” Ruby’s voice penetrates the fog of doubt eating at my soul.

“Baking.”

“Oh, babe.”

Her voice nearly breaks me, but I concentrate on whatever I have in front of me and lose myself in the familiar steps that will soothe me, at least for a while.

I shake my head, knowing she’ll understand I’m not ready to talk and just need to work through my feelings.

“Tell me about your honeymoon. I want every detail.” As she opens her mouth, I stop her because I know she shares too much. “While your other half is hot, I’m not interested in your bedroom activities.”

“So, my honeymoon?”

I listen with one ear while she talks about the island they spent two months on. Jealousy rears its ugly head when she talks about how much Liam took care of her. It disappears, though, when I glance at her and spot her beautiful face sparkling with joy. She deserves that. She deserves to have a man who's wrapped around her little finger.

And what do you deserve?

"Then we had sex while suspended from the ceiling."

"What?" I look up in shock from my mixing bowl to find Ruby smirking at me.

"You know, swinging back and forth"

"Haha." I poke my tongue out at her. "While I'm curious to know how you two did it, I don't want to have that image in my head."

"We had sex on every surface of the house we were staying in, but we haven't mastered swinging from a ceiling yet. I'll send you a video when we do." She winks at me, and I have to laugh at her antics.

Her antics and foul-mouthed language have been my salvation. If it wasn't for her, I would probably still be licking my wounds instead of running a multi-million dollar company. She was the one who befriended me and pulled me out of the shell I'd tucked myself into so I didn't have to suffer more than I already had. She wouldn't take no for an answer and slowly—very slowly—brought me back. First, out of my room and then out into the open, spending time in the garden, and then from there, we become inseparable.

She didn't care who I was, who I loved, and she never asked what had happened to me. She ignored everything, even me, and with her bold personality, faulty mouth,

and beautiful soul, gave me my life back. Or at least one I could live with.

“When you two master it, I’ll be the first in line to watch it. Of course, I’ll be skipping all the hetero sex since it’s not my thing.”

“We need to find you a partner so you can try mastering acrobatic sex all on your own.”

I push away the thought that I’m never going to find anyone and instead tell her that if I can overcome the past, I’m going to overcome the scars I have left and build a life for myself. The life I’ve dreamt of. The life I deserve.

“Let’s do that,” I agree, and I laugh when her eyes widen, surprised by my willingness to do something I’ve never done before. Maybe meeting Shane Campbell wasn’t all bad.

The only thing I have to make sure of is not seeing him again. What are the chances, anyway? It took us ten years to meet again. I’m going to make sure it will be an eternity until the next time.

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Chapter 2

Shane

I tap my fingers on the table, bored by the conversation going on around me.

I hate these meetings where everyone has to talk about their achievements in their departments, and they end up repeating the same thing over and over again as if their boasting would make my father change his mind.

His motto is “make it do,” which means to have it done without complaining. And there are a lot of complaints today.

I glance at him, and I’m met with a scolding face and eyes that move from my face to my hand in silent disapproval, telling me what I shouldn’t be doing but I am.

When I stop tapping, he looks away, and I relax against the chair. When my father is in this happy mood —as if he’s ever happy when I’m involved—leave it to me to find ways of failing to reach his minimum standards.

When he’s frustrated, like he is today, he can tell me off in front of everyone with no problem.

What I learnt from a young age is that our name, Campbell, is more important than anything. More important than values, than family... and me. Especially me. The failure, the troublemaker, the outsider.

When I was forced to work for my father's company, I learnt early enough that when other people are around or when I'm at work, I'm no longer his son. I'm less than everyone else. I'm the one who always has to prove himself. But I have to act better than them because the reality is I am his son.

As if I ever was his son, even when away from the spotlight. He tolerates me because I'm an extension of my mother, and strangely enough, he loves her. Probably because she's just like him, with more manners and a love for controlling everyone and everything, so my dad can live happily ever after.

I'm at that point in life where I'm not overly bothered by what he says or does, but I'm still under his thumb because he's the one who decides how he distributes his money, which I need for my LGBTQ+ foundation.

My dad hates the foundation, but revels in the praise he receives from others for helping people in need. That is until we're behind closed doors, where he reminds me about how I always fail.

I've stopped caring about what my father thinks of me. I just stay for what I can get out of him and to help people who can't help themselves.

And here we are, with my mind full of thoughts of the one person I should forget... Jamie Wilson . A man now, and a fine one, but ten years ago he was the boy I betrayed.

Why does everything I do these days bring me back to him ?

I don't want to remember. Not here. Not now.

But my brain has other ideas. What a surprise he had been the night of the party. I should have recognised those eyes, that pull I felt, the way we bantered, and the need

to taste him. I should have known it was him. It was the same when I met him for the first time ten years ago.

A piercing pain inside my chest reminds me of what happened before, and I don't mean when he shoved me away, pushing until I was on the ground, leaning in and screaming his name so close to my face I felt his breath washing over me. I meant when we were sixteen and we thought the world was somehow a good place, when we had some innocence left in us and we thought nothing could come between us.

How fucking wrong I was.

My life is a pile-up of regrets, and Jamie Wilson is the biggest of them all.

"Shane." My dad's impatient tone brings me back to the room, those spiteful eyes on me once again.

I smile, even though I know I'll regret it, but right now I'm regretting even more what I did a long time ago because of him—and because of the name I inherited when I was born.

"Sorry, Mr Campbell," I say to him, and I cringe like I always do at the ridiculous demand that I address him like that. I'll never get used to it.

"Your department."

"Yes sir." Then I spend the next fifteen minutes sharing about my department, the challenges we'd faced and those we might face in the future. I share even more about my colleagues' achievements and enjoy my father's lips getting thinner and thinner the more I share about how proud I am of my team. He disagrees, of course, because I can't do anything well and neither can my team. I ignore him and continue.

“The foundation...”

“Your fifteen minutes are up.”

I open my mouth to protest, knowing it will piss him off more.

“They’re finished. Tim, you’re up.”

Tim looks at me as if to say sorry, but we both know he’s taking the floor.

I lean back in my chair and resume tapping the table with my fingers, this time in frustration and regret, because I knew what I was doing and the consequences that would come with it, yet I did it anyway. Jamie Wilson was playing with my head and making me reckless.

I need to stop this behaviour now and think about all those kids counting on me to have a decent life.

Another dirty look has me stopping, and then I pretend to listen to everything and everyone, and my dad seems to relax now that his will has been followed.

I thank all the deities when the last one wraps up, and I jump out of my chair, ready for today to be done so I can be away from the office.

“Shane.”

Fuck! “Yes sir?”

“A word.”

There is never a please; it’s always an order. I don’t miss the pitying glances I receive

from the others, but also the relief of it not being them staying behind.

I turn around to face my dad only when the door closes. I can't stop the inevitable, but at least I can delay it.

I watch my father walk toward his desk and take a seat, and now more than ever I understand how much I've fucked up. The last time he did the same thing, it took me years to go back home.

"Do we have a problem?"

"No sir."

"Then next time, don't embarrass me or the company with less than professional behaviour. You seem to forget that we need to set an example for others to follow."

"Yes sir." Maybe it's not as bad as I thought.

"When you do not follow the example, you make me look like a joke."

"Yes sir."

When he continues with his monologue, I switch off, until he mentions the Proud To Be Foundation and my blood freezes. "What?"

"I'll be taking some of the money away from your little plaything to fund something else," he says, standing up after glancing at his watch and then walking around his desk until he stops next to me.

He says more, but I don't hear it. "But you promised, though. You said if I work for you and follow your rules, you'll give me the money for the organisation."

“I’m keeping my promise. You still have money, just not as much as before. I need to invest in something that’ll give me a better return than those kids you like so much.”

“Father,” I say, jumping up from the chair to stop him from walking away.

He turns around with a look of utter fury on his face, so I expect nothing good to come out of his mouth. “Stop playing with that foundation and do some actual work. Don’t force me to shut it down.” He looks at me pointedly and I back down.

“Yes sir.”

He leaves the room without looking back, and I stay there until I regain my composure. I can’t let him win, not again. If being an obedient son is going to give me what I want, I’ll do what he asks.

I’m a bundle of nerves by the time I get home, and instead of wasting time eating, I grab a bottle of beer and sit on the sofa. I look around at my functional apartment, at its high-end furniture so fitting for a million-pound apartment in London, but it doesn’t feel like a home, which sours my mood even more. I felt more at home in the dorms than here.

I take a sip of the drink and then place it on the small table in front of me. The view from the window is spectacular, and that’s the only thing I love about this apartment. Well, that and it’s a twenty-minute walk from the office. With the hours I work, I don’t have time to go to the gym, so walking is the only exercise I do during the week. I hit the gym on the weekend because I’m not dead, and I need to get laid sometimes.

That hasn’t happened since Jamie Wilson invaded my life with his wicked sense of humour, beautiful eyes, and that toned body I only had the pleasure of touching once. He won’t allow me a second chance. What we did... what I did... it was fucked up.

I drag my laptop close and fire it up, pulling up an internet window and typing Jamie's name in the search bar. And... what the actual fuck? My mouth hangs open at the amount of information and all the shots of him that are on the web. He's beautiful, even more so than the night we met again, probably because I can see his face.

He hasn't changed much. I scoff at myself and my need to play down the effect his pictures are having on me.

Not changed much is a fat fucking lie.

He still resembles the boy I once knew, but that baby face he used to have... it's all man now. His hair is a little longer, and those glasses—which he wasn't wearing at the charity ball—make him look bloody scorching hot. I keep staring until I find myself extending a hand to touch the contour of his face as if he were here with me and not just a bunch of lines of code. That shadow of stubble I can't avoid imagining pressed against my skin, and his pronounced jaw paired with those luscious lips, make me want to kiss him more.

The poor boy has become one of the most wanted IT geniuses in the entire world.

And now I want to know more about him, but that sort of information isn't on the web. I want to have dinner with him and listen to him talk about what he's done since the last time we saw each other.

I thought of him from time to time, even before meeting him again, most of the time with regret. But I never thought he would become this huge celebrity. Maybe what I thought was bad with the eyes of a kid really wasn't, and Jamie has risen from it and shown everyone what he's made of.

Now that my curiosity has been tickled, I'll be making sure to stumble upon him

again.

I'm looking forward to our next encounter.

I wave away the nagging visions of the charity ball. The visions where he pulled away and nearly punched me in the face. I'm sure if I apologise, we can put the past behind us and move forward.

Maybe we can rekindle that connection we had when we were kids. Before I was a prick. Before all the problems started.

I'll do better this time because I'm an adult, and no one will have the power to make me do what they want.

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Chapter 3

Jamie

Ten years ago

First day at school sucks.

It sucks because you're the new person starting in a new school. It sucks because you had to leave all your friends behind. And it sucks because everyone here is rich and you're the only outsider. When you live on a council estate and not in a Victorian house worth more than what my dad will make in his entire working life, then you're the odd man out.

Feeling out of place is an understatement. The king of understatements in my case.

I adjust the shoulder straps to give myself courage to enter the building, and then, with a fortifying breath, I take the first step into my new school life.

I enter the classroom, and all eyes land on me. I'm a couple of minutes late because I had to report to reception before being shown how to get to my form room. I'm like a koala in a zoo, some kind of rare species everyone can't take their eyes off.

"Mr Wilson, welcome."

I turn towards the voice, and a smiling face welcomes me. At that, some of the tension leaves my body, and I smile back. The teacher has salt-and-pepper hair, none

of which is out of place, and the rest of her shouts money.

I take in the room, and I'm not surprised by how clean everything is. The walls are as white as snow, curtains as yellow as the sun, and even the air I'm breathing smells of money. The desks, evenly spaced, are pristine, as if they were just delivered. No scratches, no names, and no bad words in capital letters. It's as if it's their first day.

"Mr Wilson?" Mrs Brown's voice brings my attention back to her.

"Yes?"

Her face scrunches, probably from my lack of manners. I'm probably too low class for her taste.

"Mr Campbell."

As I turn, I nearly swallow my tongue. The boy she's talking to resembles one of those models you see in magazines. He's gorgeous.

Maybe I should stop staring.

"Madam."

His voice is deep and melodic, and I don't totally understand why my skin is so sensitive to it.

I focus my attention back to what's happening in the room. Even a clueless guy like me can understand how important it is for me to understand the dynamics and the correct way to present myself and act. I already stick out like a sore thumb because I don't act all high and mighty like they do. I don't smell of money, and I don't speak posh.

That's the way I should address her. If I could only pull it off, like Mr Campbell just did.

"Can you please show Mr Wilson around for a few days?"

It's posed as a question, but it's clear she is not expecting a no.

"Happy to, Mrs Brown."

I must look like a rabbit caught in the headlights. My eyes have a mind of their own and insist on staring at him.

"Mr Wilson, you can take a seat next to Mr Campbell."

"Yes madam."

The smile she sends my way gives me a little breather. I can do this. I must do this. The well-being of my family depends on this.

I walk towards my guide. He's not mine. And what the fuck am I saying? Internally, I shake my head, hoping to make it work properly.

"Hi," Mr Campbell greets me as soon as I'm close enough. "I'm Shane," he continues, and then smiles, and I blink a few times, blinded by how beautiful it is. How beautiful he is.

Dark brown hair and captivating ocean-blue eyes. The more I look into them, the more I want to fall into the ocean they so resemble. His smiling mouth shows his teeth, and they're so straight, just like those actors you see on TV. He could actually be one. Or a model. His face is still kid-like, but he exudes an air of manhood. I could probably never compare to him. His skin looks so pale in comparison with his hair,

and his body is filled in all the right places. I'm sure he has a flock of girls around him all the time trying to date him.

"Hi," I say, but my voice is all broken, so I try again after taking a deep breath. "Hi, I'm Jamie," I say, and like him I smile, but knowing—because I look at myself in the mirror every day—mine is nothing close to his.

"Good morning, everyone."

"Good morning, Mrs Brown."

"Now that we're all here, we can start."

I zone out, too busy checking out everything without being too obvious; I don't want to be told off on my first day. The class is bigger, but there are fewer students. The fortune they pay here must allow them to have smaller classes. I like it, and I can't wait to see my timetable. I hope I have computer science. I really hope it's better than the public school.

Programming, algorithms, writing code in Payton—that's my jam. That stuff I understand. Being social? Being sought after? That's not me. I'm more like a silent shadow or the person who stands in a corner looking out of place. I don't do small talk. I don't even know what small talk is. People say I talk like an encyclopaedia, and my small talk is discussing a code issue. So while normal people talk about TV programs and music, I talk about sequence and symbols.

"Jamie," comes a whisper that gets all my attention, and then a hand lands on my forearm. My body vibrates like my phone does when I put it on to charge. A zing spreads through me and sets panic off inside me.

What's happening to me?

“Hey, Jamie.”

I turn toward Shane, trying to look natural and not like I’m having a meltdown because I’m hot and bothered by a guy on my first day of school. And the way he says my name, oh my, if my prick didn’t react a little.

“Yeah,” I whisper back, discreetly wiggling in my chair to make space while using my jacket to cover my arousal. I count numbers inside my head to push it away. I can’t get caught like this or I’ll be in trouble.

His happy smirk at my lack of manners makes me believe I could really fit in.

“You should listen, because Mrs Brown is going to ask questions.”

I go into panic mode because between drifting off into La-La Land, and then having my brain scattered by his touch, I haven’t listened to anything.

Shane’s snort has the class turning to us, and I freeze like a movie when someone presses pause. I bet I have one of those funny distorted faces that makes me look stupid.

“Is there a problem, Mr Campbell?”

“Apologies, madam. I was explaining to Mr Wilson where to find the restrooms.” His smile is apologetic, but with the undertone of command that comes from money.

“Thank you, Mr Campbell. If it’s that urgent, could you please show him where to go?”

Shane’s up before I can say anything. What a start to the day.

He looks at me, and I'm up and following him outside the room.

"What are we doing?" I ask as soon as we're out of Mrs Brown's view.

"We're getting acquainted."

"Couldn't we have done this during the break?"

"Nope. People don't leave me alone during break, and I wanted to get to know the new boy in school."

I'm sure Shane Campbell is going to give me a lot of trouble. He's wild and clearly does what he wants, but in a way that makes people feel like they're the ones deciding.

"Do you always get things your way?" A shadow passes over his face, but it's gone as quickly as it appeared.

"Most of the time."

It sounds like a lie, but I don't really know him so I keep my mouth shut.

"So, who are you, Mr Wilson?"

"Jamie. Don't make me feel like my dad, at least when it's just us."

Shane snorts and makes me giggle. I'd never been funny before, and I'm proud of it. I love seeing the prince smile. I wonder how he would react if I called him that.

Shane keeps walking, and I follow, not really paying attention to where we're going. In the meantime, he keeps asking questions. He really wants to get to know me, and

that makes me happy. Maybe I'll have made a friend before the day is gone.

He opens a door, and I follow without really paying attention until the stalls and the sinks finally give me a sign of where we are. He really showed me where the toilets were. Shame I wasn't looking where I was going.

"Why are you here?"

"I won a scholarship."

"Oh, you're that guy."

"What does that mean?" And why does his thinking I'm some kind of lowlife hurt so much?

"We were expecting some kind of genius, but you seem normal to me."

It's my time to snort, and I like it when his eyes sparkle.

"What were you expecting?"

"Not you." The way he says it seems to have another meaning, but I don't want to look stupid so I keep my mouth shut.

"Which school were you at before?"

I reply, opening like a flower under the sun. He fires one question after another, eager to know more.

I, on the other hand, the one always in the shadows, am now basking in the spotlight. And the way Shane seems to hang on to my every word makes me want to share

more, keeping all his attention on me forever. The thought scares me because it has implications I don't want to think about.

The more we talk, the more we lean towards each other. It's like we're two planets who have entered the same orbit, and now we're close to colliding.

Time seems to catch up with me, and afraid of having problems on my first day, I move things along.

"How long do we stay here?" I ask him.

"Why? Are you a coward?"

What kind of question is that?

"Do you always act like a spoiled child?" I ask, annoyed by his behaviour. What the hell?

"No, you're not," he says with a smile that seems filled with pride. "I like you," he continues, before throwing an arm around my shoulders and pulling me towards him.

His bigger body is hugging mine, enveloping me like a blanket and touching me like no one ever has before. The beat of my heart is so loud that everything else around us is silent. I pull away, afraid he can hear it and will realise what his touch is doing to me, even if I don't fully understand myself.

His grip tightened a bit at first, but then he let me go.

Was it my imagination, or did his hand linger on me?

I leave that thought behind in the toilets and focus on surviving my first day. I'm glad

today is all about giving us information for exams, timetables, deadlines, and revision.

One thing I can't shake off, though, probably because it's sitting next to me, is Shane.

I'm sure I made a friend today, and things are going to be amazing here.

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Chapter 4

Shane

Present day

I park the car in front of Jamie's building and turn the engine off.

I pull out my phone and shoot a text to Karl, my best friend.

Shane

I'll see you in thirty minutes. Just taking care of something right now.

Karl

Cool. It'll be good to have you here.

Shane

Sorry, work has been busy. I'll owe you.

Karl

Don't let your father boss you around.

Easier said than done.

I lean against the seat, asking myself the same questions that have been buzzing in my head since I saw his picture in that magazine.

Is he really okay?

What am I doing here?

I should be going to work instead of letting my fixation on Jamie guide my every move and thought. If my father gets a whiff of this, he's going to make me pay, hitting me where it hurts. He'll retaliate with the only thing I care about, the only thing that has kept me sane all this time, the only thing keeping me feeling human and not like a monster.

No one will know, though, because I'm going to stay hidden in the shadows.

Getting his address was easier than I thought. I had my assistant looking for it, and a couple of hours later, I had it on my desk.

The debate over whether to follow Jamie's request to stay away or to satisfy my need to check he'd survived school was short-lived. And so here I am, waiting to get a glimpse of him through the window of my car.

I'm not even sure what spying on him will give me, and if I get caught, he's probably going to punch me this time around. However, I can't stay away. It's like that encounter months ago has shifted something inside me, bringing me back to what we were and putting a veil over the bad things I'd done. Every time we see one another again, more memories pop into my head, and I'm sixteen again, smitten with the geeky new guy at school.

I didn't think much of him when he entered the room; he was just another new student, and I was too busy talking with one of my friends about meeting up after

school. But then his voice, so timid and frightened, commands my complete attention. When I glance at him, something new opens up inside me, feelings I've never felt for another person. His pale face, with that wild hair, as if he'd jumped out of bed and run his hands through it to comb it. His cheeks are pink, probably from shyness, embarrassment, or maybe he ran here. His body is small, and he looks like he doesn't spend a lot of time outside. But what really gets me, sinking its nails inside me, are his eyes. I don't mean that beautiful green forest colour, but the way they seem like they're devouring everything around him, like he's hungry for knowledge, as if everything around him is beautiful.

He's completely different from me—head of the class, first in everything because my father demands it, because my name means I must be the best at everything. It means people must follow me. It means I need to set an example for everyone, even when that example is so far from what I am that we might as well be the sun and the moon.

There is no freedom in my life. Every step I take is controlled by the person who feeds me, and there's no point in rebelling because I'll be the one to lose.

But this boy is free, and I want that. I want to grab it with both hands and never let it go. I want to spend time with him and learn how to be free and courageous. And I want to be someone that I'm not, someone better.

“Mr Campbell?” Could I really be that lucky? Being his chaperone means I'll have a reason to spend time with him.

“Madam.” I'm quick to respond. I don't look around, convinced everyone will hear my eagerness. When no one whispers, I let my breath out slowly, trying to regain my composure.

“Can you please show Mr Wilson around for a few days?”

It takes a second to reply because I'm astonished that my prayers have been answered.

"Happy to, Mrs Brown," I say, keeping my excitement hidden.

I watch as Jamie walks towards me, and the only thing I can hear is the thumping of my heart, getting louder with his every step closer.

"Hi." I welcome him as soon as he's close, eager to hear his voice again.

I need to find a way to spend more time with him. I want to know everything. Every single detail. What does he like? What does he hate? I want to find things in common that will allow us to spend time together.

I just need to make sure not to ruin everything like I usually do.

Voices outside the car pull me back to reality just in time to see Jamie and a woman leaving his building.

I'm not sure if it's because of the memory I've just relived, but it's like the first time.

He's still as beautiful as he was back then, even if he's all man now. His face is still as pale as it was, so he's clearly still spending more time inside than outside.

Then something white comes into view, and it's the cutest little thing ever. I watch the two as they walk, and I laugh at Jamie who bends down every couple of steps to talk to the dog and make sure the leash is not too uncomfortable, while the dog pulls on it, eager to move along and find something to mark.

They cross the street, never even realising I'm here watching their every move.

I wish I could just jump out of the car, walk over there and flirt with him a bit, and then spend the day with them playing with the dog, kissing and touching Jamie whenever I want, and not being rejected.

But I'd deserve that because that's what I did to him.

No. You did much worse.

Jamie pushes a wooden gate open, and then they're out of view.

My hand goes to the door handle, my body ready to follow them because I can't seem to let go of the obsession Jamie has become. If I'm not spying on him like today, I'm reading everything I can find on him, trying to catch up from being out of his life for ten years. And yet, what I discover is not enough... I want to know the insignificant details. Does he still like to bake, or does he still collect comic books? Jamie has always been a marvellous mix of behaviours, and it always left me surprised.

Every rejection makes me want to be with him more. Every rejection is a way to be seen, not to be ignored. My behaviour is wrong, but I can't stop myself from doing it again.

Even though I know I shouldn't, I exit the car and take the same path Jamie took a minute ago.

They're easy to spot as they stand in the middle of the park. I don't see anything else around me with my eyes focused only on Jamie. The smile he has is the same one he shared with me at the charity event and one I'm dying to see again. The smile I know he will never share with me again.

I hide behind a tree so I can watch without being seen. I commit each moment to memory because I'm sure we'll reach a point where these memories will be all I

have. For now, though, I'll take what I can.

Why is my heart beating as fast as it was then? Why is my heart filled with the same need to be with him? My interest should be in making amends, not in finding ways of making him happy and staying by his side until those beautiful eyes can't see anyone but me.

My phone rings and I pull it out of my inside pocket. My eyes remain trained on Jamie because I don't want to miss anything. I don't even glance at it before hitting the green button to answer.

"Yes?" I whisper, making sure no one can hear me.

My father's voice fills my brain, and I close my eyes because I already know something bad is going to come out of his mouth.

"Where are you?"

"I'm getting there."

A long silence is the response to my words. "We have a meeting in thirty minutes, and I want you here."

"I don't have any meetings scheduled today."

"You have one when I say you do. Be here on time, or you know what will happen."

"Yes sir." I hate how he can control me like this.

Another glance at the man playing with his dog, and every ounce of fight leaves my body. I hate letting my father win, but at the same time, losing the only thing that

makes me worthy is something I can't accept.

If my dad takes away the foundation from me, I'll let those people down like I did Jamie. I'll be only a monster again. There'll be no redeeming myself from my sins. I'll never be able to face the man across from me and explain to him how hard I tried to make amends. I'll be the scum he thinks I am.

I don't think he hears my reply because the line goes dead while I'm still talking. I lean my forehead against the tree, praying with all my might to refuse for once, to tell him to go to hell, and to refuse every one of his whims. Instead, with a deep sigh, I lean back, stealing another glance at Jamie before I turn around and walk away.

One day... One day, I will choose me.

While I walk away, I can't avoid looking back. Even if I know I shouldn't, I'm deeply aware I'll be here again soon.

I just can't stay away.

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Chapter 5

Jamie

I come to an awakened state, feeling as if someone is trying to restart my heart.

In a vain attempt to protect myself, my arms are in front of my face, and I'm gripping my elbows so hard my hands are hurting. The smell of sweat is suffocating me, choking me. The fear awakens my need to fight or flee. I slowly move my arms down, away from my face, still afraid I'll come face to face with my nightmares.

My thoughts are all bungled, making old memories and reality merge, spiking my fear of being trapped in the past.

Whispered words fill the room, and it takes a while to understand it's me. "This isn't real... I'm no longer that boy."

The sound of my broken voice saying words makes my stomach revolt, trying to expel something lodged inside me, but it never quite achieves the goal.

Sweat drips from my hair into my eyes, and only the sting makes me aware that my eyes are open. I can't see anything, still standing between the nightmare and reality. My body is wet, like I'd jumped into the water, but instead of sliding down my body, it's clinging to me, as though the fear has impregnated my entire being.

My chest is pounding as if I've been running for my life—which I did, so hard and so desperately, but I was still caught.

The sound of my heart echoing in the room is matched by my uncontrollable breathing. For a moment, I lie there, unable to tell if the pain in every part of my body is real or part of the dream.

The walls around me don't look familiar; they seem to move with the rhythm of my breathing, getting closer the more I reach consciousness. The shadows are becoming enemies from the past, those who are never far from my mind.

My body is slow as my mind is still caught in the torment, a reminder of the reality of the past. I move slowly because it's like thousands of knives are piercing my skin, but they're nothing compared to the pain in my heart. A pain that never goes away; it's lodged there like a thorn, impossible to remove.

My body feels as heavy as if a thousand-pound rock is sitting on me. My breathing becomes even shallower because I can't move. I try harder to reach for the bedside lamp. I'm sure I'll be safe when it's on. I try steadying my breath, hoping it will help my brain to function normally, but the rising panic is making it impossible.

I shoot my hand out, reaching for safety, and knock over the glass of water I always have sitting next to me just in case I wake up thirsty. The dripping of the water on the floor brings me backwards into the nightmare instead of pulling me out.

The wet, muffled sounds created by shoes hitting a small amount of water fill the room, and while I realise I'm not there any longer, I want to curl in on myself again before I'm pulled back into the torment I'm fighting so hard to dispel.

I sit up, hoping the remnants of my bad dream will disappear, even just for now, but it seems my mind is still clouded by it. The shouts, now subdued by reality, of those voices I want to forget are still so very present, and those faces are what nightmares are made of.

Once the light is on, I welcome the soft light like it was the sun illuminating the room. I right the glass with trembling fingers—I'll think about cleaning the floor later—and look around the space, seeing my room but unable to shake the feeling that I'm in a foreign place.

The sound of my phone buzzing pulls my attention back to the bedside table. My unsteady fingers cause me to drop it a few times before I'm able to pick it up. The cold sensation of the phone anchors me to the reality I so want to be a part of and makes me feel like I'm a step closer to safety.

My head is still buzzing from the chaotic events of my sleep, and I'm still struggling to believe I'm in a different time, a different reality, and that nothing they do can harm me any longer.

I take deep breaths to calm myself and to shake the remains of the nightmare away. Holding them for a three count and exhaling for three, to allow my mind and body to pull themselves back from the high of rushing adrenaline.

What I can't shake is the taste of the words I hate the most. It still lingers on my tongue. "Please, Shane... please... save me."

I was saved, but I was long gone when it finally happened.

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Chapter 6

Shane

I tap my fingers on the steering wheel while I look across the road, hoping to spot Jamie coming out of his apartment.

This is the fifth Saturday I've been here, just outside his apartment, watching for him to be out doing his own thing. He has a very precise schedule, and knowing him as I once did, I should have expected it. He's as anal now as he was when we were in school. I used to poke fun at him over it, but not maliciously. I loved teasing him and watching his cheeks go all red, and then he would push me away, and just that touch made everything worth it.

Why am I here? God only knows because I don't. I've thought of him over the last ten years, mostly with regret, but seeing him at the charity event has brought long-dormant feelings back to life.

Not all these feelings are positive.

I can't forget the long-ago past—and the more recent past—we'd shared. They both haunt me. The first because of the choices I made, and the second because of how good kissing him was.

At the charity ball, he'd made himself very clear that meeting me again, a decade later, was not a pleasure. If he'd hit me, I wouldn't have complained because I deserved it then—and I still deserve it now. But even then, given the opportunity, he

was still a better person than me. He never compromised his values and beliefs.

However, my fear of him being broken by what happened when we were in school has been soothed by how far he's gone in life.

He's not the scrawny boy he once was. He's fit, knows how to dress, knows how to behave, and he fits the part of a billionaire perfectly.

I still can't believe he's a billionaire. He was always clever, smarter than most of us, and he's more than proved to everyone who looked down on him that he could make it.

Jamie should be the one looking down on us. We've done nothing other than use the money our families have amassed, having everything handed to us. But Jamie, he worked his arse off to rise to the top.

When he passes by my car, I'm glad no one can see past my black-tinted windows, and I watch him heading to the park for a walk with his dog.

A fluffy white thing that looks adorable with a red ribbon on her head. They both look adorable. Jamie's wearing loose trousers, skater shoes, and an adorable hoodie with a cartoon-like dragon on the front that says Dragon's Hugs , and there's a small chubby dragon with enormous eyes, rolled up on itself, just below the phrase.

My hands itch to open the door, jump out, and ask for one of those hugs.

I watch them walk past me and I crack up when I read the back of his hoodie... "If you piss me off, I'll fry your..." There's a picture of a peach instead of the word arse. I'm sure it's what would happen to me if I requested a hug.

When they head into the park, disappearing from view, I jump out of the car to

follow.

They're going to spend the next half hour going around the park so the little lady can do her business.

I should be scared, knowing so much about him without having spent a second with him. My behaviour is downright stalkerish.

This time, not even his no violence policy would stop him from frying my arse. So I just need to be careful and not get caught.

His walk around the park will give me time to get settled and pretend I'm just there for a coffee, not waiting for him.

The inside of the coffee shop is painted green. Plants hang from the ceiling, making the place look like a forest.

I head to the counter and spend the next couple of minutes chatting with the server, Andy.

"I'll have a chai latte. Regular." It's one of my favourite drinks and I'm always on the lookout for new places to try it.

"Take away?"

"No, stay in," I reply, and then I pull out my card.

"Three pounds eighty-five, please," says Andy, and points at the machine for me to pay.

While I wait for my transaction to go through, I look around for a table that will give

me a full view of the door but will also keep me partially hidden.

I spot a good one, half hidden by a plant with big green leaves, and head there once my payment is complete, confirming with Andy that he'll bring the latte over when it's ready. I don't want to be caught by Jamie when I get up to grab it from the counter.

Once I'm seated, I glance around the space. I love what they did here. It's all dark furniture and light green walls, giving it a comfy, bookish atmosphere. There are shelves on the walls with small cactus plants and books. I could see myself coming here often to take a break from my life.

I count the seconds, and every time the bell over the door rings, my heart gives a thump like it's trying to jump into my throat, and butterflies flutter inside my stomach. It's like I'm sixteen again, waiting at the usual place for Jamie to arrive.

Before I can lose myself in the memories, the door chime rings again, and this time a white dog leads the way. I watch in awe as the man I'm waiting for makes an appearance.

Afraid of being spotted even before I take my fill of him, I grab an abandoned newspaper from the corner of the table and quickly open it. I watch Jamie from around the edge of the newspaper, seeing without being seen.

"Hey Jamie," Andy says as soon as Jamie enters.

Jealousy unfurls inside my body at the sight of Jamie's beautiful smile being directed at another man. A jealousy I'm not allowed to experience, but my mind and heart don't care.

I want to stand up, go over to them, and claim him. I wish I had the right to do that,

but he'd probably kick my arse if I attempted something like that.

I inhale, trying to push the foolish feeling deep inside. I have some grovelling to do if I want him to at least talk to me. Losing my shit because I'm jealous of him talking to other people won't win me any points.

I let go of the cup's handle and try to relax my body and my face. I don't want him to see this side of me.

While Jamie speaks with Andy, someone else focuses her attention on me.

"How's Lizzie today?" Andy says. I love Jamie's smile, but I don't like it when it's meant for someone who isn't me.

The dog doesn't turn to Andy as all her attention is on me, but the two men are too involved in their conversation to notice.

"Queen Lizzie is good. We had a wonderful walk today."

"That's great. How's work?"

"Argh. Let's not go there. I should be in my office instead of walking around, but I couldn't say no to Lizzie when she came running with her leash in her mouth." Jamie giggles, and I love the sound.

I lose sense of the words as I watch Jamie getting into his conversation. Even the jealousy I felt a few seconds ago decreases, faced with the beauty of his movements, of his very being. His hands move to express even better what his mouth is saying. I like the way he touches his mouth when he laughs too loudly and gets self-conscious about it. He looks adorable, and I want to be the one making him do all these little things.

I compare this man to the boy he was, and there are so many similarities, but there are also new things I find endearing. He's taller than he was, at least five inches, putting him at about my shoulder. His body has filled out a bit, but he still has the swimmer's physique that attracted me so much when we were younger. His hair is longer than before, and my fingers tingle with the need to touch it, wanting to make sure it's as soft as it looks. Jamie's face still has a youthful appearance, but his cheeks are more visible now, and I love how he keeps his face clean-shaven. My eyes zero in on his lips, the colour of a ripe peach, and—as I already know—as soft as a mature one. The taste, though, is different; it's like nectar, like the best wine you can buy, sweet and delicate, and so very manly. I'm addicted to it, and I want more of it. I want to drink from them as if they were a cup, as if they were the Holy Grail. They are lost to me, though, like that cup is lost to humanity.

I ignore the sadness that thought brings, and I concentrate on drinking in everything Jamie is. I don't want to miss a single detail because they will soon all be lost to me. The sweetness he has will soon transform into hate. A hate I deserve. A hate that'll probably never go away. A hate I want to take from him and wear until he feels I've done enough penance. And maybe then he'll find the strength in himself to forgive me.

When the dog moves, I redirect my attention to her. I mentally coax her to go back to her owner so I can admire him from afar for just a little longer. Instead, she moves towards me, getting a little closer. I'm sweating more with each step she takes because I'm sure I'm seconds away from being discovered.

“Queen Lizzie?”

Jamie's voice calling the dog spreads panic inside me. I need more time to admire him, to absorb as much as I can before I'm discovered. I sound like a stalker, and clearly I am one, but what other choice do I have when he doesn't want to see me?

It's wrong. Completely and utterly wrong, but what else can I do?

I bring the newspaper higher, totally hiding myself behind it. The dog, instead of listening to Jamie, moves closer and sits on my foot, leaning her full weight on my leg. She turns her head towards me, and those black eyes are so lively and attentive, calling for lots of cuddles.

I always wanted a dog, but I was never allowed one. I was never "obedient enough to deserve a dog."

This beauty is really trying to carve out a space in my heart. She seems to understand my turmoil because she stands up, sits on her back legs, and after placing her front paw on my leg, looks up at me. Her tongue is hanging out, spreading doggy drool all over my jeans while I whisper to her to go away. Instead of listening to me, she swiftly jumps up to sit on my lap. Surprised by it, I let the newspaper fall.

I hear Jamie's panicked intake of air and then his steps getting closer.

Does he know it's me?

"I'm so sorry." His tone is apologetic at first, and then more commanding. "Queen..." Then his voice stops abruptly, and for a second, there's only silence.

I glance up, knowing damn well I've been discovered, but still hoping to have time to be with him. His face has lost everything I admired before, all the joy and warmth, and my guilt rears its ugly head.

"What are you doing here?"

I don't look up. Instead, I focus my attention on Queen Lizzie. Such a fitting name, especially now that she's sitting on my lap, acting like she owns it.

My brain is trying to come up with a plan that won't make me look like the dick I am. Before I can, however, Jamie speaks again. His irate tone and the jealousy I felt before come back with a vengeance that clouds my mind.

"I said, what the hell are you doing here?"

I fold the newspaper with calm and controlled movements, like I'm not the one in the wrong here. Or like I haven't been caught doing something I shouldn't. I follow my old man's teachings—always act as if you're right—and for once, his way of doing things is coming in handy.

"Having a drink," I say, glancing at Andy, who's watching us as we interact. My glance has him going back to preparing my drink, so I don't look like the liar I am.

I'm being a dick, and I have to continue...

"Here?" Disbelief exudes from Jamie's words.

"Yeah, chai latte. My favourite."

"It's mine t—" He stops, as if remembering we're not friends, and lets his words die. Then he continues with a different tone. "I've never seen you here before." Suspicion has taken over the disbelief from a few seconds ago.

"It's my first time. I love finding new places and trying their chai lattes. Today, it was this place."

Another long look has me squirming like a kid being scolded by the teacher, but I don't show it.

"So, you're not here for a chance to talk to me?"

I'm screwed. Lying to his face is where I draw the line. I did it in the past and there is no way I'm doing that now.

"I can't say I'm not."

He looks at me, puzzled, as if he doesn't really get what I'm saying. "Are you here for me?" Doubt drips in as his voice shakes.

"Yes." Honest and direct.

My answer seems to shake him, as if he didn't expect me to be so frank. He recovers very quickly, and I don't like what he says next.

"Stop."

"Stop what?" I ask when he turns on his heel, ready to walk away.

When he turns around, his stare burns like fire, but I'm not declaring defeat until all my hopes are crushed. From his behaviour, though, I know it won't take long.

"Stop following me. Stop interfering with my life. You and your friend have done enough. There's nothing here for you." His voice goes up a notch with every new word he says until he's nearly shouting.

All my attention is on him, and he's breathtaking. Even when he's mad at me, the only thing I want to do is kiss him until he's moaning and writhing under me. Until he's pleading for me to let him come.

What the fuck is wrong with me? I should be crawling, begging at his feet, instead of setting his teeth on edge.

Jamie seems to think the same because his face becomes as dark as storm clouds, and his words are like knives stabbing my skin. “I don’t want you here. I don’t want to see your face. I want you gone, now and forever.”

His dog seems to disagree with him and keeps jumping on my leg.

That seems to make Jamie even angrier. He looks at the dog and then at me, and I catch a glimpse of his watery eyes, and if I wasn’t feeling like shit already, now it reaches a whole other level. I stand up and feel like a monster when he takes a step back, his face going as white as the foam in my latte.

I take a step back too, bringing my hands up and surrendering to his desire. But before I can talk, someone jumps in.

“Is everything okay?” Andy asks, stopping to stand next to Jamie, and I hate it.

“Yeah,” I reply at the same time Jamie does.

“No.”

“Can you please leave?” Andy says, while moving to stand between me and Jamie. As if I’d ever hit him.

“Yes, go away. Leave me alone.” He’s looking straight at me.

Where is all this aggression coming from? Jamie was never this direct, always preferring to stay in the shadows. Did I do this to him? Another fucking thing I would be guilty of.

Good way of making him think I’m different from before. He’s never going to change his mind now. I’ve upset him even if it was the last thing I wanted to do. I’ve

ruined the moment of his day he enjoys most, and I've made him uncomfortable in a place he loves.

"You haven't changed a bit..."

His voice brings my attention back to him, and I try to jump in to defend myself from the accusation, but he doesn't leave me space to interject.

"You still do as you like. Because it's always about you and no one else."

"That's not true." It sounds weak even to my ears.

"Didn't I ask you to stay away from me?" He looks at me as if waiting for an answer.

Even if I don't want to because it's like shooting myself in the foot, I reply, "Yes, you did." I shouldn't find this side of him so arousing, but I do. So much so that my dick is taking notice and starting to fill.

"You did."

What was I really trying to achieve other than defying whatever he made clear at the event? For me to stay away.

"Is everything okay?" Andy asks, placing a hand on Jamie's forearm.

Jamie turns and gives him a smile. A smile I want for myself.

The jealousy melting away while Jamie's full attention was on me comes back full blast, and of course, so does my bad behaviour. And like the horrible person he just accused me of being, I'm ready to give a demonstration.

“I’m not here for you,” I say while picking up the dog in my arm so she stops humping my leg. I caress her long fur, but at Jamie’s murderous look, I place her on the floor and continue. “I’m here for a chai latte.” I turn to Andy. “Is that ready?”

Yep, I kept the no-lying policy in place. In my mind, I roll my eyes at myself.

I don’t miss Jamie’s hurt face, and it’s going to add to the pile of regrets I have and haunt me for a long time.

The satisfaction of seeing Andy leave should make me feel like an asshole, but instead, I’m relieved.

Jamie only stares at me, and it seems like he isn’t even blinking. It’s as if he’s trying to rein in everything going on inside him. He keeps himself still, but his trembling hands are impossible to miss. Then he clutches them into fists.

Being forgiven is becoming even more of a distant possibility.

So, focused on Jamie, I miss Andy returning. I look at the cup he’s holding in front of me and then at the man holding it, and it’s clear what he wants me to do. As if I was ever someone who did things other people asked of me, unless it was my father.

“J—“

“Here’s your chai latte,” Andy says, placing the cup in front of me and himself in front of Jamie. “Please leave now.” He’s polite but firm, and I bet it would take him less than a minute to throw me out of this place.

I leave before my mouth can spout more bullshit, but not before I take a good look at Jamie.

As soon as I'm out, I want to walk back in. This encounter was supposed to go a totally different way. It was supposed to end up with me asking for forgiveness, instead of me spouting bullshit because jealousy clouded my mind.

Andy is accompanying Jamie to his usual table, his hand on Jamie's lower back, and his body close as if he's trying to protect him from me, even if I'm not there any longer. My mood goes sour, and with a growl I leave them to it, but I vow to myself to come back and find a way to make him listen.

Whatever happened ten years ago, I had my faults, yes, and I regret them all. But I never wanted to harm him in any way.

How am I going to come back from what happened today?

He's sure I haven't changed, and my behaviour has given him plenty of proof. But it's a lie. I have changed. How am I going to prove it to him now?

Is there a way out of the hole I dug for myself?

Or maybe Jamie is right, and I am a dickhead, and I'm the only one who doesn't want to admit it.

I need to stay away from him.

Chapter 7

Jamie

I still haven't recovered from my encounter with Shane.

His behaviour reminded me so much of when we were in school. The way he treated Queen Lizzie, though, reminded me of when we first became friends. He treated me with the same gentle touch he used with Lizzie, the same care, and gave me the same undivided attention. I was like my dog, eating from the palm of his hand and craving his attention every moment we were together—and beyond. I'm glad I had more self-control or I would have humped his leg like Queen L did.

I used to crave spending all my time with Shane. He made my life a little less analytical and a lot more adventurous.

We never did anything dangerous; however, being with him was like standing atop a train going full speed.

He made my life exciting and kaleidoscopic, and every day we got to spend together left me wanting more and more.

Until... I prayed night and day for him never to look at me again. While my heart cried for him to be back by my side.

Why was he doing this to me again?

“You need to come to this appointment.” Alexi’s impatience at my lack of attention is like a wave of stormy water crashing against a rock.

“You know I’m the one who does the typing, and you’re the one who does the talking.”

”I do know that, but the client wants to see both of us at the meeting.”

“Who’s the client? I’m sure we can afford to lose them.”

“Of course we can. With your genius, we’re set for life. However, this company is doing a lot for the LGBTQ+ community, and I thought you’d be interested in working with them.”

Ah, damn. Alexi said the magic words. The words that’ll convince me to do basically anything.

I’ve got it marked inside my body, what being an outsider means, even before I knew I was gay. After that, though, my life became a living hell. At that moment, I promised myself that once I had money, I would do everything in my power to prevent other kids from feeling as I did—judged, hunted, and rejected.

“When is the meeting?”

“Thursday, at seven p.m.”

“Seven p.m.? That’s late for an office meeting.”

“The customer wants to have dinner with us. He wants to discuss the project in fine detail with the person who’ll be working on it. He’s busy during the day, and then he’s travelling, so he won’t be available until the end of March. Problem is, he wants

the project to be well under way before that time.”

“I really don’t want to have dinner with them. Can’t we change it to a normal meeting? During regular working hours? It’ll be faster, and I can be out of there as soon as we’re done.”

“Jamie.”

Uh-oh. I’m in trouble. But I’m fed up with rich people, and a very rich one appears in my mind.

For crying out loud.

I need to stop thinking about Shane, and I need to stop my body from reacting to the mere thought of him.

“You need to go out more, and while I understand you don’t want to spend time with rich people...”

I zone out, following my thoughts once again. Alexi knows me too well, and he knows why I hate rich people. I wish it was only Shane, then I could have survived, but it was more than him. So many more...

My pulse quickens at the thought of what I lived through. I jump backwards, nearly falling out of the chair, when a hand lands on me.

I’m not usually this bad. I can hide it better. But my last nightmare has left my nerves exposed, like a fuse ready to blow, and so close to the surface my skin is buzzing. My body hurts as though I never left that nightmare.

My recurring encounters with Shane are not helping either, as they’ve left me

unstable, like I'm walking on broken glass.

I need to call my doctor, but it's like admitting defeat at the very first obstacle life places in front of me.

Shouldn't I try to deal with these emotions and Shane without having to go back to square one?

"Fuck, man. I'm sorry," Alexi says while taking a step back. His face is as white as I believe mine is.

It's fucking upsetting that the only touch my body didn't reject was from the man who made my life hell when he touched me out of nowhere.

"Jamie, I'm s—"

"No, I am," I placate him, trying to take a couple of breaths to calm my heart. "Never apologise for this. I was just lost in thought." I extend my hand, and I'm glad it's not trembling. I smile when he takes it and squeezes.

"You're spending way too much time indoors. Come out with me tonight. It's Friday, and you don't have any life-or-death matters to resolve."

"Hmm. I'm not sure." A polite way to say no.

"I bet your laptop is dreaming of a night's rest."

I smile gently, but it's clear he's doing everything in his power to return to the casual conversation we were having before. If I say no, it'll be like I'm punishing him for touching me.

I make a promise to myself not to allow Shane to win anymore. Not to allow them to control my life any longer. To live , despite everything.

“Okay, let’s do it.”

Alexi’s grin is dazzling in its brightness.

“That’s amazing,” he says, squeezing my hand and then letting it go. “I’m meeting with a couple of mates from the gym for a few drinks, then we’re going to hit the dance floor.”

“Don’t think for even a moment that I’ll be on the dance floor.”

“You can spend your time candy shopping,” he says with a wink.

We both know I’ll never do that either, but I don’t call him on it. I cock an eyebrow at him.

“I’ll be happy if you just come with me. It’s been ages since we went out together.”

“Okay,” I concede. “But now, let’s get back to work.”

“Okay, boss.” His laugh reverberates through the room even after he’s gone and leaves a smile on my lips.

I think about my best friends. I’m so damn lucky to have found them, and so fortunate they decided I had to be their friend.

Ruby, she’s my hero, my saviour. The one who helped me through the worst moments of my life. I never felt alone after meeting her at the psychiatrist’s office. She bonded with me when I couldn’t do anything more than open my eyes every day.

Even leaving my bed was a chore too exhausting for me to take on.

We exchanged phone numbers... or she forced me to give mine to her, and then the texts filled my phone, day after day. Memes, fun facts, texts with just a smiling emoji—or five—or simply asking how I was.

Sometimes, even reading her texts would drain me. I would spend my time sleeping for long periods just to wake up even more tired than before. Slowly, at a sloth's pace, though, things changed, and I began looking forward to receiving her messages.

I push away thoughts of what happened during those changes.

Alexi had money, but he didn't come from money, so he was kinda like me. Shamed and called an outsider, never fitting in. He left his school, and we met at a new one we attended together.

Where trusting Ruby was easy—we'd suffered the same pain—I didn't trust Alexi at first. He had money, so he was like them. Only with his perseverance and Ruby's constant nagging about giving him a chance were things able to move forward. That and the pack of crisps we fought over and then shared while we talked about my idea, and his interest in it, were his winning cards.

I had the brain; Alexi had the money. And on top of that, he believed in me. Teaming up was the best thing for us both. We've been friends since then.

A knock at the door pulls me out of memory lane, and I smile when Alexi's head appears in between the door and the frame.

“Are you ready to go?”

“Go?”

Alexi smirks. “It’s seven, and we’re meeting the guys at seven thirty.”

“Seven?”

This time, Alexi laughs out loud, and I send a dark look his way, but there’s no heat behind it.

“How can it be seven? You were here like a minute ago.”

Another burst of laughter, and I can’t keep a straight face.

“Chop, chop,” he says, grinning at me. “I need a drink, and I’m keen on spending time with my best friend doing something other than working.”

“Let me—“ Big fingers push the screen on my laptop until he’s completely closed it, and I have no choice but to move my hands out of the way.

“Nope,” he says. “Let’s go.”

“Okay, okay. I’m ready.”

I’m kind of pleased about going out. It’s really been a long time since I last did. Since Shane.

Fuck. Why does it always go back to him?

I shake my head to dispel those thoughts.

“Are you okay?”

I hate that both Alexi and Ruby have to tiptoe around me because I’m a wimp and

they're worried.

"I'm good," I say, infusing the joy of being out with my friends into my tone.

"Good," he says, bumping his shoulder gently against mine, but it still nearly makes me stumble.

"Hey!" I tease. "Be careful with all that strength and enormous body."

"Sorry, mate."

Alexi stops, and I bump into him. When I look up, the pub is right in front of us. Pulse is one of the best private LGBTQ+ nightclubs in London.

When we get inside, I'm assaulted by the loud music, and I wait until my ears adjust to the sound. Every time I come here, I'm fascinated. I love the brick walls, the dark purple fabric adorning the ceiling, and the hanging Edison-style light bulbs, creating an intimate setting. The lighting is mostly purple and white, casting a sultry glow through the venue. The combination of the deep purple tones and the brightness of the white gives the place a sensual, mysterious atmosphere.

We walk in with no problem, and after leaving our coats at the entrance, we continue inside.

At the centre of the room is the dance floor—something I will avoid like the plague. The floor is dark and glossy, reflecting the lights above. All around it, there are dark benches with purple cushions, placed in the shape of a U, so the dance floor is always visible. The tables are black, and white lights are embedded in the floor to illuminate the area.

The bar is visible at the far end of the room, and it's stocked with various bottles that

I don't recognise half of.

Mounted on the walls are multiple screens, pumping music and showing videos.

On the left are stairs leading to another section, the VIP area. That's where we're heading. The elevated section overlooks the downstairs, but the music is quieter to allow people to have conversations. The area is more intimate, with plush sofa-like benches, each set in private booths. Their backs are tall to create a secluded, cocooned feeling. The tables have lamps on them to illuminate the space.

When we arrive upstairs, Alexi's friends are already sitting there, and they greet us with joy when we approach the table.

"Hey guys," Alexi greets them before pointing at me. "This is Jamie, my best friend and work partner."

"Hey Jamie," they chorus.

"Hi," I say without looking at anyone. This kind of situation makes me uncomfortable. I wait for Alexi to take a seat so I can sit next to him.

"Jamie," Alexi calls out to me. When I raise my head, he continues. "This is Adam," he says, pointing at the guy sitting closer to us, and then continues, going clockwise, with the introductions. "Next to him are Luis, Owen, and Dominic."

I glance around, not really making eye contact, and smile in their general direction. Once we're seated, the waiter arrives to take our orders.

"A glass of prosecco," I say when it's my turn, then lean back against the bench, trying to relax and enjoy the evening. I'm not a good drinker, and I always prefer having a clear mind.

“So, you’re the infamous Jamie,” says someone next to me, close enough to be heard over the music, making me jump.

I turn towards him, pushing away a little, and I’m met with two beautiful crystal-blue eyes and dark brown hair, short on the sides and longish at the top, with strands falling messily over his forehead. He’s a looker, and he knows it. My gaze lands on his lips, stretched in an open, gentle smile and encased in a well-kept, barely there goatee.

Remembering his name is never going to happen, I wasn’t paying enough attention. However, I find myself replying to him with no problems. “I’m not that famous. Alexi always exaggerates.”

I pick my glass up and take a sip when the waiter places it in front of me. A bit of alcohol will help me relax and not look like I swallowed a stick.

“He does,” he says while looking at Alexi, and then winks at me when my friend takes the bait and stares at him with menacing eyes no one is going to take seriously. Then he turns his attention back to me. “I heard you’re a genius, and you can make magic happen with a laptop in your hands.”

“It’s only lines of codes and numbers.” I’m not used to being the centre of attention, but I’m comfortable chatting with this guy. He’s kind enough to welcome me into the group.

“Don’t listen to him,” Alexi jumps in. “He’s amazing.”

I go bright red and then turn to Alexi, who’s put his chin on my shoulder so he can crash the conversation. “Don’t listen to him. He’s a salesman.” Now it’s my turn to wink and then laugh at the outraged sounds coming from Alexi.

He places two fingers near his eyes and then squints them threateningly, pointing those fingers at us. He and I look at each other and then back at Alexi, and then we're both laughing.

"I'm Dominic, by the way, but you can call me Nic," he says with a smile.

I like him. His hair is styled to perfection, and his blue eyes are open and kind. I also don't miss how ripped his body is. The shirt he's wearing just accentuates his muscles. I relax a bit more, grateful that I won't be making a fool of myself for not listening to the introductions earlier.

"How did you two meet?" he asks, pointing at Alexi with a nod of his head.

"We went to the same school." I can't believe how good it is to talk to someone like I'm doing with Nic, but his calm, playful behaviour makes me feel at ease.

"Adam, Luis, and I went to school together."

Following his look to the other guys, I don't miss the longing in his eyes. I also don't miss Adam's look when Nic turns back to me, nor do I miss the jealousy showing on his face. I wonder what their story is.

"Then there's Darren, but he's always late."

"Hi guys," someone says, stopping at our table.

I don't pay attention because Nic says, "And Darren has arrived."

"Hi everyone."

My blood goes cold, and I don't have the courage to look around and check if what

my ears heard is reality or a figment of my imagination. I push closer against Alexi, and he leans towards me, aware something is wrong, especially after what happened at the office earlier today.

“Is everything okay?”

I want to scream, No, nothing is okay .

But I haven't looked yet, so how can I be so sure he's here?

The music is loud enough to distort voices, but my entire body is saying he's here.

What the heck am I going to do? I can't jump up and scream at him to stop, to leave me alone. I don't even know if he's here for me, even if it feels like he's stalking me.

I don't reply, instead glancing up, and my fears are confirmed because there's Shane, saying hello and bumping his fist with some of the other guys.

When his eyes land on me, he pauses for a moment, his eyes going dark and his smile wavering. And even if it's only a second, it feels like it lasted a lifetime.

Someone calls him, and he breaks our standoff.

“Shaz, this is Alexi and Jamie.”

“Hey,” I hear Alexi say. As usual, he's always friendly with everyone.

However, as much as I try, I can't seem to make my vocal cords work or my eyes move from the table back to Shane.

“Hey,” Shane replies, and his voice washes over me, making my body go hot and

cold.

They keep talking for a while, but I don't follow. I'm too busy asking all the deities to grant me a wish and send him away. Meanwhile, my body relives the few touches we shared at the event and asks for more.

As if I'd ever allow that. But my body has a completely different idea from my brain and keeps reminding me of the feeling, almost as if his hands are still touching me.

"Have a seat, man."

I watch in horror as Shane walks towards the side of the booth I'm sitting on.

I can't sit next to him.

But then why is my body buzzing at the idea of having him close?

My heart is beating so hard it's stealing my breath away. In self-preservation, I jump up, and without looking at anyone, I rush to the stairs. My only hope is reaching the toilets before I break down or before I allow him to touch me again.

I rush down the staircase and walk across the dance floor. That's when a hand lands on me. I struggle against the grip, but it doesn't budge. I turn around, hoping my stare will be enough to incinerate them, but I'm left with my mouth hanging open.

Shane is there.

I ignore his worried face and his pleading eyes. Instead, I struggle more to get free and he lets me go. At last, he lets me go.

I turn around, ready to abandon him there and take refuge in the toilets. It's only then

that I take notice of the fact I strode across the dance floor instead of walking around it. Now I'm surrounded by a crowd of bodies lost in the music and not aware of the walls closing around me, or my breath deceiving and disappearing on me, leaving me breathless.

I whip my head left and right, trying to find a way to get free, but the bodies close in on me. I bring a hand to my throat, willing my lungs to breathe and free me from these chains.

My body is out of control, frozen in the fear of being surrounded, until a soft touch has me raising my head up to meet ocean-blue eyes that stop my mind from spinning out of control.

I watch his lips moving, but I can't understand what they're saying. Then strong arms wrap around me, and I expect my body to recoil from the touch, but instead it sags against it as if the touch is my salvation.

My head is full of the same word, like a song on repeat... please, please, please .

I breathe in the alluring scent flowing from this body and let it fill my head until those walls push outward and my brain resumes its natural function.

At that moment, everything I thought I disliked is what's keeping me sane.

“Are you okay?”

His voice reminds me of who I have in front of me, and I rein in all my fears to face the monster. But a sick part of me wants to keep him close because some part of me tells me I'm safe with him.

My brain, though, knows he's not, so I push his arms away, standing tall in front of

him. Knowing the music is too loud for him to hear me if I move away, I stand still.

I look up and meet his eyes. I don't waver.

“What—“

“I promise you, I didn't know you'd be here.”

I pause because his words ring true. Does it really matter? My brain supplies. What about all the other times?

“Would it have made a difference if you knew?”

“No. I would have wanted to come here even more.”

His words unsettle me, and I'm not sure if it's because I refuse them or because I want them to be true.

The bodies around us get closer still, and I flinch at the idea of being touched and unconsciously take a tiny step forward. I stop myself from searching for his comfort and instead focus on breathing. I don't have any intention of letting him see me broken.

“Leave me alone. Don't talk to me, and above all...” I spell out the rest in the hope he'll finally listen and finally believe what I'm saying, “Do. Not. Touch. Me.” I grit my teeth and move forward ready to pass, to be done with him for good.

He steps in front of me, and I watch his mouth move, but I can't hear anything. The dam has broken, and everything I tried to keep contained is now dripping out, and it won't take long to be a flood that will submerge me.

Please, don't let him see me broken.

"What's happening?" Alexi's voice washes over me, and his large body encircles me, creating a cocoon I'm glad to have right now.

I try to speak, but nothing comes out.

"What did you do to him?" Alexi's voice, once again so clear, even if the music is loud.

I need to run away, and I can't do it on my own, so I force myself to speak.

"I want to go." I believe I've whispered the words and no one is going to hear me.

Instead, Alexi turns to me. Only a glance, and I'm sure he knows. "Let me get you home."

He guides me away, making sure no one else is going to touch me, and once we're out, Alexi doesn't ask. Instead, he stops a taxi and helps me in, following me inside and giving my address to the driver.

I sit there, broken, like the threads of a rag doll. Alexi's stare is impossible to ignore, but I keep my face towards the window, watching without seeing what's out there because all my thoughts are on Shane's face.

He looked devastated.

Am I seeing another facet of the mask he constantly wears?

Or has Shane really changed?

Why do I wish it to be the latter?

Chapter 8

Shane

I've fucked up again.

Last night, I could have ignored him and had the chance to spend the evening with him. Instead, my impatience bested me, and I forced myself on him once again.

I wasn't prepared for the pain I felt when he walked away from me yet again. Even less when the other man was the one taking care of him. I wanted that to be my responsibility, but instead, he ran away from me.

For a moment, he'd sagged in my arms, and for a second, I'd believed Jamie wanted to stay there. That was until he pushed me away.

What was all that, anyway? He seemed afraid... actually, no. It was more than that. He seemed terrorised and, for a moment, broken beyond measure.

I watched him walk away while something inside me screamed to rush to his side and protect him. Only his friend's bigger body held him up. Seeing that had long-gone memories resurfacing and breaking me.

What happened last night was because of what I did?

Or did something else happen to him?

I made a promise to myself last night, one in which I would not reach out to him anymore, because I'm clearly only making things worse for him. However, his face wouldn't stop flashing through my mind throughout the night, while I lay awake in my bed reliving in vivid detail what had happened on the dance floor.

Remembering the layer of sweat covering his face and his dilated pupils, his need to run away made impossible by a body unwilling to cooperate. If I hadn't witnessed those symptoms in so many of the youngsters coming to our foundation, I wouldn't have recognised them.

However, that's why I'm here today. My promise didn't even last twelve hours. The need to see if it was my mind playing games with me forced me out of bed and brought me here.

I didn't park in front of his place this time, afraid Jamie would see me and ask me to leave again. Instead, I parked a couple of streets away and walked over, making sure to become invisible. I'm hoping the people around will be an excellent cover, so he won't catch me with my trousers down, so to speak.

I don't want to talk to Jamie. I mean, I want to but I won't, because I heard him loud and clear. Last night, I understood, and it finally settled in my soul... He wants nothing to do with me.

Hearing his broken voice mumbling incessantly, "Please, please, please . "

Fuck, that's what nightmares are made of.

I'm not even sure he was aware of it because when he faced me—and I liked it more than I should—there was nothing pleading in his attitude. He was standing strong and tall, pushing down the fear I could easily see.

He stops, and I stop with him, far enough away not to be spotted.

I'm a stalker.

I admit to that.

Am I ashamed? Yes . A thousand times, yes . But... I needed to check on him, to see if he was better today, to see he wasn't as broken as I believed yesterday.

I needed to be here today for my sanity so I could stop drowning in guilt.

I've followed him from his house to the park and now to his usual coffee shop. I watch him while he orders his drink and then chats away with Andy. Jealousy has become my friend. But what rights do I have over him? None . Yes, my brain is always a friend I can count on.

As soon as his drink is ready, he leaves the shop and keeps walking, as if what's inside his head is more important than what's happening outside it.

Another dog owner stops him, and it gives me time to observe him. I'm too far away to see his face in detail, but his demeanour is shouting, "I'm at my limit . " I watch him as the dogs sniff one another and try to run away from them, while Jamie looks tired and a bit dejected. He wears dishevelled amazingly well, even if he looks too pale. I'd bet everything I have that he probably didn't sleep at all.

I wish he was like last night—before he saw me—tranquil and with a small smile on his face. That smile... the one I loved when we were boys, because it made my heart beat as fast as a race car. The same smile I want so much to curve his lips when he's looking at me.

It surprised me that the guy who was never friends with anyone, who used to talk

only to me—for a long time only when I asked questions—has become this chatty bee moving from person to person like they're flowers in blossom.

Am I jealous? Yes. Again, a thousand times, yes .

It's childish and wrong. However, I wish I was the one Jamie wanted to spend his time with. Instead, I'm reduced to following him around ,having glimpses of him when I'm sure he's not aware of it.

Am I going to stop being a stalker? No. A thousand times, no.

Now that he's come back into my life—or I've come into his, really—I want to have the chance to apologise and make up for the pain I inflicted, even if it'll take me a hundred years to do it.

I lean forward slowly to make sure I'm not spotted and take a few more seconds to admire the person who's become my obsession. He's still walking around, enjoying the sunny winter's day. It's not raining, and that's a blessing, but not even the horrible weather would have stopped me from being here today.

I swiftly move backward when Jamie moves, and then, after waiting a few seconds, I poke my head out again. If he walks, I follow, and if he stops, I stop.

Poking my head out again, I'm met with two dark orbs focused on me. My gaze jumps up in search of Jamie's face to see if I'll have to come out of my hiding spot and once again be on the receiving end of his anger or if I'm still safe. When I look up, my body sags against the wall in relief. He's still talking with someone and is very involved in the conversation.

I look down at his feet again, and Queen L is staring at me. Her tongue is hanging out, doggy drool falling from it, and her tail is going left and right, thwapping against

Jamie's leg. I love how he looks down and smiles at her. Yep, I'm jealous.

How would it feel if all his attention was on me? Just for a second, so for that moment I could live without guilt and regret.

She wiggles and pulls, then sits when Jamie gently pulls on the leash.

"Queen, just a minute. We'll go to the park again before going home if you behave."

I'm too close if what he's saying is so clear. I wait until they both get distracted by their friends and I cross the road. Once on the other side, I find another corner from where I watch undisturbed.

I take my phone out and pretend I'm busy with it, while nothing going on over the other side happens without me knowing.

"Baby girl, what's wrong?"

With the road so quiet and not too wide, hearing Jamie makes it easy enough to know when he's moving, even if there's no way I won't be constantly checking where he is.

I'm becoming obsessed. No, I am obsessed. Leaving him alone, though, is simply not an option.

He could have me arrested. And yet, here I am.

Queen listens for a few seconds, behaving like an obedient dog, but then she's turning back to me again. I make it just in time to hide behind the wall before Jamie takes another look around, probably checking what's making his dog so restless.

I press myself against the wall, close my eyes, and wait for Jamie to arrive and tell

me off. When nothing happens, I peek again, and I'm glad when Jamie is still involved in the conversation.

Queen pulls again, and this time the leash detaches, and I'm not sure who's more surprised, me or the dog. She looks at Jamie, but he's still talking, and when she sits back, I take a breath of relief. It doesn't last long, though, before she wanders around. She takes a few steps in the direction she saw me before but then stops. Her nose is probably telling her I'm no longer there.

She sniffs the ground and then the air, and then she's onto me. I glance at Jamie, but he hasn't noticed anything, so he's still unaware of his dog walking free.

That's good news to me since it means she's lost me. But it doesn't last long because after sniffing the air a couple of times, she turns her head in my direction.

"Crap," I mumble, and get a dark glare from a passer by. I smile, using years of my dad's teachings, and the man walks away.

I turn just in time to find Queen staring at me, and I swear to God she smiles at me as if we are old friends. And maybe we are after she humped my leg at the coffee shop.

My heart beats faster and faster the closer she gets to me, only to take a breath of relief every time she stops and looks around.

"Queen," I whisper. "Go back to Jamie."

She seems to have a mind of her own. She sniffs the air and then looks at me, and her tail does a little dance once again, then she resumes pawing her way towards me.

I shake my head at her, and instead of following my instructions, she barks. With an under-my-breath profanity, I hide behind the wall so Jamie doesn't spot me. After my

behaviour each time we've met, and ruining his days out, I don't want him shouting "stalker" or worse in my direction ever again.

When I don't hear Jamie's voice, I poke my head out, and the dog is still walking towards me as if she has all the time in the world.

I watch her moving from the pavement to the road, indifferent to whatever is happening around her. I frown when I don't hear Jamie's voice calling for Queen to stop. She's still wearing the red bow on her head, keeping her hair standing up straight, making her look like a real queen.

She turns her head up and sniffs around like she has all the time in the world, as if there aren't any cars around and she's still in the park. I'm surprised nothing has happened to her yet.

I usher her with my hand to go back, but I only have the opposite effect, and she moves towards me. Those small legs are not covering as much ground as I would like, and every second she spends on the road has my blood pressure rising.

I hide again behind the corner, hoping that if she doesn't see me, she'll go back to Jamie. I count to thirty and then spy, without sticking my entire head out, to check if she's made the right decision and turned on her tail to go back to her owner.

I don't understand why Queen likes me so much, and if I wasn't trying to hide, I would have been excited by her behaviour. I've never been wanted before as much as she wants me right now.

Liar, my brain reminds me. Jamie was as excited as she is to spend his time with you.

I ignore it and focus my attention on the dog.

Queen is sitting in the middle of the road, looking back and forth between where Jamie is speaking with his friend—I really hope he’s only a friend—and my hiding spot.

She jumps to her paws as soon as she spots me again and begins her slow walk towards me. Defeated and preoccupied, I coax her towards me, as she’s better off with me than on the road. Her pace doesn’t quicken, and she wastes even more time by looking around and following some scent only she can smell.

That’s when I spot the car. I’m sure the driver is going to see Queen and come to a halt. Instead, the car keeps coming at a fast speed, and my worry grows. I look at Jamie and pray he calls her back, but inside I’m conscious there’s no time to waste. My brain clocks out, and I’m running towards the dog. My only thought is that I can’t let anything happen to her because it will destroy Jamie.

After leaving my hiding spot, I jump out into the road without thinking. My entire focus is on making it in time to save Jamie’s dog. I won’t forgive myself if something happens because it will be my fault. If I wasn’t here, Queen wouldn’t have followed me. What I can’t stand, though, is the thought of Jamie suffering more and having to live with the guilt. He’ll never forgive himself if something happens to his precious dog. He’s had enough bad things happen in his life, and he doesn’t need this too.

I could jump out of my skin in relief when I’m in time to pick the dog up from the ground. I hug her tightly, happy she’s fine.

“Shane!”

Fuck, I’m screwed. He’s going to get upset and tell me off again...and we’ll be in this stupid circle forever.

Until the urgency and fear impregnating his tone chills me to the bone.

To save Queen, I launch her out of the way, and watch as she lands like a cat on her paws. I look up, knowing I can't get out of the way in time...or without a scratch...

Fuck! This is going to hurt.

Chapter 9

Jamie

My throat still hurts from screaming Shane's name over and over, shouting at people to call an ambulance while I rushed to his side.

My mind was blank, my heart racing, and my body sweating. It was only the prayers I said while running to him, needing to check if he was okay, that kept me standing.

The face of my companion had sent chills down my spine. I glanced down to check on Queen, and not finding her next to me had petrified me to the bone. I turned around, just knowing she was in trouble. That's when I saw Shane, there in the middle of the road with Queen in his arms.

My first stupid question was, "What is he doing here?" Then the danger they were in hit me like a slap to the face, and I recoiled so hard I nearly fell on my arse.

The first "Shane" was just a whisper, getting louder as my fear mounted. Then it left my mouth as an explosion of sound when the car barrelling down on them didn't change its course.

The car was going way too fast because the driver was clearly distracted by something happening on the side of the road. There was swerving, then chaos. People were screaming, and the roaring sound of brakes came too late. The slide of the car on the slightly wet road was the last thing I heard before the ear-splitting sound of metal hitting flesh.

My voice screaming Shane's name died at the impact.

His body was propelled upward, arms flailing like broken wings. He flew like a rag doll only to slam down onto the ground, first landing on the car with a sickening thud before coming to rest on the hard asphalt.

Then there was only the deafening sound of silence, like what happens after a storm.

I made my way to him, swatting away the hands that were trying to keep me from going to him. In that moment, nothing was more important than reaching Shane and being with him.

Then came the sirens and the loud voices, telling everyone to give them space to work. All the while, I crouched next to him and kept his hand in mine.

Even now, while I sit next to him in the ambulance, I can't let go. Even with my eyes full of tears spilling over and running down my cheeks, I can't let go. I glance at his face, and more tears spring to my eyes seeing the collar bracing his neck, how pale his complexion is, and his eyes stubbornly remaining closed even though I now want them to look straight at me. His body on the stretcher fills me with guilt, as does the blood covering his face and staining his white shirt.

If I'd only kept Queen by my side instead of chatting about nothing. I'd needed to stop thinking about last night, to stop remembering how calming his touch was.

How am I going to survive if he doesn't make it? How am I going to endure the guilt?

"He's going to be okay," the paramedic says, as if reading the nefarious thoughts filling my head.

I could have laughed at Simon's face when I asked... okay, when I shouted at him to

take care of Queen, but I was too worried about the man lying on the hard ground, bloody and not regaining consciousness.

There has only been one other time I've prayed as much as I'm doing now, and whoever is up there wasn't fully listening then. I don't want to remember that time, but I want whoever is there to truly hear me this time and make sure Shane is okay.

The door of the ambulance opens, and it's a rush from there. I'm forced to let go of Shane, and then I have to watch him being wheeled away, staring after the stretcher and medical personnel working on him until he disappears from view.

"Sir?"

I jump when a hand gently rests on my shoulder. I whip around, plastering myself against the doors that just took Shane away, until the scrubs she's wearing kick-start my mind and I'm able to function and focus on her.

"Sir, are you okay?"

"Yeah." Not really, though. I won't be okay until they tell me Shane is stable and recovering.

"We need some information about the patient," she says, pointing towards reception and walking over to it.

"Do you know the patient?"

"Yeah, I do."

"What's his name?"

“Shane Campbell.”

“Address?”

“I don’t know.”

“Does he have any allergies?”

“I don’t know.”

“What’s your name?”

“Jamie Wilson.”

“Jamie... Can I call you Jamie?” she asks, and I nod.

“Shane is in expert hands. They’ll assess his condition to determine the severity of his injuries. You can sit there, and we’ll let you know what’s happening.”

“Okay, thank you.”

“Who are—“

“There was a car accident, and someone was brought here.”

I turn around to check who’s talking because I’m sure they’re talking about Shane. It’s a tall man, and I recognise the uniform he’s wearing, and next to him there’s a petite woman wearing the same.

“Yes, he’s in triage now, but he’s not conscious yet. As you know, we can’t disclose any more information. This person was with the patient,” she says, pointing in my

direction.

I fidget under the stare of three pairs of eyes, but I'm not surprised to see them here or that they're asking about him.

"Can we ask you a couple of questions?" the tall man says, indicating towards the door so we can step outside and have a more private conversation.

How can I leave, though, when Shane is here? How can I step out without knowing how he is? I take a step back because I want to stay here.

"I'll come and look for you if there's any news," the nurse says with a gentle smile.

I nod, and when the two police officers move, I follow them.

"We'll be quick," the tall man says while pulling out a small notepad and a pen.

"Okay," I say, looking through the door, itching to go back inside to be with Shane. The most difficult thing I've done today was let go of his hand.

"What's your name?"

"Jamie Wilson."

"Mr Wilson, can you recall the incident?"

"I was talking with a friend, and when his face became as white as a sheet, I turned around. Shane had just picked up my dog because she'd wandered into the road." I stop as another wave of tears overwhelms me.

It's my fault. If I'd only checked that her leash was properly attached. If only I hadn't

stopped to talk with Simon and instead walked to the park like Queen wanted.

“I’m not sure how Queen got off her leash.”

“That’s okay. What happened after that?”

“Everything happened so quickly. The car was coming, and I knew Shane wouldn’t have time to jump out of the way. He launched Queen out of his arms just before the car was on him. Oh my God.” My stomach revolts, and I bend over to empty it of the coffee I had this morning.

The memory of the car hitting Shane, his body flying and landing on the ground with a sickening thud, makes me sick, and I keep dry-heaving until my guts are contorting in pain.

“Are you okay?”

How can I be? When someone’s in hospital and his life is at risk because of me?

“Do you need any help?”

I take a few deep breaths, trying to calm my stomach, and use my sleeve to wipe the tears away from my face.

“Yeah,” I say to him, and then continue. “The driver tried to brake and swerve too late, but hit a wet patch and slid, crashing into Shane. He flew into the air for a moment before landing on the car and then hitting the ground. After that, he didn’t move. I shouted at someone to call the ambulance, and now here we are.”

“Is Shane a friend?”

Is he? Can I lie to the police? “Yes, he is.” Yep, I can easily lie to the people who enforce the law.

After that, they ask me to share my personal information in case they needed to talk to me again. Before they go, they tell me they’ll be back to speak with Shane, but only once he’s better.

I watch them go, and then slowly walk around, finding a chair tucked in a corner where I can have another meltdown. I collapse onto the chair, my legs no longer supporting me. My body has run out of adrenaline and just wants to be next to Shane.

The whispered words of the other people remind me of the pain we share, of the prayers sent above to keep the ones we care for safe. The sounds of plastic shoes squeaking across the floor, and the wheels of the machines used to take the vitals of those waiting to see a doctor but aren’t sick enough to be priority... they’re all reminders of the situation I’m in.

I lean my head against the wall, shut my eyes, and clap my hands together between my trembling knees. There’s the buzz of a fluorescent light, probably at the end of its life, but more than that, I hear my heart pounding in my ears.

I wanted him to suffer, but I never thought it would end up like this.

I turn my thoughts to the man above, even knowing I have nothing to bargain with. “Please,” I whisper, and wish I had a sign of my devotion to clasp between my hands, but still hoping to connect with the power above. The power that has control over life and death.

“Mr Sutton,” calls the nurse, and an old man slowly rises and walks even slower to meet her.

I go back to my prayer. Sitting there in a hard plastic chair, I pray, asking the universe to keep Shane safe and to make sure he wakes up. “Please, just let him make it through. Please.” I close my eyes and mumble my prayer like a mantra, my lips trembling while my mind keeps flashing back to the moment the car hit him. Then on the ground, pale and unmoving, and so different from the man who drove me crazy just the night before.

The door opens again, and I look up, hoping they’re coming to tell me he’s awake. Instead, the nurse doesn’t even look at me, but walks past just to disappear behind another closed door.

I look down at the floor, noticing the cracks in the worn linoleum, my vision blurred by unshed tears, my thoughts focused on my prayer. “Please wake up.”

My phone vibrates inside my pocket, and the reality outside these walls takes my thoughts away from the man lying in a hospital bed because of me.

Ruby

Hey, lovely. How are you and Queeny?

I look at the message, trying to rein in my tears. I must have created a lake by now. Rising from my seat, I walk out but stand near enough to the door so it doesn’t close and I can still hear if they call my name or Shane’s.

I click on her name and then the green button to call. I pace in front of the door, waiting for her to answer.

“Hey.”

“Rubs,” I croak, my voice hoarse and still infused with tears.

“Jamie? What’s wrong?”

“There was an accident—“

“Are you okay?” she interrupts, and I hear the sounds of her moving around in a hurry. “Where are you? I’m coming, baby.”

“It’s not me—“

“Is it Queeny?”

“No, we’re okay. It’s Shane.”

“Who?”

“Shane,” I say, emphasising it to make her understand who I’m talking about.

“Oh... is he okay?”

“I don’t know. I’m outside the A&E. He wasn’t waking up.” My voice breaks, and another wave of tears fills my eyes.

“Baby, what happened?”

“He saved Queen, but the car couldn’t stop in time and he was hit.”

Shane’s face was void of any emotion but fear, looking at me until he couldn’t anymore because he was flying up and then plummeting down to the ground without a sound.

“I’ll be there as soon as I can.”

“Th—“

“Is there anyone for Shane Campbell?”

“Yes, me,” I say, rushing back inside and raising my hand for the nurse to see.

“We’re keeping him in and moving him to the ward.”

“Okay. What do I need to do?”

“Are you family?”

My mind goes blank. What am I to him? No one.

“Jamie. If you tell her you’re no one, they won’t tell you anything.”

Only when Ruby’s voice comes from the speaker do I remember I never ended the call.

“I’m his partner.” Oh my god. I’ve lied again, and this is something I can’t take back.

“It’s okay, baby. Breathe. Everything is going to be fine,” says Ruby on the other end of the phone.

I do as she says, trying to forget I’ve just lied to the police and to the hospital.

“Follow me.”

And that’s what I do.

I want to cry when I see him. His eyes are still stubbornly closed, his face paler than

the white sheet he's resting on, and the machine he's attached to is beeping so loudly in the otherwise silent room.

I follow but don't pay attention, because that's split between my prayers for him to open his eyes and look at me and him lying motionless on the bed.

I wait outside while they bring him into the room and attach everything he needs to have attached. Once they're done, I sit in the big chair next to the bed and reach for his hand.

I turn my thoughts to the universe and begin my bargaining once again.

"Please, please, bring him back to me. If you do, I promise I'll listen to whatever he has to say."

I watch Shane, but nothing happens, so I sit back until I'm resting on the backrest. I close my eyes and continue praying.

Chapter 10

Shane

Ten years ago

Three months and we're as inseparable as brothers, though I'll never see him as one.

I'm not sure what I feel when I'm with him, but it makes my insides quiver, and my skin comes to life every time he touches me. I lock away every sensation he gives me because each one of them is new to me, and I never want to forget.

I've never been important to anyone. I've never been loved for who I am, but Jamie has never even questioned any of it. He just likes me for who I am. I don't need to be the best. I don't need to be the strongest, and I don't have to be more than I am. For him, I just need to be Shane, the Shane I have inside, who never really saw the light of day until Jamie entered my life.

We don't spend enough time together at school, between my friends and all the extra-curricular activities I'm forced to take to please a demanding father—who's never pleased. Everything but Jamie is hard work. With him, I have peace, a peace I want to keep close as much as I can. I'm whole, and I have hope, hope for a future that's not already fully written for me.

Jamie is the key to open the door of my golden cage.

Every day, I hope it's the day I get to fly. When I get to be free, when I get to follow

my dream.

Every day, the crack between my imprisonment and my freedom becomes bigger, but I'm still watching, waiting for it to slam shut. Because every single thing I've ever wanted has been taken from me, and now I want Jamie.

I'm gripping it, and him, with both hands and all my might, as I'm sure it will end one day. Because of me, because of my name, or because he may see that the darkness inside me is stronger than the light he brings out.

"Shane?" Jamie's whisper next to my ear makes me shiver.

I bring my hand up to rub that spot and make the tingling sensation disappear before I turn to him, hoping my face doesn't display what he did to me with just one word.

"Yeah?" I say, turning slightly towards him where he's sitting next to me—very close—because he forgot his book.

"About coming over today..."

A thump inside my heart, and agony spreads inside my body. "Are you not coming?" Why does the thought make me want to smash something or plead with him not to leave me behind?

"I am," he says, and all the darkness disappears into the light of happiness. "Are you sure your family is okay with it?"

I didn't really ask them, and I never talk about Jamie because I'm sure if my dad saw how happy he makes me, he'd take him away.

"Yeah. No one is going to be there."

“Okay,” he says, and I love the way he turns red and bends his head to hide his face.

I resist the urge to lean closer and place a kiss on his cheek, but I can’t avoid my face becoming as red as Jamie’s.

I push my leg closer to his, and I lean over. “Let’s have lunch together,” I whisper, looking at his face. I love the shy smile spreading there, and I want it to stay there forever.

The bell rings, and I pull back quickly, but then slowly lean against the backrest as if I have no cares in the world. Out of the corner of my eye, I watch as Jamie jumps up and begins collecting his stuff.

Looking around to make sure no one witnesses what I’m about to do, I reach out to him, and with a finger, I caress the side of his hand. He stops but doesn’t look at me. Now that I have his attention, I whisper, “Meet me at our usual place.”

His head moves up and down once, and then he’s gone.

“Shane, my man, are you coming with us?” Dan asks.

“No, man. I have something to do.”

“Aren’t you a busy bee?”

I don’t like his tone, and I like it less when he leans closer, and even less when he talks. “Are you meeting your girlfriend?”

The way he says “meeting” makes my stomach revolt. Sometimes I really wish I could tell Dan to fuck off and let me be, but our fathers are friends so I have to live with it. He reminds me of my dad when he acts like this.

“I don’t have a girlfriend, and you should know, as I spend most of my time with you and the guys.”

“True, true,” he says, and he’s once again the cool guy I like to spend time with.

Sometimes, though, he acts like a jealous prick and says things that make me uncomfortable, and that’s the reason I’ve never brought Jamie into our group.

“I’ll see you later, Dan.”

“Okay.”

I turn around because I can’t shake the feeling he’s still looking at me, but I’m glad when I turn around that he’s talking to Tom and Toby.

I rush through the corridors because I need the calm Jamie brings. He’s someone I’m not exhausted by. In fact, he’s the battery I recharge from.

I find him sitting in our usual place, nearly disappearing behind a large plant. Today, though, I need something more because the dread of something coming is taking my breath away.

Looking around, I don’t see anyone else, so even though I know I shouldn’t, I take his hand and bring him somewhere I know we’ll be alone. “Come with me.”

At the far end of the property, there’s a small pond protected by trees. Few students know about this place, but during those moments when I couldn’t wear the mask I’m expected to, I explored this part of the school.

“Wow.” Jamie’s voice washes over me and has the calming effect I was hoping for.

“Yeah, it’s beautiful here,” I say, stopping in front of the pond and letting the stillness of the water calm my nerves a bit more.

Jamie perches on a flat rock and pulls a box out of his bag. He always has the most amazing food. I don’t even know if I’ve ever eaten anything cooked by my mum.

“Where’s your lunch?”

“I forgot.” In my need to be with him and away from Dan, I didn’t even think about lunch.

“Let’s share,” Jamie says, scooting to the side to make space for me.

I sit and watch him take half his sandwich out and pass it to me. Tuna and sweetcorn, my favourite. I take a bite, and then another, and in a few seconds it’s gone.

Then it’s a piece of carrot, and another, until they’re all gone too. And finally, he breaks the chocolate bar in two and gives one half to me.

“Thank you,” I say when we’re done.

We relax next to each other, enjoying the silence and the sounds of the leaves moved by the wind. I look at Jamie, his eyes closed with that sweet smile on his lips, and something inside me builds. On impulse, I lean in and place a kiss on his cheek.

Then I pull back, afraid I crossed a line I shouldn’t have. Instead, he’s looking at me, his face as red as before, but on his lips is a smile I’ve never seen. A smile that tells me I’m safe, that tells me he feels the same, that brings tears to my eyes.

The bell rings at that moment, and we rush to get everything back inside his bag. Before we leave, though, he takes my hand and squeezes, and my spinning world

returns to its axis.

We don't look at each other and go our separate ways once we're back in the building, but whatever we had at the pond will always be inside me.

I've never seen anyone look as uncomfortable as Jamie does while sitting on the edge of my bed. And I don't think his mind is like mine, full of the indecent things I want to do to him.

"Shall we play video games?" I ask, and snort when he jumps up and nearly falls to the floor, arse first.

"I don't know how to play."

I hate seeing him so guarded and afraid of saying or doing something he'll be judged for.

I'll never judge him. To me, he doesn't have any flaws. To me, he's the essence of perfection. Just like the sun and the moon or a cold drink on a hot day.

He's so beautiful when he smiles, his head thrown back, his face illuminated with amusement, and his lips stretched thin in joy. I wish I had the power to make him smile like that all the time. Instead, what I hoped for today wasn't really happening because he's so afraid of what's around him. He's not even looking at me with his full attention like he does in school when he makes me feel as if I'm the only person he really sees, as if I'm the only person he wants to see.

"What's wrong?"

His eyes land on me but quickly move away.

“You’re rich.”

I nearly laugh at his astonished tone.

“I’m not,” I say, and his eyes are back on me. His forehead is furrowed as if he doesn’t understand, so I continue. “ I’m not. My dad is.”

Now, even his eyebrows are frowning, and I want to smile so badly, but I don’t want to make him more uncomfortable than he is.

“It’s the same thing,” he says finally.

“No, it’s not.” My tone is harsh because I’m not like them. I’m at my parents’ mercy, with no power over my own life, and I don’t seem able to please them, ever.

“Okay.” His meek tone and “I’m ready to flee” demeanour make me feel like I kicked a puppy.

Jesus.

I breathe in a few times while trying to control my frustration over the gilded cage I live in, and no one seems to understand how much I want to fly free. How much I want to be like Jamie, with a family who loves him, praises him, and thinks he’s the best thing that ever happened to them.

Me? I’m just an object that can be used in different ways depending on the situation. Dutiful son, but only when I excel in my studies or in front of others. A disgrace when I don’t maintain the high standards my name requires. A failure when no outside eyes are on me.

“Sorry,” I say to the only person who has ever made me feel like I matter. I sit next to

him and lean closer until my shoulder is touching his. I ignore the electricity passing between us, instead gripping the peace and calmness that spreads inside me whenever we're close with both hands.

The more I relax, the more Jamie relaxes, and when I'm back to the person I am with him, I speak. "Don't worry about all this," I say, pointing to the stuff around my room. "None of it is important. We are." And with fear eating at my insides, I inch my hand over until it covers his, and then I grip it delicately, afraid he'll reject me, just like everyone I love does.

I hold my breath while I wait for his reaction. I admire his long lashes fluttering with nervousness, his teeth biting at his bottom lip, and his pale skin pinkening at his cheeks. He looks stunning, like a flower blooming in spring.

"Okay," he says breathlessly, and all my worries are gone.

I'm not sure how long we stay like this, basking in each other's presence and touch. No need to talk to fill the silence, no need to move, but only the need to be together.

"Shane." Agata's voice makes us jump in surprise and forces us to move apart quickly.

She's the help and has been assigned to provide for all my needs. With the way my dad goes on and on about descending from noble blood, which we do, I'm glad she calls me by my name. However, while we're still commoners, I was afraid he would ask the people who work for us to address us as lords and ladies. What a nightmare that would have been.

I want to pull Jamie right back against me, but I can't allow anyone to know because if they do, they'll ruin it.

A knock quickly follows, as I haven't been quick enough to answer.

"Yes, Agata?" I say, and she takes that as an invitation to enter the room.

I want with all my being to lock the door and live here forever with Jamie, but instead, I face reality.

"Mr Campbell is requesting your presence in the study."

"But I..." I look at Jamie, the person I want to spend time with, and Agata, the person who's taking me away from here.

"Your father doesn't like to wait."

I want to scream and throw everything on the floor in a tantrum, but I learnt it won't make a difference. I'll have to bend to my father's desires anyway. We all do.

"I'm sorry, Jamie," I say, turning towards him.

"Don't worry. I'll see you tomorrow at school." His soft smile calms the beast inside me, ready for a battle it will lose.

I can't let this moment go. "Meet me tomorrow at the usual place. I don't have after-class lessons," I whisper in a rush, afraid we'll be forced to let go, but making sure he's the only one who can hear me.

"The car is waiting."

Of course my father had the idea of calling the car to send my friend home. He'll expect Jamie to be grateful for being seen getting out of a limousine, as a repayment for his time here being cut short.

We leave the room following Agata, and I want to reach out to him to tell him without words how sorry I am to see him leaving, while all I want is to be sitting next to him with his hand in mine.

“Shane,” my father greets me before turning to Jamie. “Mr Wilson, it’s a pleasure having you here. I hope you found our humble abode comfortable enough.”

What I don’t expect is for my dad to extend his hand.

“Your house is beautiful, sir. Thank you for having me,” Jamie says, all composed while extending his hand to shake my father’s.

Jamie gets distracted by Alan, our chauffeur, who appears at the door, but I don’t miss how my father cleans his hand, the same hand that shook Jamie’s, on a tissue pulled out of his pocket.

At this moment, I come to hate him and make a promise to myself: I’m never going to be like him.

I turn away, disgusted by his display of false superiority he showed Jamie, and follow him outside.

I want to take his hand and hold it, but instead I wave while the car moves away, and then he’s gone, and I wish I was going with him.

“I’m proud of you.”

My father’s voice surprises me as soon as I enter the house.

“Befriending the poor kid is the kind of behaviour expected of a Campbell. Helping those less fortunate will be a good way to gain others’ approval. Well done, boy.”

I watch him walk away, and I'm disgusted with myself because while I hate his words with all my being, I'm also a tiny bit happy to have finally made him proud, even if for all the wrong reasons.

Maybe I'm not as different from my father as I wish to be.

Maybe it would be a good idea to avoid Jamie.

Chapter 11

Jamie

Present day

The beeping of the machine is the only sound in the otherwise silent room. The space is filled with the smell of antiseptic, probably used to disinfect the various cuts on Shane's face, and I suspect there are so many more on his body hidden by the covers.

Every time my eyes close, a beep from the heart monitor wakes me up. Every time I leave my uncomfortable chair to check on Shane, he remains stubbornly asleep. My only relief is that he's still breathing.

When it's not the beep of the machines, it's the nurse on shift coming in every couple of hours to check on Shane and to wake him up to give him medication. He seems out of it most of the time, and his answers are not always comprehensible, but at least he's waking up.

I tremble at the memory of him lying unconscious on the road.

They've assured me he's not dying. That was so much of a relief that I sobbed like a baby. They also said that he was awake but confused for a few moments. He had dislocated his right shoulder and broken his right wrist. He'd also sustained an injury to his left leg as well as a concussion, but they're keeping an eye on his vital signs to make sure he doesn't go into a coma.

They said Shane was lucky because it could have been so much worse. I believe them since I thought he was dead when I saw him flying up and over the car.

I go back to my chair, keeping my eyes focused on the body beneath the sheets and the rise and fall of his chest, the only sign he's alive.

The memories of our past, the one I try so hard to forget, and the more recent memory of the accident overlap whenever my mind is not focused on Shane. It's as if my mind is trying to remind me of the mistakes we made.

He hurt me so badly and so deeply. It was like he'd ripped my heart from my chest, thrown it to the floor, and stomped on it. This man, though... he's the person who risked his life to save my dog, and the two faces of Shane, one past and one present, are not adding up.

I want to remain cold and unaffected. I want to stay angry at him. I don't want to forgive and forget; that's an impossible task. I will never be whole again, and it's Shane's fault. Everything I suffered haunted me for months, years, and it's still haunting me today.

Ten years, and he never reached out before. He never asked for forgiveness. He never asked how I was or how I am. It seems like we have a different version of the past we shared. How can he forget that what we once were died the day he pushed me away?

The rift cannot be mended; there is no pride to be soothed. There is only fear. A fear that has created cracks too deep and too jagged to be fixed.

But here I am... waiting for him to wake up.

I'm itching with the need to reach out to him, to take his hand in mine, to give my strength to him so that he can wake up and heal. Because when he does, I can leave

and go back to a life where he's not part of it.

I wait for his eyelids to flutter or his fingers to twitch, but he remains trapped inside his dreamless sleep.

I give in to the need to touch him and reach for his hand resting motionless on the white sheet. He's cold to the touch, and my heart tugs inside my chest, worrying that he's in pain.

"Shane..." I whisper, but I can hear the prayer, the plea in it. "I'm sorry. It's all my fault. If only I'd made sure the leash was secure. If you come back, I swear I'll listen. I may not be able to forgive you, but I'll listen."

His fingers move inside my grip, and tears fill my eyes.

I want to, but I can't ignore the small smile filling my lips and the sense of relief at the thought that Shane is going to open his eyes soon.

The ringing of my phone pulls me from sleep, and the light in the room makes my eyes hurt. I closed them for a minute, too tired to keep them open with my will.

Shane is still asleep, and he looks worse than he looked last night. His face is a canvas of green and purple spots, with red cuts and scrapes caused by hitting the asphalt.

I sit up, grunting because of the uncomfortable position I spent the night in. I place my elbow on my knees and keep looking at Shane.

He's still sleeping. At least, I hope that's what he's doing. He looks pale and fragile under the sheets. His features remind me of the boy I once admired and loved... It pains me to admit it even now, and I only admitted it once before...

I shake my head because I don't want to go back there. I don't want to twist what happened or make it less traumatic—or less painful—only because he's lying in a hospital bed, and it's my fault he's here.

A groan fills the room, bringing my attention back to Shane, my thoughts forgotten as I watch his eyes flutter. My breath stops and only resumes when his eyes open after a couple of blinks. He looks around, confused, until his gaze lands on me, and then, his eyes wet with unshed tears, he speaks.

“Jamie...” His voice is weak, and hoarse, and way too quiet to be creating a storm inside me.

For a moment, I can't speak. I'm only able to bring oxygen into my lungs. The years of hate, of wanting him—and them—to suffer like I did, and the anger all come rushing back, burning inside my chest.

“I'm sorry...” he says, trying to reach out to me, but his body goes against his will, staying obstinately still.

“How are you feeling?” I ask and then lean over to press the button to call the nurse. I'm glad he's awake, but I can't have a discussion right now. I know myself, and I'd be agreeing with everything he says because he's hurt and it's my fault.

“Like I've been hit by a car.” His face is serious, almost as if he truly doesn't remember that's what happened.

I turn to the door, hoping for the nurse to come back and check on him. I'm seriously afraid he hit his head too hard, and he doesn't remember what really happened.

“I'm sorr—“

I'm relieved when there's a quick rap on the door before it opens and a man in a white coat comes in. He's an older gentleman with grey hair and bright, kind eyes.

"Mr Campbell, how are we feeling?"

"I've been better."

"I'm sure you have. How is your head?" The doctor continues to ask questions while he checks Shane's eyes and his vitals.

All the while, I sit on the chair, trying to focus my attention on what's being said, but my attention goes back to Shane every time he hisses in pain.

"We are very glad you're back with us. We were all worried. Especially your partner here."

I blush under Shane's scrutiny and look away, ashamed to admit what I did.

"Is he okay?"

"He's okay, but it was a serious accident. We've reviewed the tests we did yesterday, as well as the scans, and the recovery will be a long one."

I let out a shuddered breath at what the doctor is insinuating. From what he's saying, it's clear that Shane could have died yesterday.

"We're keeping you in for a couple of days so we can monitor you and make sure there are no complications. Concussions are nothing to joke about, and you'll need rest and to avoid strenuous activities, as well as anything that could exacerbate your head injury or cause another one."

“Okay, doc. I’ll be good. I don’t want to make my partner worry.”

This side of him reminds me of the man I met at the charity event, the man I allowed to kiss me when I usually hate being touched.

“Good. We’ve put a cast on your wrist and leg, and we immobilised your shoulder. We hope the bones heal correctly and you won’t need surgery, but you may need physiotherapy to get back to a full range of movement.”

The more the doctor talks, the worse I feel. I wanted him to suffer, but now that he is, it’s not giving me the satisfaction I thought it would.

“Your wrist and leg will take between six and eight weeks. Your shoulder will take a bit longer, between eight and twelve weeks. Avoid placing weight on it or doing any lifting with it, especially during the early stages of the healing process.”

“What about the concussion? My head feels like it’s splitting in two.”

“That could take anywhere from a few days to a few weeks. No screen, bright lights, or loud noises for the next week.”

“When can I go home?” Shane’s voice is now serious, as if he’s understanding what jumping in to save Queen has done to him.

“We’ll keep you in for a couple more days, but it’ll depend on how well you’re doing. We need to make sure you’re stable and your pain is manageable.”

“Thank you, Doctor,” I say, watching Shane. He closes his eyes, and his face goes pale.

I start to reach out to him to take his hand, but the doctor continues.

“Once we discharge you, you’ll need someone to help you out. But I’m sure your partner will be able to help and I’m sure he’ll be happy to have you back home. You gave him quite the scare, so please be a good boy for a while,” he says to Shane and smiles at me. I want the floor to open up and swallow me so I can leave this mortifying situation.

What the heck was I thinking when I told them I was Shane’s partner?

“I’ll see you tomorrow, but in the meantime, for any issues that arise, please press that button and the nurse will be with you,” he says, pointing at the call button.

When he leaves, the room becomes silent, and I wonder if Shane has fallen asleep again. I lean back in the chair, forcing my brain to find a solution that doesn’t involve me taking care of Shane for the foreseeable future.

“My partner...” Shane says, opening his eyes at the same time and looking directly at me.

Hope and something else I can’t decipher fill his eyes, and I can’t do this. Even if he saved my dog, we are not friends, and we never will be.

“I need a coffee,” I say, walking to the door and stopping whatever is coming out of Shane’s mouth.

“I’ll see you later, darling,” he says, loud enough for everyone to hear it, even people in Japan.

I glare at him and then close the door, but before I do, I don’t miss the wink he sends my way.

I try to stop the smile spreading across my face, but I can’t keep the relief blossoming

inside my chest at bay.

After I get my coffee, I need to stop this nonsense. There is no way I'm taking care of the person I hate the most. I said I would listen to what he had to say, not look after him for weeks!

Chapter 12

Shane

I barely remember the drive home. No, not my home, but his. It only took saving his dog and breaking a few bones to have him inviting me over. Actually, staying with him so he could take care of me.

A bump in the road sends a flare of pain up my leg. The throb in my shoulder and the live-in headache return with a vengeance that leaves me so dizzy it makes everything hazy.

Jamie hasn't said a word since we left the hospital, not that I was expecting him to talk to me. He'd been very clear when he said he didn't want to talk to me. He hadn't said much in the last three days either, talking only when other people were around. I can't blame him. He's not happy, and I understand why he's like this. I was a dick when we were younger, and I've been nothing but a stalker since we met again as adults. His hands are gripping the steering wheel so tightly his knuckles are white.

After all these years spent apart, we should be strangers, but instead, at least for me, it's like we never lost contact. I'm sure he would throw me out of the car if I said that to him, though.

I should be grateful for the silence, but instead it's like a weight taking away all the air in the car. Since we met, memories I didn't know I had have been resurfacing, and they're not picturing a good version of me. The wrongdoing I'm guilty of cannot be swept like dust under the carpet.

Another bump in the road has me hissing in pain, but I don't expect Jamie to care.

"Sorry," comes from his side of the car. For a moment, I believe it's my concussed brain playing games with me.

"It's okay. The roads are atrocious," I say, turning my head towards him.

But no, he's back looking straight ahead, the dim light making it impossible to see his face and understand if he was offering an olive branch.

I guess not.

When he's parked the car in his assigned parking space, Jamie is out even before I can thank him. He stands outside the car for a moment. I bet having to help me, of all people, is some kind of punishment for him he doesn't deserve.

If I could have relied on my family, I would have thanked Jamie and asked him to drop me off at mine, but other than that, I've been a victim of the silent treatment.

He comes to my side, and then he must think better of it because he walks towards the lift instead. I let out a sigh of frustration and move around, trying to get out of the car. I bang my head on the headrest when the door suddenly opens, again hissing in pain.

"Sorry," he says, extending a hand but then stopping midway as if realising he'll have to touch me. He takes a deep breath and extends it fully this time.

I try to get out of the car with minimal physical effort.

He crouches down next to me and does something, making the seat move backwards, giving me space to move my leg without bending it too much. It takes a bit for Jamie

to help me out because I'm heavier than he is and because I'm not really stable on my feet. But I don't have to be because parked next to the car is a wheelchair.

I look at it, then at Jamie, and finally I measure the distance I have to cross from the car to the door with the crutch I stubbornly decided I wanted to use and... it's never going to happen, not with my injuries, and not with how tired I am.

When he opens the door of his apartment, I expect to see something similar to mine, something cold and pompous. Instead, his place has a homey feel, decorated with warm tones all around and shelves full of books just across from the entrance. It reminds me of him with his nose deep inside one of them.

He pushes me in when he enters, and with each step he takes inside, I love his place even more. The entrance leads to an open space. On the right, a beautiful kitchen, a mix of high-level technology and furniture in a warm brown colour. I can smell the faint scent of coffee and freshly baked cake.

On the left is a big comfy sofa in a deep brown colour I wish I could sit on. In front of it, a TV screen and a PS5. All things I was expecting to find in Jamie's house.

When he stops, putting the brake on, I stand, using the chair as a support. He looks at me but doesn't say anything. He doesn't have to, as his disapproving glare is enough.

"You're staying in the guest room," he says, and without turning back, he marches towards a door that I now believe separates the day space from the night one.

He must truly hate me. I know I remind him of the things he wants to forget.

My legs feel shaky, but I force myself to place one foot after the other—or should I say one foot after a crutch—but I'm at my physical limit, and I stumble. I don't hit the floor, but only because Jamie is there to catch me.

How many times before, without even knowing it, was he the one keeping me standing and giving me what no one had given me before? The courage to try to break free.

“You should have taken the wheelchair, you stubborn prick,” he mumbles, but loud enough for me to hear it.

“I can manage if you give me a second.”

“No you can’t,” he snaps, his voice tense. “Just... let me help,” he says, gentler than before, while coming closer and awkwardly placing his arm around my waist.

Even through the layers of clothes, his barely there touch burns like fire and raises the guilt that fills me every time I think about us. Sometimes, I’m sure there’s more, just like when a word sits on the tip of your tongue and no matter how hard you try it never comes to you. Sometimes, I’m sure my memories are the same.

Once again, I realise how much he’s changed. The boy who used to stay silent and avoid confrontation is now ready to take everyone on, or at least me.

By the time we reach the guest room, I can no longer stand the proximity. I’m about ready to give up. I desperately want to kiss him when he accompanies me to the bed, removing the cover and helping me sit down.

He bends down and helps me remove the only shoe I have, and then very gently, mindful of my battered body, he helps me lie down, adjusting my pillow before covering me with the duvet.

I close my eyes as soon as the weight is off my leg, and I relax against the soft mattress.

“I’ll get you some water and painkillers,” he says, still fussing with the covers.

I think I nod, but I can’t be sure because my tired body is pulling me into a very welcome sleep.

“Don’t fall asleep before I’m back,” he says, his tone harsh again.

I know having me here must be challenging for him, so I open my eyes—not without difficulty, as they’re heavy with sleep and exertion. Jamie hands me the pills and then helps me sit up so I can take them. Then he helps me to lie back once more. His touch lessens the pain, even more than any pill I could ever take.

I want to ask him to stay, but I don’t want to break the peace we have going on right now.

“Call me if you need anything.” Without another word, he walks away.

“Thank you,” I say before he leaves. I wish I could ask him to stay, but even I know he would kick me out.

“I’m not doing it for you. It’s only because you saved my dog and because I lied to the police and the hospital.”

The click of the door closing sounds definitive, as if by closing it, he’s not only closing me out but shutting the door on any chance we might have had at a future.

The smell of food wakes me up and makes my stomach growl. I could cry with relief at being away from the hospital and not having to eat their food.

I move, but when my leg makes its presence known, I stop very quickly. My head reminds me of the concussion I’m still nursing. I’m still convinced it’s a small price

to pay for saving Queen, and for Jamie to avoid the pain of losing her.

I try to roll onto my right side, but the pain flaring up stops me. A sound near the door grabs my attention, and there is Jamie, wearing an unreadable expression.

“Good morning,” I say to him when he doesn’t talk or come in.

“I’ll bring you some breakfast.”

He’s gone before I can say anything.

When the smell fills the room, my stomach growls again. He places the tray on the chest of drawers and comes over to help me sit up.

He hands me the tray, and I spot the pain pills next to a plate of fluffy eggs and bread with butter.

I raise my head to thank him, but he’s already gone. I eat slowly, enjoying every single mouthful. I’m just setting my fork down when Jamie comes back in.

He doesn’t talk but comes close and places a bottle of water on the bedside table. When he glances at the tray and finds it empty, he picks it up and turns around, ready to walk away.

Is he going to leave without saying anything?

“I’ll be back when it’s time to take your pills. Call me if you need anything.”

Is this how it’s going to be?

“I can leave if my presence bothers you so much,” I say, trying to get a reaction from

him.

“I promised to take care of you, and that’s what I’ll do. But we are not friends. I don’t want to talk about the past, and if you try, I’ll throw you out.”

His words hurt. I didn’t think anything was going to change just because I saved his dog, but I don’t know who this heartless man standing in front of me right now is. But then something flickers in his eyes, something that reminds me of when we were friends.

That something gives me hope... that while I’m here I’ll have a chance to convince him to listen.

Just once.

Please, just give me a chance.

Just one.

Chapter 13

Jamie

What was in my mind when I lied to both the police and the hospital?

I should have acted like normal people do and come back at visiting hours, but I couldn't let go of his hand.

Now I'm avoiding Shane like I would the plague. I've spent all my time in my office, coming out only to prepare breakfast, lunch, and dinner, or when Shane needs to go to the bathroom, before returning to my office. Every touch we share makes me weaker. Each time I turn away, he looks a little sadder.

I'm scared I'll forgive him simply because he's in pain, or because this one time he saved me from it. He didn't have any problem watching me suffer—or adding to it—back when I couldn't defend myself.

Three days have already passed, and I'm still far from comfortable having him here. Actually, sleeping is getting harder and harder. I have this gnawing feeling eating at my insides, like something bad is going to happen. It's the same feeling I had every morning before going to school. The need to run away, but knowing there's no escape.

I stop in front of the guest room, my heart a roar inside my chest. I glance inside, expecting Shane to still be asleep. Instead, somehow, he has pulled himself up, and he's now resting with his back on the pillow pushed against the headboard.

He turns his head towards me and smiles, but when I don't reciprocate, I watch it die on his lips.

Guilt rears its ugly head, but I push it down. He never felt guilty for what he did, did he? A memory of his face full of tears appears in my mind's eye. No, that can't be right. He never, not even once, took responsibility for how he and his friends made my life a living hell.

"Breakfast?" I ask, pushing those thoughts away. I can't think of those bastards, or I'll lose every bit of progress I've made in the last ten years. I take a breath in, hold it for four, and then release it in four, until I'm focused on the present.

"Yes, please." Shane turns his head away and closes his eyes. He looks tired, but mostly sad.

"Do you feel well enough to have it on the sofa?"

His head whips my way so fast I'm worried he's going to be sick again. His eyes are as bright as the sun coming through the window, and guilt gnaws at me.

"Can I?"

Why does he look and sound like a kid who's just received a special gift?

Tenderness fills me, something I never thought I would associate with Shane again. "Give me some time to get everything ready for you. I'll be back." And this time, I smile at him. It's forced, but I don't give myself time to regret it.

My mum taught me to be kind to people, and even if I would have preferred not to have anything to do with him, we're in a situation where we have to live together.

And that reminds me, I need to call her before she knocks at my door. How upset would she be if she knew I was taking care of Shane? That's something I don't want to see.

"Yeah, okay."

I smile again because he reminds me of Queen and her eagerness when I pick the leash from the hook next to the front door. I miss her, but with Shane here in need of help to do everything, I couldn't take care of her properly. In a couple of days, when Shane is more mobile, I'll ask Ruby to bring her back so they can keep each other company.

He seems lonely.

Ugh. Why the fuck do I care? I'm getting soft... not that I was ever tough.

Am I splitting in two? One half sees Shane as the caring boy I once knew and that he's been showing me since we met again. And the other half sees Shane as the petty, horrible boy who made my school days nearly impossible to live through, the boy who sent me to hell and never tried to save me.

How can Shane be both?

These vulnerable moments he has, as if he's never been loved or taken care of, mess with my head. Sure, his dad was strange the only time I met him, but how can the life of someone so rich be anything close to horrible?

It can't.

I walk back to the living room and quickly create a space for him to rest properly. I push the small table in front of the sofa closer and set a cushion on top so Shane can

rest his leg. I place some other cushions against the backrest so he can sit straight, and his shoulder and wrist can rest comfortably on the armrest.

When I re-enter the room, Shane is trying to swing his leg off the bed, but all I can hear are his hisses of pain.

“Stop.” He freezes, and I realise how harsh my tone is, but I don’t want him to injure himself more. Only because if he does, he’ll have to stay here longer, I tell myself.

Liar. I ignore my brain.

“Let me help you.”

He mumbles something I don’t catch.

“What?”

“I know you don’t want to touch me, so I was trying to do it by myself.”

Why are my eyes wet? Why do I feel like a horrible person?

“It can’t be avoided. I don’t want you to injure yourself more.”

I remove the sheet and then help Shane sit straight. Once he’s balanced, I help him move the injured leg to follow the uninjured one.

I ignore the flicker of awareness that his touch provokes in me. We end up facing each other, and I look at him for the first time. His face is open, letting me see everything he feels inside: guilt, need, and hope.

It makes my heart gallop, but at the same time, it sends shivers of fear through me. I

don't want to be pulled in again. What if nothing has changed and he's still the same person? Would he throw me away again, turn his back on me?

What I really want is to walk away, push all these feelings down, purge them from my system, and only then could I be in his presence again. But his downcast face and his meek demeanour are things I never associated with Shane. They tug at my heart, so against my better judgement, I wrap my arm around his waist and pull him up against me.

He's heavy, and I stumble a bit, and his arm goes round my shoulders as if to keep me standing.

Our faces are so close that his breath washes over me, and his lips look as inviting as a plate full of sweets I can't say no to.

Ignoring all these feelings, I concentrate on the task ahead, recovering quickly and manoeuvring us until we're side by side. I should let go and let him walk with the crutch that I left next to the chair for him yesterday. Instead, intoxicated by his touch, I take a step forward. Then, one slow step after the other, we make it to the living room.

I gently turn around so I'm facing him again and help him slide down until he's sitting on the sofa. Then I fuss around him to make him comfortable and give myself time to get my heart back to a normal rate.

Once again, I ask myself, why does it have to be Shane ?

I'm glad he doesn't speak, because otherwise I would've run away and hid in my room for the rest of the day like I did for the first three days he was here, only coming out to give him food and his pills. Or when he asked me to help him to the bathroom.

Once I'm done, I walk to the kitchen and prepare two plates with some eggs and bread with butter.

We eat in silence, albeit an awkward one, but I can't bring myself to say anything. He seems to read my mood correctly because he doesn't even look at me. I'm acting like a bully, one moment acting as if I care about what happened to him, and the next ready to throw him out because I can't stand him. I should know better.

I take a few deep breaths, trying to calm my mind and body. I can live with him for another couple of weeks, then he'll be well enough to go back to his own place, and he won't be my problem any longer.

I ignore the tug on my heart at the thought and instead concentrate on the memories he left me with.

Even sitting this far from him, I get a sniff of body odour and the faint tang of hospital. Oh boy, he does smell. Before I can think better of it, my mouth does what it wants. "You really need a shower."

He blushes, probably aware of how much he smells, and again I'm hit by guilt.

I should tell my mother off for raising me well enough that I take pity on the person who never stood up for me when I was in trouble, but actually, sometimes, led them forward.

Again, my rage fires up, but a vision of him with Queeny in his arms keeps my mouth shut.

"I'm dying to have one. But it'll be difficult in this situation," he says, pointing at his leg and then his wrist.

If it wasn't for his shoulder, I would have covered the casts with plastic bags, but in this situation...

Fuck! I'll have to wash him.

Panic settles in at the thought of touching him over and over while cleaning him. I don't want to do it, but can I leave him like this?

"I don't want to be a problem," he says, when I keep looking at my empty plate, trying to bring myself back from the edge of a panic attack.

"Stay here," I say while turning the TV on and placing the remote in his hand. "I'll get rid of these plates and clean the kitchen, and then I'll help you get washed up."

The way to the bathroom was a long one, with me supporting most of his weight because, once again, he refused the wheelchair. But now, ten minutes later, Shane is sitting on a chair in the bathroom, the warmest room. I've also turned the heating on in here just to make sure he's comfortable. Sitting on the closed toilet seat, I have a bowl filled with hot water, along with soap and a cloth. I have a towel on my shoulder so I can dry him as soon as I've washed him.

He's not wearing a shirt, and I know I should be doing something, but my gaze is fixated on the bruises covering most of his torso and back. I look up, but he's not looking at me, probably afraid of setting me off and being abandoned in here.

Fuck! I thought I was different from them. But here I am, using the power I have to make him feel bad.

"I'll try to be as gentle as possible." I pick up the cloth, wet it, and squeeze it out before using it to clean his back. I can't face him right now.

He shivers at the first touch, his skin raising goose pimples as the hair on his arms stands on end. I watch, fascinated and horrified at the same time. His body is bigger and has filled out more than when we were adolescents, and every time he shifts, the definition of his muscles is like art... beautiful.

I stop when I encounter a bruise that covers most of his lower back and twists around to cover part of his abdomen. My stomach revolts at the thought of what could have happened. He could have died that day.

“I’m sorry,” I say, my body overflowing with remorse. My eyes fill with tears, and my touch becomes even gentler. I find my hand lingering in those spots where he’s suffering the most, just to move along as soon as what I’m doing becomes clear.

“I am sorry,” he says, and I shake my head. I’m not ready to have this conversation yet. He seems to understand because he doesn’t say more.

I move my hand away and throw the cloth into the bowl, then use the towel to dry his skin.

I move to the front, and I awkwardly stay there for a long moment, not sure of what to do. I take the cloth again, and once it’s ready, I go on my knees in between his legs, but I don’t look at him. Instead, I clean his neck first, sliding along his collarbone until I reach his shoulder, then back up, and do the same on the other side. I do this a couple of times, and then rinse the cloth out and move to his chest. His nipples are standing out, and I admire them for a moment, wondering how good they would taste if I leaned in to kiss them.

I catch myself immediately because it’s not good behaviour. He’s not an object I can take pleasure from.

We don’t talk. Shane’s breath hitches a few times, making me uncomfortable, almost

as if I'm doing something I shouldn't be. Feeling like a sick voyeur, I make quick work of cleaning him and drying his wet skin.

I help him put on one of my bigger zipped hoodies, keeping his cast arm inside. Then I help him get rid of his trousers and make quick work of cleaning his legs and feet.

"I'm stepping outside so you can finish cleaning yourself." I'm not getting near his family jewels. "Here's a pair of boxers; they should fit. If they don't, just wear the shorts I left next to them. Call me if you have any problem. I'll be just outside."

"Thank you."

Am I imagining things, or does his voice sound hoarse?

I change the sheets while Shane's finishing, and when he calls me back in, I've found my balance again.

"Come on, I'll take you back to bed, and you can rest," I say, when he yawns, and his eyes close.

I have some thinking to do.

I hide in my room, needing to be surrounded by familiar things. My phone vibrates, and I pull it out of my pocket. I let out a sigh of relief when Ruby's name is on the screen. She always knows when I need her.

"Hey, babe, how are the living arrangements going?"

"I just gave him a sponge bath."

"Oh, lucky you. From what I saw online, he's a fine specimen of man."

“He’s also the boy who broke my heart and my soul. Should I just forget everything he did?”

“Babe, of course not. However, you can’t live with this weight all your life. Talk to him, curse him, kick him in the balls if you have to, but don’t let the past ruin your future.”

“I want a future.” Visions of a house with a garden and a couple of dogs come to mind. “But how can I let anyone touch me?”

“Babe, don’t get mad, but you know you like him. Even in your lowest moments, what you couldn’t let go of was him. The boy you first met, the boy who offered you his friendship without asking for anything back.”

“Mmm,” I murmur, because I can’t deny it.

“This could be your chance to ask why, to understand his actions, and maybe to let go for good.”

“You’re right,” I whisper. But why does my heart hurt at the thought of letting him go completely?

I hear a bark through the phone, so I ask about Queen, and I laugh when Ruby puts her on the phone and she whines, making my heart soar at being needed by someone.

“You’ll be home soon, baby girl,” I tell her and then make plans with Ruby.

Once I end the call, I feel a bit better. I’m just setting my phone down when it pings again.

Alexi

Hey, mate. How are you holding up?

Jamie

All goo—

But then I think better of it and delete the message and instead press the call button.

“Hey,” I say as soon as the call engages.

“Hey.” His chirpy voice greets me.

“There’s something I need to tell you.”

“What’s wrong?”

“Do you remember the guy we met at the club?”

“Shaz?”

“Yep, him. He’s Shane...” I let my words die, waiting for his reaction.

“Shane? That Shane?”

“Yep.”

“That fucker. I’m going to kick his arse.”

“He’s here.”

“What do you mean?” Then, as if realising what that means, he shouts, “Are you in

danger? I'm coming over!"

"He saved Queen. He saved her from being run over, and he's injured. I had to agree to take care of him." I'm not sure why my eyes fill with tears and my voice breaks.

"That's okay, J," Alexi says to soothe me. "He did good, and you did good."

"I have all these feelings inside me, and I don't know what to do with them." A long pause follows my words, and I'm afraid I've disappointed him.

"J, you don't have to do anything. Take your time, talk everything through, and once you think you can deal with it, you do it."

"Are you upset?"

"I'm not upset with you. Are you upset?"

"Yes, with myself."

"Jamie, you don't have to rush into anything. The fucker is there, and you can talk about what happened. If you don't like his answers, you can throw him out. But please call me if you do, because I want to have the pleasure of kicking him while he's down."

I laugh, but I know Alexi is only half joking. "I love you, A."

"Love you too, mate."

My next actions are to ask, listen, and then kick out if I don't like the answers.

We haven't talked, but since I helped him clean up a couple of days ago, things have

taken an unexpected turn.

I can still feel his smooth skin under my palm and fingers. How hot it was, and how every time I brushed against him, zings of pleasure would travel through my body. Keeping a straight face, my breath even, and my cock in check had been a nightmare.

Why does it have to be him? Why do I have to feel this way about Shane fucking Campbell?

We get into the habit of having meals together and then sitting on the sofa to watch TV or read, just like we're doing right now.

The first time we sat on the sofa, we were at opposite ends, as far away as I could possibly be from him. Then the lines blurred, and now we're so close to each other that if I move my leg, I'll touch his.

Now, after nearly six weeks, he's able to move around better, and I'm not needed when he has to use the bathroom, which is where he is now.

I watch him coming back, still wobbling around, but his face looks better, and his bruises are finally fading.

Tonight, though, after dinner, I watch in surprise as he's leaving the bathroom and his crutch slips on the floor, causing him to stumble. I jump up to stop him from falling, but he's heavier than me, and I fall back, bringing him with me. We hit the sofa with a huff, and for a few moments, we freeze, our faces close and our breaths fast.

"Are you okay?" I ask him, worried about his injuries.

"Yeah, I think so."

Neither of us makes a move. Instead, our eyes lock. Whatever I felt when I was washing him comes back with a force I'm not prepared to handle. From the way Shane is looking at me, he's having the same issue.

Am I imagining things because of my own desire? Or is his face getting closer?

While my brain battles with my heart, he moves in, and his lips gently touch mine.

What I felt at the charity event is amplified by the feelings I once had for the boy he was. My thoughts muddle the more our lips stay pressed together, and the lines between what I should be doing and what I'm actually doing blur.

The kiss is a non-demanding one. It's as if he's asking for forgiveness or asking permission to deepen it. He pulls back, looking at my face for a second, maybe looking for the rejection I should be giving him. When there is none, he leans in again, and this time it's not only a press of his mouth.

I should be stopping this, but my body is working against me.

Shane uses the tip of his tongue to caress my lower lip, going right and then left, and my breath hitches at the sensations spreading through my body. My mind is screaming in denial, but my body is captivated by the gentle way he's kissing me, as if I'm something precious.

I succumb to the demands of my body, and with the next caress on my lower lip, I open up for him, finally taking the kiss I dreamt of when we were sixteen.

His tongue probes gently until it meets mine, and they tangle into a dance that has my senses blossoming.

All the blood that concentrated on my lips at the first touch is now rushing south, and

my cock starts filling. I move to make space and rub against his equally hard one.

A cacophony of voices fills my head, and my body reacts to the sounds by going rigid. My limbs are heavy and unable to cooperate, while my mind searches to assess any possible danger. My heartbeat reverberates in my ears, louder with every breath I take, as if I'm getting ready to flee.

Shane is kissing the side of my mouth now, and in a continued assault to my senses, he trails down to my neck.

I use both palms to push him away. "No," I say out loud, not sure if I'm trying to stop Shane now, or stop what happened in the past.

"Jamie?"

"Let me up." It sounds so loud in my head, but I can barely hear my voice. "Please, let me up." I plead with him when he doesn't move quickly enough.

"Jamie, breathe, please. I'm moving as fast as I can."

His weight getting lighter on top of me helps me separate reality from the nightmare. I breathe in slowly, like the doctor taught me, and bring myself back from the edge.

When his weight is gone, I jump up, and without looking at him, I walk away.

"Jamie?" It's his tone that stops me, a mix of worry and pain. He tries to take my hand, but I move away.

"Please, leave me alone."

I don't look back.

I wish I could do something to distract myself, as it would help me clear my mind and come to terms with how messy my life is right now. But I can't show him another part of me. So I go into my office, slamming the door behind me.

Chapter 14

Shane

Is this how I pay for my sins?

One minute he's in my arms, and the next he's gone, leaving me as alone as I always am.

The kiss we shared was like nothing I'd ever felt before. Having him in my arms was a gift I never thought I'd receive, no matter how many times I asked or how much I desired it. Just for it to disappear in the blink of an eye, transforming a peaceful cohabitation into a long, awkward moment of silence.

I've been here six weeks now, and things are worse than when I arrived. Maybe I should leave and go back to my place, leave Jamie alone and come to terms with the fact that nothing is ever going to change, no matter how much I want it to.

I spend my day on the sofa, pretending to watch TV, while I hope to get a glimpse of Jamie every time he comes out of his office, but that's a rare occurrence and only seems to happen when it's time to eat. He seems skinnier than before, and he has dark circles under his eyes. They're not as bright as before, and his mouth is always in a flat line, which speaks volumes about the tension he's holding in his body.

He stays as far away from me as he can, and the only words we exchange are the greetings in the morning or the thank you I say when he serves the meals. Other than that, there is only silence between us.

I hear him typing on his keyboard well into the night, and sometimes I wish I could say something to him, as I'm worried he's not taking care of himself, but it's like a comet passing through, too fast to stop.

Thinking about him working reminds me I need to go back to mine... and it reminds me I haven't called my father yet. I sent a text to Karl to let him know that I'm forced in bed after saving Jamie's dog. Another to my PA to ask her to cancel all my meetings as I was down with a bad flu, keeping me in bed. And I did the same with my mother. She replied, saying she was going to let my father know. After that, I booked a couple of weeks' holiday... without discussing it with him.

I did it knowing I would pay for my rebellion. However, now it's time to face the monster.

Maybe I shouldn't wonder why Jamie avoids me at every turn and why he runs away every time we get close. Because I'm cut from the same cloth my father was, since he is a monster, and so am I.

What a fucking cheery thought. I did everything I could to be different from him, but I still wound up hurting the people I care about.

I pick up the phone and scroll until I find my father's number. I press call, followed by the speaker button.

"Morning, sir. I just called to let you know I need to take a couple more weeks." The gelid silence that follows my words pushes me to fill it. "I'm not well..."

My father's voice breaks through my words and stops me from finishing my thought. "Nothing has ever stopped me from going to work. New generations don't know what working hard means. They spend more time on their phones than doing actual work."

He inflicts jab after jab, leaving me without a chance to say a word. I stop trying, hoping he'll run out of steam soon. When he does, I jump in.

"I was in an accident. I broke my arm and leg. I'm not spending my time online." I try to keep my mood in check before I lose my shit and shout my frustration. He'd make me regret it by taking away something I love or what makes me happy.

"Probably one of those dangerous sports you love so much. Or that damn bike."

"No. It was a car, and I was saving a dog."

"Risking your life for a dog," he scoffs, unamused by my behaviour, and then inflicts another jab. "Are you stupid? I can't believe you're my son."

He says the same thing every single time, so I should be used to it. But his comments cut me every fucking time. I spent my life trying to please him, but there was no pleasing him.

I want this conversation finished quickly. I don't want Jamie to hear what he's saying and think I'm like my father, because I've spent my life working hard to be different from him.

I want to ask Jamie if I've succeeded, even though his answer will be no. And while I believe he's right, I couldn't face it coming from him.

My father continues, but I'm no longer listening, as I know nothing good is coming out of his mouth.

"Anyway, make sure to be back in a couple of weeks. I hate when things don't go as planned. Don't make me pull the plug on that foundation of yours since it's only wasting your time."

The phone goes dead, and my rage sparks. Not even a fucking “ How are you ?” I grip my phone so hard my fingers sting, but that’s the only thing stopping me from throwing it across the room until it smashes against the wall.

I raise my arm, ready to do just that, but a knock at the door has me stopping mid-air and turning towards it.

As soon as I spot Jamie, I know he heard the whole conversation, and he heard how useless I am, according to my father. I wait for him to speak, to say something nasty, to use this newly discovered weakness against me so I can finally atone for my sins.

Instead, he enters the room, and while pretending to tidy up, he gives me the time to calm down. I watch him move around the room, his body light on his feet. I watch his back and his body, with well-proportioned shoulders, a slim waist, and a pert backside that looks amazing in those black jeans he’s wearing.

Lost in the wonderful view he offers, it takes me a while to realise he’s not going to use whatever he heard against me. Another sign that he’s a better person than I am.

“It’s time for your medication.” His tone is abrupt, but it’s missing the usual punch that keeps me at arm’s length every single time.

If I had doubts before, I don’t anymore. Jamie heard the full conversation, every single beautiful word my father said to me.

Is he pitying me now?

He shouldn’t let the way my dad treats me influence the way he sees me. I was as bad as my father. I was a prick, and I made him suffer when I chose my friends and my dad over him. So everything coming my way, I deserve it.

“I’m sorry,” I say, because I can’t stop, and because maybe this time he won’t throw it back in my face. Even if he has every right to do so.

“I don’t want to talk about it,” he says while handing me my pills. I touch his fingers when I take them, and for a second, every single memory of us touching fills my mind. I want to grab them and never let go.

When he moves away, it’s like I’m losing a limb. I have to let him go. I don’t have the right to want him close.

His hand, though, doesn’t pull away as fast as it usually does, and a glimmer of hope grows inside me. I savour the sensations and the emotions that this barely there touch brings. When it’s gone, I want to cry because I want more of it and because I’m sure I won’t have it again.

This call with my dad taught me yet another thing: if I want to be different from him, I can’t force Jamie to listen to me, and I can’t force him to accept my reasons. If my trying to explain is making him sad, upset, or hurting him, then I need to stop.

I need to respect his wishes, even if all I want is to give him everything I took away before. I’m ready to have my life turned upside down just to witness a real smile touch his lips, hoping one day he’ll allow me to kiss him and to worship his body in the way he deserves.

I let my hand fall on the sheet and watch him walk away, continuing to tidy the room. One thing I understand now is that Jamie doesn’t like messy , and he has a need to control everything that happens in his life. Since I moved in—and I wish it wasn’t the case—he’s been cleaning non-stop, maybe to keep the mess my presence brings at bay.

I’ve heard him at night when he can’t sleep. He walks or he types on his laptop, and

the speed varies depending upon how nervous or frustrated he is.

It's all my fault, I'm aware of that, and if I were a better person, I would have left him alone. But how can I? When he looks like he's lost. When he looks like he needs me more than I need him.

"I'll go make breakfast. Do you want to eat in the living room?" he says without looking at me, unconsciously caressing the fingers that had connected us for a few moments.

Maybe there is a hope I don't deserve, but I'm a bastard, and I want him more than I ever wanted anything. I want to have another shot, and I want to try my damn best to make him happy. I would spend my life trying every single day to make Jamie Wilson the happiest he's ever been.

"No, I'd prefer to stay here," I say, because it seems that inside this smaller room we're kind of connecting, and I'm sure that outside, the real world would crush what we have now. "Thank you," I say before he leaves the room, and he pauses at the door. I hope he stays, I hope he talks to me, I hope he gives me the second chance I don't deserve but want like water in the desert.

Instead, my hopes crash to the floor when he walks out without a word.

When Jamie comes back half an hour later, he places everything on my lap and moves away.

The smell of food fills my nostrils, and my stomach growls in appreciation. I glance at him, and I love the small smile curving his lips and the red spreading across his cheeks. I thank my stomach for giving him the best compliment we could.

I look away as soon as he glances at me and focus my attention on the food he so

beautifully prepared for me. The eggs are so soft that they melt in my mouth, and the mushrooms are crispy and delicious. I put two bites into my mouth in quick succession. But what's making my mouth water more is the bacon, crispy and golden against the white plate. I try very hard to cut a piece because I want to savour it, but it keeps running away from me. I can't really stop it from taking a walk around the plate with one hand. I let out a sigh of frustration, and I take another mushroom, but the fork disappears from my hand, and I lean back, surprised by the move.

Jamie takes the knife in his other hand and cuts a piece of bacon, bringing the fork to my mouth. I hide my surprise, trying to calm the butterflies going crazy inside my stomach because I don't want this moment to end. Instead, I open my mouth, and a moan escapes me at the heavenly flavour hitting my tastebuds. I can't ignore that it tastes better because Jamie cooked for me, and even more so now because he's feeding me.

I stop breathing when a giggle fills the room, and I force the tears suddenly filling my eyes to go back where they came from. I don't want any of my nearly uncontrollable emotions to push him away. I don't want to lose this moment.

So without looking at him, I chew the bacon and then open my mouth, silently asking for more. My heart nearly explodes with joy when Jamie brings the fork to my mouth again and feeds me another piece.

Neither of us says anything, and I eat in a companionable silence that I hope never ends. Unfortunately, even eating as slow as a snail slides, the time for Jamie to put the knife and fork down comes too soon. I wait for him to move away, but instead he stays where he is. I don't look at him, because he'll move away. I want Jamie close, even if it's only for a few more moments.

I pick the fork up and slowly finish everything that's left on my plate.

While I finish, Jamie goes back to tidying up, and I go back to following him with my eyes, trying to take my fill of him. That's when I notice him glancing back at me when he thinks I'm not looking. His face tells me he's trying to find the courage to tell me something.

I don't want to push him because it could easily be something that'll make me sad. I glance down at my plate and stab a mushroom, and that's the moment Jamie decides to speak.

"Is your father always..." He pauses as if looking for the right words, and what he says next pulls a snort out of me. "That charming?"

"He can be very charming, but not with me." Never with me. I failed before I was even born.

"How was it living with him?" Jamie asks, taking a seat on the bed next to my legs.

A nightmare, a struggle, something I wish I'd never experienced.

"Tough. He's not an easy man."

"I always had this idea that because you came from money, you had an easy life."

I scoff at how far from reality his words are. "My life has never been mine. I always had to be perfect, never tarnish the family name, and always be better than everyone else around me."

"You're old enough to make your own life."

"I am, and I always thought when I was young that one day I would fly free. So high and so far that I could never find my way back. But life never goes how we expect it.

I did things I regret, so many, and I wish I could take them back. I hurt people I cared about.” I look at him, hoping he’ll understand. “And some of the things I did can never be taken back.”

“What’s keeping you there?”

“I have people depending on me.” Jamie’s face goes dark, and I take his hand in mine, inwardly cheering when he doesn’t pull away. “I’m not talking about a lover. But the people I’m talking about are important to me, and I want to do my best to give them a future. Even if, and this may sound dramatic, I live in a prison I can’t escape.”

“I know what living in a prison looks like. I’m living in it every day. A prison created by others, and I can’t even see the bars so I can bend them to get free.”

“I’m sorry.”

He goes to pull his hand away, but I stop him. I don’t want to lose this connection we have. It feels like the last chance I’m ever going to get. He doesn’t want my sorries, and I won’t give him any more.

“How was living with your parents?”

“I’m lucky. I had two loving parents who doted on me,” he says with a smile. I love it and want more of it. “We didn’t have much money, but I never felt like I was missing out on anything. Not until...” His voice trails off, and I’m aware of when he started to feel like he was less than others... When he joined my school.

“What about friends? Did you have any before us?”

“I’ve never been one to socialise. I’ve always preferred video games and coding. I

met my best friends after I left your school.”

A heavy silence fills the room, and I regret the question, so to keep him here I ask more. We never talked about any of this. We were too young to care about what made us different from each other.

“Do you have any brothers or sisters?” I ask him, interested in knowing more, but also wanting to change the tough subject.

“No, I don’t. But I’ve always wanted a sibling.”

“Tell me more about when you were young.”

“My parents were older when I was born. I think they were in their forties, or close to it.” He giggles, and I bet it’s a joke they have between them. “They tried a lot to have kids and were overjoyed when I was born. You have to see the pictures I have of when I was a baby. Ridiculous.”

It’s my turn to laugh.

“I’d love to see them.” I bet he’d be so damn cute.

“Nope, and don’t ever ask my mum for them.” He glances at me with a dark face that makes me laugh. What has my heart soaring, though, is the fact that he’s hinting at the possibility of seeing each other after this is over.

“Did they allow you to have a dog even then?”

“I had pets but never a dog. I’m happy I found Queen; she’s the best.” And as if she was waiting for Jamie to mention her, she appears. Head held high, her tail swinging from one side to the other. We look at each other and smile at her antics.

“She’s great.”

“You say that only because she’s nice to you. She doesn’t even look at me since you saved her.”

“Queen loves you.” And as if on cue, she goes to Jamie and sits on his feet.

“Okay. Maybe she does.”

I look at him while he pets the dog, and at that moment it becomes clear how deep my feelings for him run.

“Isn’t she cute?” Jamie says, but I’m lost inside the soul-deep realisation I just had.

“What I did was unforgivable. There are no excuses.”

“I don’t want to have this spade always hanging on top of my head. I’m not ready to talk now, but one day I’ll come knocking, and I’ll want the truth.”

“I’ll never lie to you.”

He looks at me for a long time, and I don’t look away. “Okay, “ he says, standing up as if he found the answer he was looking for. “I’ll be in my office, “ he says before picking the plate and walking away.

I watch him leave, and it’s as if, in some way, we’ve turned a corner.

My heart is beating hard against my ribcage, and a flicker of hope is growing inside my chest. Maybe we have a way to go back to what we were before.

Friends.

Even if I wish for more, so much more.

Chapter 15

Jamie

Ten Years Ago

When the bell rings, I jump out of my seat, grab my lunch, and rush through the corridors, with all my focus on the destination ahead of me.

A few times, I wished I had the money to buy food at the cafeteria, but not today, because today I'll have the chance to spend time with Shane. Alone. Or as alone as you can be at school.

Today, Shane doesn't have to have lunch with his mates, so we're meeting up to spend the lunch hour together. I'm eager, and my rushed steps show just how much I want to be with him.

I've been waiting for this. To have him to myself for a full hour. I suppress a giggle that's ready to come out.

I even have a cake for him. He doesn't need to know I baked it just because I wanted to give him something made by me. I wanted to make today as special as I could. I'm all nervous inside, like an exposed wire, as if my insides know something is going to happen.

I come to a halt when I spot Shane sitting next to a big vase containing a huge plant with long hanging leaves. The sun, so rare in March, illuminates him, making him

look like a god, like he is the sun himself. At least in my eyes. Making him look like the god I believe he is. Gorgeous, kind, and always ready to help me. Me, poor, inept—at least in the way of the rich—Jamie.

Shane could have anyone, but instead he chooses to spend time with me.

I love the way his face brightens when he sees me, and I eagerly reciprocate, because when he smiles he makes my heart beat faster. My stomach fills with butterflies, and my feet move faster to reach him before he disappears, because if I don't rush, I may lose something good.

“Hey, Jame,” he says as soon as I'm close enough to hear him, and my heart does a pirouette.

I love the nickname he gave me a couple of days after we met because it makes me feel special. I've noticed more than once that he always addresses others by their full name or by calling them mate or bro . I'm the only one he calls something different, and never with a generic word that could identify anyone else.

I must be special to him.

“Hi, Shane.” I'm too much of a chicken to give him a nickname.

Especially when the names I want to call him are not really fitting for a boy like him. I could never call him sweetie, love, or darling; I'm blushing just thinking about it. They seem so old, anyway.

I'd love to call him Blue, but I can't really say that aloud because Shane—and everyone else, for that matter—would know I'm taken by his beautiful eyes.

I'm already an outsider. They're all rich and have fancy things, while I'm the poor

guy who came to this school on a scholarship because I'm clever. They can barely stand me, probably jealous of the bond Shane and I have. I'm sure if they find a weakness, they'll use it against me. I'm not ready to test that theory, so I just need to keep my head down.

I just need to keep my thoughts and my feelings to myself so nothing can jeopardise what I have now.

Once we're out of here—school, I mean—then, if I find the courage, I might tell Shane how much I admire him and how much I want to become like him. Maybe, if I'm brave enough, I'll tell him how much I like him. If I'm lucky enough, he'll share my feelings.

Being courageous is not one of my best features; I prefer spending my time with books, games, coding, baking, and being in the shadows. All things that can't put you in danger.

Shane is the epitome of danger, passion, and love, all in one beautiful, hot body.

I close my eyes and school my face to avoid Shane reading the whole sequence of emotions shining brightly through them.

I sit next to him, leaving some space between us. We're only friends, and friends don't sit too close to each other. I distract myself by pulling out my sandwich and crisps.

I keep the cake hidden because after that pep talk I had with myself a second ago, I don't want Shane to be aware of the strange feelings I have inside of me.

“Hey! What do you have there?” he says, indicating the piece of cake I was trying to hide.

“Cake?” I say, but it sounds like a question, and it makes Shane giggle. I can’t believe he’s still hot even when doing something ridiculous like giggling.

“Why are you hiding it?”

I ignore the question and instead ask one myself. “Do you want it?”

“Oh, yeah. As if you need to ask. I’m a sucker for sweet things,” he says, then winks at me.

Am I a sweet thing? I wish I were a sweet thing.

I shake my head, trying to stop these dangerous thoughts, as they can only bring trouble. I take my time giving the cake to him, but when his smile brightens the day more than the pallid sun, I have no regrets about baking it for him.

I watch him bite into it, and his eyes sparkle with delight when the sweetness reaches his tongue, and the moan he lets out should be illegal. My stupid dick needs to get the memo that we shouldn’t be interested in Shane.

“Who made this?” he asks once he’s done chewing.

As if I’m telling him I did. “Me.” Stupid mouth. Of course I can’t lie to him.

“J, you’re a genius.”

“That I am,” I say with humour in my tone.

He bumps his shoulder against mine, telling me with his body to stop teasing. “This is much better than your mathematical witchcraft.”

His face and voice are serious, but once again, his eyes give him away. I laugh, happy he's not judging me and liked what I made.

I smile and then look around just to check that we're still hidden from others. I let out a breath of relief when no one is looking at us, happy that the big plant is doing its job.

I concentrate on my lunch, so I avoid getting lost in Shane's presence, and for a few seconds, it works. It works until he places a bite of cake right under my nose. I pull back and look at him, but his face is serious again, and his eyes have a strange look in them that has me on edge.

"No thanks," I say to him, taking a bite of my sandwich.

His face seems to fall a little, but then he raises his shoulder as if he doesn't care and eats the bite of cake himself. I follow the movement like a moth following the light, and I get trapped in his presence, just like the moth gets caught by the net.

"This is good. Do I have to bribe you into getting me more of this nectar from the gods?" His laugh sends tingles of awareness through me and makes all my hair stand on end.

I love his laugh. I'm actually thinking that I love a lot of things about him. Again, with these derailing thoughts.

"Not too often, I hope, or I'll put weight on, and it'll be a problem with the coach."

I glance at him out of the corner of my eye, and crap if I don't love the tight muscles that I can imagine through the clothes he's wearing. "As if that's going to happen. Your body is perfect."

Silence settles between us, and I pretend to concentrate on whatever I have in front of me while I sweat buckets, afraid he'll leave me there, but not before punching me. I stop breathing while I wait for Shane to move. When nothing happens, I go back to eating my lunch, even if it now tastes like sand.

I do my best not to let the tears start, and use my jacket to dry them before they fall. All the while pretending that I didn't actually say what I did.

When Shane moves closer and plasters his leg against mine, letting me learn about his muscles in a different way than just visually. Even in my state of panic, I can't stop appreciating them.

Our heads are so close I can smell his scent and feel the warmth of his breath washing over me. Panic is building up inside me—along with something else I should be feeling for the opposite sex. Instead, all my senses are captivated by him. Shane Campbell . Someone I never thought I'd meet, and someone who was turning my world on his axis.

I look up just to find he's smiling down at me. His white, perfectly linear teeth are just as hot as everything else about him. My eyes zero in on his lips, now back to their natural resting form, and they look so inviting, just like a ripe peach you're compelled to bite. I lean in slowly, as if my body has a mind of its own. It's only when Shane's smile slowly dies on his lips that what I'm doing becomes clear to me. I go to pull back and pretend I didn't just try to taste my best friend's lips, but Shane's hand lands on my thigh, stopping everything—my retreat, the breath inside my lungs, and my heart. Just to make it beat faster a second later when he's the one leaning in.

I watch his face coming closer to mine, as they do in movies, his blue eyes getting darker and darker, and then, when I can't look at them any longer without mine crossing, I close them, and in the darkness, I wait for my first kiss to happen.

Shane's breath is hot on my chilled skin and sends shivers down my spine. Then, when it washes over my mouth, I have the first hint of how close we are. I inhale deeply to take his scent inside me, so I won't ever forget it.

Then a butterfly-winged-like touch caresses my lips, but it's too fleeting to be called a kiss. Shane's hands land on my shoulders, tightening on them for a second, and they feel foreign until he pulls me towards him.

There is nothing classy about the way we're close to each other. Too many limbs in the way, but yet, I can't find any fault in this shared moment. For me, everything we're doing is beautiful, magical. It's the best thing that's ever happened to me.

Now, I just want to feel his lips on mine.

We're in a world made only by us. Shane and me.

"I saw Jamie coming this way. I bet Shane is with him."

My brain is still caught up with the need for Shane to kiss me, so it takes a moment for the words to register, and when they do, my eyes spring open. Shane's eyes are reflecting the same fear I have right now.

I move away, afraid of being found out. I must have been too slow because Shane uses the same hands that were just keeping me close to push me away. The movement is so unexpected that whatever I have on my lap flies off and lands on the ground.

When I look at him, I would bet my eyes are as big as saucers, my body filled with worry, but he's no longer looking at me. Instead, his face and body are turned away as if he's trying to put as much distance between us as he can.

Why does my heart feel like it's just been stabbed?

“What’s going on here?”

I’ve never hated someone’s voice like I hate Dan’s right now. Every other moment, I wouldn’t have cared about him crashing my time with Shane. Today, though, because he robbed me of my first kiss, I wish I could stuff his mouth full of cotton so I no longer have to listen to the voice that ruined everything.

Little did I know there was so much more he could ruin for me.

I don’t turn around, still looking at Shane, hoping—even when it’s clear to see I shouldn’t—that he would turn towards me and smile that beautiful smile of his. The one that leaves me breathless every single time.

I bend down to pick up my stuff, and Dan, at the same time, kicks it.

“Hey,” I say to him before reaching out to pick up my lunch box.

“You’re too slow, Povo.”

“Stop that. It’s not funny.”

“I think it is,” he says, looking down at me from his six-foot-something frame.

I glance at Shane, but he’s still not looking at me. Another stab to my heart.

“Shano, why are you so upset? Did we interrupt something?” Probing, that’s what Dan is good at. Finding your weakest point and using it until he’s satisfied.

I fret, afraid they’ve discovered us. Instead, Shane doesn’t even flinch.

That only pushes Dan to be more openly aggressive, while the others look at us with

smiles on their faces. What a bunch of idiots.

“Jamie and Shane sitting in a tree, K-I-S-S-I-N-G,” Dan sings in a childish voice that has me wanting to cover my ears.

I bet, just to pull a reaction from Shane. I turn towards him again, and the disgust on his face kills me a bit more.

“Are you a fucking child?” Shane says, turning towards him. The look in his eyes is one I’ve never seen before. Cold, hard, and nasty.

Dan’s smile fades away, but I don’t miss his devilish glance at me because I’m witnessing everything.

“I’m out of here,” Shane says, walking past me without even a backward glance.

“Shane,” I say and place a hand on his forearm to stop him from leaving before we even have the chance to talk.

He breaks free, and with the same hand I grabbed him with, hoping to keep him here, he pushes me away, making me stumble backwards. Tears spring to my eyes, but I do everything I can to not let them fall.

“Ooooh, look at Povo. He’s going to cry.”

I don’t have a comeback for him, and I don’t really care now that Shane is walking away from me.

“Let’s go,” Shane says, and the bell rings at that moment, signalling the end of the lunch break.

I watch them walk away, feeling like Shane took a piece of me away with him, because I'm broken now.

Inside myself, though, I'm sure this is the end of us.

"Did you two fight or something?" Dan's voice reaches me.

"No. He's so fucking clingy."

Why did he say that? I thought we were friends. Did that tender moment disgust him so much? Am I disgusting?

I enter my next class with an uneasy feeling gnawing at my insides. I don't look at anyone or anything, and no one seems to notice me. When I reach my desk, I glance up, ready to say good morning to Shane, but as I look at him, he turns his face away and speaks with Dan sitting next to him.

I really wish the memory of yesterday was just a nightmare, but I guess what happened wasn't a dream after all.

I sit down next to Shane, and maybe I shouldn't because he wasn't nice to me yesterday, but I want to talk to him anyway.

"Hi," I whisper, so he's the only one who can hear me. I won't feel too ashamed if he doesn't reply.

He doesn't really look at me, instead blatantly ignoring me as if I'm not really there.

It's like there's a wall between us, a wall that I don't know how to climb because I'm not sure what I did to have it erected in the first place.

I place my book on the desk and pretend to concentrate on the lesson, but my thoughts are all jumbled inside me, and my gut is telling me I did something wrong, and that's why Shane doesn't want to spend time with me anymore.

Didn't he want to kiss me? Did I come onto him too forcefully?

Oh, God. My insides turn upside down, making me want to throw up. But no, I'm sure it wasn't all in my mind. Everything was good when it was only the two of us.

We don't talk, and I'm glad when the bell rings, pushing us to another class, a different class, so I won't have to sit next to him, racking my brain about why he isn't talking to me.

I reach my locker and open it, hiding my face so others don't see the tears ready to flow, and use the sleeve of my jacket to wipe them away. I hear voices around me, but I don't pay them any attention. I pull my book out for the next lesson, and take a step back to close the locker.

A shove sends me crashing against the locker, and I bang my head on it. I turn around, and the gang's all there, led by Shane and Dan. I detest the look in Dan's eyes, so full of hate, and it makes me shiver in fear. What did I ever do to him?

"Hey," I say, while I glance at Shane, but his gaze on me is a blank canvas. It's as if we'd never met before. What the fuck?

"Sorry, Povo, I didn't see you there. You should watch where you're going before someone gets hurt."

What the fuck! Is he blaming me?

"Stop calling me that."

“What’s up your ass today?” I hate the disgusted smile he sends my way.

“Go back to class.” Mr Andrews’s voice has everyone moving. All except Dan who is still looking down on me.

“Is there a problem, Mr Bryant?”

“Nope, I think Mr Wilson here has one, though.”

“Mr Wilson?”

“No problem here, Mr Andrews.” I close my locker and walk away, but I still feel Dan’s eyes on me.

I don’t turn back. Ignoring him is the best thing I can do.

Ignoring him is not working.

Every time no one’s looking, I find myself pushed against walls, lockers, or whatever surface I’m next to when the gang walks past me.

A month after my near first kiss with Shane, my life at school has become a nightmare.

Now I’m surrounded by Dan, Tom, and Toby, towering over me. I don’t miss Shane, just a few feet away, pretending not to see what’s happening here. He hasn’t been the same since that day. Nothing has been the same.

What I loved about him, I now hate the most. I want to cry because it’s not even true. I’m still waiting for him to turn my way and save me. And every time he doesn’t, I die a little bit more inside.

I can't believe that for a couple of seconds, something that felt so right has become the worst decision of my life. And now, this mess is my life.

"If you open your mouth again to accuse us of bullying, I will find you outside of school and break your legs."

"Please, leave me alone." My voice shakes, and I hate myself for it.

"Povo, stop fighting, because things can get much worse."

Yeah? Worse than having my stuff stolen and finding it in the bin on my way to the next class? Or my homework torn and pushed into my pockets? Or having to become well-acquainted with every surface they push me into?

I've tried responding, ignoring, and taking different routes, but they're there all the time. I can't ever seem to have a moment where I'm not subjected to their bullying.

I don't have anyone to talk to, as my only close friend is now part of the group that bullies me. He watches—always watching—but never, not even once, has he said anything.

I don't care what they do to me because my head is full of ideas about how to put a stop to this.

When I'm taking the Tube to go home, I ask myself how easy would it be to jump in front of the train? How liberating? Or when I'm near a window, I wonder whether it's high enough that if I jump, I'd be dead when I hit the ground. These are my thoughts.

I live in constant fear of going to school, perpetually afraid of people finding out and having to pay bigger consequences for that.

They're never going to stop.

Maybe today is the day that I really put an end to this—by putting an end to my life.

My mum is always so happy when I'm back from school, so proud of the boy who achieved so much to be accepted into one of the most selective colleges. She doesn't know of the pain, the fear, and the desperation filling me every day. She doesn't know of the bullying I endure, even at home, because they keep texting me. The messages all seem very friendly, and only I know what their words hide and what's waiting for me the next day.

"Are you fucking listening?" Dan pushes me, and I hit the tree behind me.

I hiss in pain, but that seems to spur him on, and he pushes me again and again until my head bangs on the tree trunk with a loud thud. I raise my hand to push him away, but two of them take my arms and bend them backward.

"Let me go." The more I struggle, the more they pull my arms backwards, pressing my back against the tree. Fear of my arms breaking makes me stop struggling.

"Shut your mouth," Dan says, his face so close to mine I'm afraid he'll bite me.

I close my eyes to keep myself from crying, but that seems to anger him even more. I actually think that everything I do makes Dan and the others angry. The only one who seems unaffected is Shane.

"I think Povo needs a bath. What do you think?"

"Oh, yeah. He fucking smells," Tom says.

"I can't even stand to be near him," Toby is happy to add.

“No,” I say while trying to drag my feet, but not finding any grip. “Please don’t.” And this time, I can’t keep my tears inside, and they fall free, making them laugh.

Once they’re next to the small pond, Tom and Toby still keeping my hands behind my back, someone else pushes me so violently that I couldn’t stand even if I wanted to.

I fall face first into the water, and I struggle to free my arms, and panic when they don’t release me. Then I’m free, and I fight to pull my head out of the water.

I scramble to get up, ready to run away, but they’re already walking towards the building. Only Shane is still standing in the same spot, but this time, he’s looking in my direction.

I’m not sure why I walk to where he’s standing. My shoes are making squeaky sounds, and water drips on the ground as if I just had a shower. “Shane?” I call, hoping he’ll do something, anything, to make me feel safe. I grip his jacket so he doesn’t leave me here, alone and afraid. Hope is still making me do idiotic things that I’m going to regret.

He turns around, making me lose my grip on his clothes, as if bitten by a snake. “I told you not to touch me.” Only his hard face, straight mouth, and the fear of repercussions push me to back away. But he’s still not happy and he pushes me, but I don’t fall.

I stand there watching his retreating form, and it’s at that moment I finally understand.

I’m alone.

Chapter 16

Shane

Ten Years Ago

Fuck! Fuck! Fuck!

I want to punch him so fucking much. Each one of them.

I want to do to them what they're doing to Jamie. Spit at them, punch them, and kick them until they're begging me to stop, just like Jamie does.

Instead, I'm standing here a few feet away, pretending not to watch, pretending not to see, while I don't miss anything they're doing to him. I scream inside to let him go, and I cry inside when he does, but outside, I'm as cold as an iceberg and just as unbreakable.

My chat with Dan after the near kiss interrupted by them had been awkward, and that fucker had me by the balls. He saw everything, and no matter how much I denied it, he didn't budge. He threatened to tell my dad everything, and that was what sealed Jamie's fate.

And the stupid idea I'd had that if I stayed away from Jamie, they would stop, he would stop... Instead, things are getting worse. Every new day is more fucked up than the previous one.

I'm betraying him like everyone else is doing, and unless I want my head served to my dad on a silver platter, there's nothing I can do about it.

I hate to be a monster with Jamie, but I have monsters of my own I have to fight. They're always watching, always looking for a moment of weakness, and I won't allow them to win.

I can't fail, or my life will be miserable, and I won't even be able to see Jamie.

"Shano, my bro."

I shiver in disgust. I've never seen anyone so similar to my father. Dan is the son my father would love to have. Shame he had me, a weak, selfish son who has made someone else's life miserable to protect himself.

One day, I promise myself, I'm going to ask for forgiveness. One day, I'll make them pay. But for now, I have to survive.

"All good, Danny. How's you?"

"Ready for another day of enjoyment in school."

His more wicked than ever smile tells me what kind of fun he's referring to. I so wish he would just leave Jamie alone. That he would leave us alone.

"Can we do something that's real fun for once?"

"I'm having fun."

"It's getting boring." I use my best bored face, but the glint in his eyes tells me he's no fool.

“I’m having lots of fun, Shano. I wish you were having fun too.”

I’ll have to keep an eye on him. I didn’t like what they did last week at the pond, and I hated it so much when I had to push Jamie away.

A monster, that’s what I am. I don’t believe there’s redemption for what I did, what I’m still doing. One day, I’ll have to pay for my sins.

Chapter 17

Jamie

Ten Years Ago

I nearly jumped on the Tube track this morning.

The idea of coming to school, the idea of living another day like the days before this one, is impossible to fathom. The idea that death is freedom seems impossible to shake.

Only remembering my dad's proud face, tired from working night shifts, and my mum's overjoyed face at seeing me ready to go to a school they could never afford without a scholarship had stopped me.

Right now, I wish I wasn't clever enough to go there. If I were normal, I would have been in my old school and not fighting every day to stay alive. And I wouldn't have had my heart broken by Shane Campbell.

I'm glad they didn't notice the smell of food making me sick, but their joy was agonisingly painful and hurtful to watch. I wish I could tell them to take me away, to save me, but how could I face their sadness? How could I face disappointing them?

When I reach the school gate, I take my time looking around, hoping to spot them so I can walk in the other direction. But they seem to smell me, and they jump out of nowhere, scaring the shit out of me.

Their hands, touching me whenever and wherever they want. Those hands are what I hate the most. I recoil in disgust every time they try to grab me, and my stomach revolts every time they touch me. But they're too strong, and there's nothing I can do but endure it. When they're gone, my stomach expels everything, leaving me breathless.

I walk slowly, hoping for something to happen, for someone to take me away. My insides are tighter than ever, and my skin is wet, even if it's not that hot. It's like I'm watching a ticking bomb, and today is the day it's going to explode.

Nothing happens on my way to class, and I almost let out a sigh of relief when I remember I don't have any classes with them today. Then it hits me. We are all in PT.

When the bell rings and it's time for PT, I really want to leave and go home. My breath is coming in shallow, almost frantic puffs, as if the air around me has become thicker than usual. The heaviness in my chest makes me gasp, and my heart drumming inside my rib cage makes my head hurt. My hands—actually, no, my entire body is wet, as if my skin is trying to push out the terror I have inside.

“Jamie, are you coming?” I bite my lips, nearly drawing blood, and I nearly wet my trousers when Alicia's voice takes me by surprise.

“Yeah, I'm coming,” I say, but my voice feels strangled, as if something got stuck there and it's nearly suffocating me.

I walk with her towards the gym, and then we separate near the changing rooms. I slowly open the door, hoping not to find anyone inside, and nearly cry in relief because it's as if a boulder has been lifted from my chest.

When I enter the gym, everyone is chatting, and I spot Dan and the rest of the gang talking and smiling, and once again I ask myself how they can't see the monster

behind the mask he wears. The masks all of them are wearing.

They laugh, and they train, and they never once look my way. They're polite, kind, and charming, and I want to scream until my head explodes.

I'm the last one to leave the gym, hoping to find no one in the changing room. As soon as I open the door, my skin rises with goosebumps, and I want to step back, but a hand lands on my T-shirt and pulls me in.

It's me and them inside the changing room, and from their grinning faces, I'm in for a treat.

I raise my arm to free myself, to escape, and my elbow connects with someone's face. The grunt of pain stops me mid-air, and then the words send my fear spiralling down until my legs are trembling so much I can't stand.

"You prick," Dan says from in between his fingers that are trying unsuccessfully to stop the flow of blood.

A pang of pride fills my body, but it drains away when I'm pushed to the floor.

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean to hit you." I hate myself for apologising, but if I don't, I'm sure he'll be more violent.

"Oh, you'll be sorry."

And then it's a shower of punches in my middle section, hard enough to hurt and leave me breathless. They've covered it with towels, I bet so they don't leave marks.

I pull and push, trying to get free, but they don't budge.

“Help!” I scream at the top of my lungs, but one of them places a hand on my mouth to stop me.

When he also covers my nose, I look at him desperately. I can’t really see him because my vision is all fuzzy with fear, but I try to plead with him to let me go. I freak out when air doesn’t enter my lungs anymore.

Someone pulls the hand away, and I take in air in big gulps.

I hear loud noises, someone screaming, but I don’t really understand the words. The sound of the door shutting feels definitive, as does the silence that follows. At that moment, I understand there is no escape. Whatever they want to do to me, it will happen.

“Find something. I want to show this bastard how painful taking it up the arse can be.”

What?

“No, please. Please, please, don’t.” I struggle with all the strength I have inside me, but those hands keep me on the ground, open and exposed to the whim of this horrible human being. I don’t even hear myself begging because the sound of my heart roaring inside my head is louder than anything else. I smell the scent of fear, and it’s a mix of urine, sweat, and desperation.

“Man, are you sure? We’re going to be in trouble.”

“Do you see what he did to me?” Dan punches me through the towels. The heavy hit leaves me breathless, and pain reverberates inside my skull.

Please, God, or someone, please make them stop.

I hear sobbing, and I try to find where it's coming from. But it's me. Those sobs are coming from me.

I should have jumped. And then nothing more fills my mind, the darkness taking me, and I wish it was forever.

Chapter 18

Shane

Ten Years Ago

What the fuck is happening?

I was called by the teacher to discuss a project I'm working on. I spent my time watching the clock, hoping the woman would speed up and let me go.

I want to rush back, because if I'm there Dan and the others won't go overboard, even if lately he's become obsessed with Jamie.

I've watched him lose weight and the dark circles under his eyes grow bigger, but there's nothing I can do to stop it unless I want to face my father's wrath.

So many times I thought of sending him a message and telling him to hang on, that school would be only a memory soon. But my fear of Jamie reaching out to me like he already does, and having Dan thinking I'm plotting against him, stops me every time I take my phone out.

What I do, though, is be there, always, so that if the group does try to go too far I can stop them.

I glance at my watch again, and I want to scream at Mrs Watson to be quicker, faster, so that I can protect the boy I like.

He would never believe me. And probably in his eyes I'm as bad as them. Maybe even worse because I turned my back on him without a word. I built a wall between us that Jamie has tried to knock down, more times than I would have if I was in his place.

I wish neither of us was in the situation we're in. I wish it could still be me and him, close together and finally having that kiss I've longed for since the beginning.

"Mr Campbell, thank you for your time."

"Thank you Mrs Watson. I'll be going, then."

"Of course. Thank you."

I walk out, wishing I could run, and that's what I do when I close the door behind my back.

I'm breathless when I reach the gym, and uneasiness fills me when I don't find anyone there. I thought I was still on time. I rush to the changing room, and when I open the door...

"We were just joking, but he went mad. We were just trying to stop him after he elbowed Dan in the face."

"What were you doing to him?" I shout, and I hate myself when my voice fails me.

"Nothing," Dan says from the floor where he's still sitting pretending to be injured.

"Jamie," I say. And then close to his ear, I whisper, "Please come back to me." Please wake up.

Jamie's eyes, though, remain stubbornly closed.

"I'm going to kill you if you've done something to him," I say turning to Dan and the others.

"Mr Campbell, calm down," Mr Thompson says, trying to calm everyone down.

But how can I be calm when Jamie's not responding?

"Go and call the nurse," he tells me.

I watch Mr Thompson bend down and call Jamie as well, and I cry harder when he opens his eyes.

I rush out of the room, and run with everything I have in me because I want to be with him.

"Miss Brown, there's been an incident at the gym, in the changing room. Please come."

I wait there, watching as she collects what she needs. I wish she was faster.

"What happened?" she asks while we walk, too slow for my liking towards the changing room.

"I'm not sure." I don't want to cause Jamie any problems if he really was the one punching Dan in the face. I should have been the one doing it. Over and over again.

When we reach the changing room, everyone else is outside, and when I go to enter the room, Mr Thompson stops me.

“Only the nurse, please.”

“You all, go back to your classes. We’ll let you know about Mr Wilson as soon as possible.”

I want to pound on the door until it breaks when he closes it on my face.

“You fuckers,” I say to the others, wishing Dan was here so I could rearrange his face. “If he’s hurt, I will make you suffer.” Then I turn my back to them. “Now, fuck off.” After that, I don’t move from the door, my eyes trained there and my ears straining to hear what’s happening inside with no luck. I stay there until another teacher forces me to go.

I go back to class, and wait and wait, but no one comes to let us know about Jamie.

I want to wait outside as long as I can, but there’s no sign of Jamie.

I take courage in both hands and text him while I’m going home, but he doesn’t reply. And even when I text more my phone remains silent.

It takes me ages to fall asleep.

I run to school without eating breakfast, and ignore my mum’s comments on how I should behave.

I’m tired of behaving. Behaving didn’t help at all, it actually made things worse. I should have done something before we came to yesterday’s shitshow.

I don’t stop to talk to anyone, eager to go check if Jamie’s in school, but when I arrive in the classroom, there’s no trace of him. I sit at my desk, trying to appear calm and collected, but my leg is jumping up and down like a drill so I don’t jump up and

pace around like a lion in a cage.

One after the other everyone sits at their desk, and when the bell rings Dan appears at the door. His face is not showing any of the signs of what happened last night.

“Good morning, everyone,” Mrs Watson says while entering the room.

There’s a chorus of people who greet her, but I’m only thinking of how I can sneak out to go and see Jamie. Even if I have to enter the office and steal his file so I can get his address.

“Settle down,” she says, but people keep talking. “Please, settle down. I have an announcement to make.”

I’m on the edge of my chair, hoping to finally get some answers.

“Due to personal circumstances Mr Wilson will no longer be coming to this school.”

Loud voices ask “What?” and “Why?” but that’s not what I want to know.

“That fucking povo is finally out of the way,” Dan is whispering, but I hear him loud and clear.

I’m out of my seat in a flash, and before he can move away I punch him. One, two, three times... until I hear the satisfactory sound of his nose breaking.

People try to pull me away from him, but I keep surging forward with nothing more important than making him suffer. Shame I won’t be able to get to the others and make them go through the same treatment.

Someone pulls me up until my feet don’t touch the floor, and the only person who

could do that is Mr Johnson, the PE teacher and bodybuilder. I still try to reach for Dan, though, now on the floor trying to stop the blood flowing out of his nose, because he has to pay more. Even if the sight of him makes me smile.

This is for Jamie, you fucker.

Mr Johnson lets me go once we're out of the classroom. "You need to calm down," he says to me, but I'm focused on finding a way to get back in.

He lets me be for a bit, and then stands next to me. I look at him, and his eyes have an understanding glare in them that says more than thousands words. Everyone must know what happened to Jamie, and everyone must know that it was Dan and those other pricks' fault.

"Are you calm?"

I nod.

"Now listen carefully. You need to keep your mouth shut. Do not say anything other than that you are shaken by what happened yesterday at the gym, and your body acted on its own."

I nod again. Why is he helping me?

"You've never acted out before, and if you did today, I believe it's because you know something we don't know. I can't justify what you did, but I don't want you to get into trouble."

"Mr Campbell, my office please."

When we reach the office my father is waiting outside, his face as dark as the night

without the moon. I tremble, but I clench my hands until they're closed in fists and it stops.

“What happened?”

“We had a problem yesterday between two students...”

I let the headmaster's voice trail off, because I lived that story and I don't need to hear his untrue version.

A smack at the nape of my neck brings me back to the room. “Listen,” my father orders me.

“We have a strict policy of no violence in school, so we have to expel Shane.”

“What if I take him out of school. Can we avoid making a mess of the Campbell name?”

“I can work with that. But I can't guarantee that Mr Edwards Senior won't press charges.”

“I'll deal with it.”

“Shane, I'm sorry. I know how hard it must have been to see what happened yesterday.”

I don't reply and keep looking at the floor.

“Shane,” my father says sternly while already walking to the door.

I don't care what happens to me. I just need to know that Jamie's okay.

My father doesn't even wait for us to get home. As soon as we're in the car, behind the tinted windows, he tears into me.

"I have a fucking idiot as a son. Why did you have to ruin everything?"

"He was bullying Jamie."

"Who's Jamie?" He shakes his head before I can answer. "I don't care who he is. I've asked you only one thing, to keep the Campbell name out of people's mouths, and instead you made a mess."

With the way he's clenching and unclenching his hands, I'm afraid he'll hit me. Instead, he speaks again.

"You're going to boarding school. Away from here, so you won't have the chance to talk to any of those idiots you call friends. I'm going to confiscate your phone." He takes a pause to get some air, and then continues. "As soon as we're at home, I want you to go to your room and get your stuff ready. We're leaving tonight."

"Sir."

"Do. Not. Talk. I don't want to hear a sound coming from your mouth. Are we clear?"

I nod. And I'm glad it's enough for him.

I place a mask on my face, the one he so long ago made me wear. This time it's not to please him, but so he can't understand the pain he's inflicting on me.

I make a promise to myself in this moment of desperation.

One day I'll be free. One day I'll meet Jamie and ask for forgiveness. I only hope he'll be the same wonderful boy I let slip through my fingers like sand.

Chapter 19

Jamie

“I’m ready to talk,” I say with a lightness that I don’t feel.

Shane’s face nearly plastered to his plate rises to look at me, and his eyes reflect the fear and uneasiness I’m feeling.

There’s been a strange mood since we kind of became friendly... or since I lost my hard and cutting edges. I can’t say I’ve forgiven him, because that’s not it, but seeing him bullied by his own family hit me hard. I can’t even fathom the idea of my family not loving me, protecting me, and supporting me like they do.

How did he survive all these years fighting left and right? I’m surprised he’s not more like Dan—angry, violent, and out of control.

I spent the night remembering, and trying to come to terms with what they did to me. I thought I did a good job, when I went to the therapist to discuss everything that happened that year, but Shane coming back into my life and living with me has brought some of the anger and desperation back. It was never far, but now it’s at the forefront.

“Okay,” he says, but does nothing more than eat.

“Why?”

“Can I finish breakfast? Then maybe we can sit on the sofa?” I want to say no, because I need to know right now, but he waited weeks for me to come to terms with the fact that he’s back in my life and I have to face my past. I can wait a few more minutes.

I watch him while he eats, and his manners speak of money and a life of having everything at his feet. But not once since I’ve known him have I ever thought he was a snob. Before everything went south between us, he treated me like there was no class difference between us. He treated me like a friend, and sometimes something more.

How would things have evolved between us, if Dan hadn’t surprised us that day? He stole my chance to have my first kiss with the boy I loved. I’ll hate him forever for that.

I shake my head. There’s no point worrying about the past, the only thing we can do is move forward. I’m not sure I’ll be able to understand his reasons, but I want to try. Not for him, but for myself, so that I can finally put everything behind me and get on with following my dreams.

My thoughts are distracted as Shane stands up. I follow him with my eyes when he piles up the plates, picks them up, and then walks to the sink. He puts them to soak and then washes his hands.

“Shall we move to the sofa?”

I stand up as well and precede him to it. I fluff up the cushion and then wait until he sits down to turn his way. He’s so handsome, with his dark hair unstyled, making him look younger than his twenty-six years.

“Why, you ask?” he says, picking up the conversation as we left it at the table.

I watch him as he tries to collect his thoughts, and I don't interrupt him because I know how difficult it is.

"I was protecting you."

I open my mouth to call it as I see it, bullshit, but his hand goes up to stop me.

"You want to know and I'm going to tell you. My reasoning, it's probably not going to make sense to you, and sometimes it doesn't for me when I think about my actions and my decision. But at the time, that was all I could think of."

I close my mouth and lean against the cushion. I delete everything I wanted to say from my mind, and then I turn back to him, ready to listen.

"And I was protecting myself. Since I was born, the only constant in my life has been what my father requested of me... not to shame the family name. Nothing has been more important for him. Maybe my mother, but me, I've always been a tool for him. Still am. Even now, I have something I'm protecting from him, and I'll do everything in my power to achieve what I want."

Did I ever see this struggle in him? Not that I can think of.

"This shouldn't be an excuse for my behaviour. I only want you to understand why I made those choices."

I nod, not sure what to say right now.

"I'm not even sure you remember this, but we were having lunch together, and I had hoped to kiss you, and that day it nearly became reality."

"I remember," I whisper, and I don't fight him when he takes my hand in his, because

all those feelings are still swimming inside my body.

“We were interrupted, and I was a prick. I’m sorry I pushed you. I’m sorry I hurt you,” he says, squeezing my hand, and I squeeze back. “I was afraid. I knew right then that Dan saw us and he was going to use it against me, so by pushing you away I thought I could save us.”

“I didn’t fall, so I wasn’t hurt.”

“I don’t mean physically. I saw on your face how much pain my behaviour caused you. And I’ll be sorry for the rest of my life.”

I don’t know what to say to that, so I push him further. “Tell me about Dan, and the others.”

“He threatened to tell my father. To expose the fact that I was kissing a boy to the school, and to everyone who had ears open to listen. I wasn’t ready to be gay, and I wasn’t ready to go against my father. The only way I thought I could protect you was to deny everything and avoid you. And be a wanker to you.”

“We didn’t even kiss. And you were saving yourself, because if you’d wanted to save me, you could have told me instead of rejecting me, mistreating me, and allowing them to do what they did.” I take a deep breath and try to calm down, because by the time I’m done talking I’m shouting. That’s not what I want to do. I want to be in control.

“I needed you to hate me.”

I scoff at that. If only I could have hated him from the start.

“I promise you. Once school was done I would have come to you to beg for

forgiveness. I never expected things to turn out the way they did.”

“Oh, believe me, I’ve hated you. I did hate you. Unfortunately, not enough. The feelings I had for you kept getting in the way. I hated myself because I kept looking for you, waiting for you to save me. You, all of you, were monsters. I couldn’t cope with everything you did to me. I couldn’t cope with you and your offensive behaviour. You broke my heart every single fucking time you rejected me. After what happened at the gym, I had to see a therapist. For years. I tried to take my life so many fucking times. It’s taken me years to be able to live with what you did to me.”

I don’t look away, because I need to see what my words do to him. Does wanting him to suffer make me a horrible person?

His eyes get bigger and bigger the more I share what’s rotting my insides, and then they fill with tears.

The pleasure I hope to feel is not there. I’m actually feeling guilty for dropping everything I went through on him all at once.

“Fuck.” He uses his sleeve to dry his eyes. “I’m sorry. I didn’t know it was that bad.”

I scoff once more, and he’s quick to speak again.

“I mean, I knew it was bad, but I really thought I was protecting you from the worst of it.” He places a hand on his face. “I was so fucking blind.”

“Yeah, that you were.”

We don’t speak for a while, and I’m close to believing the conversation is done. Maybe there is no way for us to settle the past and move forward.

“What happened after I left?” Shane asks me, and hope makes the desperation and anger retract a little.

“I fought, hoping that the person who’d saved me from Dan would come back and stop them for good.” I shake my head. That didn’t happen.

“I ran to call the teacher after they pushed me out of the room. All the way there I was praying for you to be safe. I’m sorry I couldn’t do more.”

I look at him, and everything in him speaks of how sorrowful he is.

“What happened after the teacher’s intervention?”

“I was still out of it, and at first I thought they would finally see Dan for the monster he was. Instead, he was sitting there with his face dirty with blood, acting as if it was nothing. He accused me of elbowing him. Of course, he omitted that he was the one who’d attacked me first.”

“Fucker,” Shane says, and I love how he pulls me closer to him, as if trying to protect me, even if there’s no need now.

“He accused me of being the bully, and they didn’t say anything.” I involuntarily clench my hands into fists, a sign of how much I’m still affected by what they did to me that day. The hand Shane is holding squeezes his, but he doesn’t complain even though it must have hurt. “It looked bad, I admit that, but I couldn’t believe they took his word as truth.”

“I broke Dan’s nose,” Shane says, and I raise my eyes that had fallen to our linked hands. “And nothing had ever felt that good in my life. Until I kissed you.”

“Did you? Did it?”

“Oh yeah. The next day, I was waiting for you to come to school and I would have told you everything, and told you how sorry I was, but you never came.”

“Yeah, I asked my parents to take me out of school. I didn’t want to see you or the others ever again.”

“When Mrs Watson told us you were never coming back, and Dan made one of his stupid comments, I just lost it and punched him a couple of times, until I heard the sounds of his nose breaking.”

“My hero,” I say to him. And it’s not until he stops and looks at me that what I just said hits me, and I’m not sure if I want to laugh or cry, because there is a bit of truth behind it. I did consider him my hero, my knight in shining armour, until his behaviour tarnished it.

“I was never a hero. I was always someone just trying to survive.” He stops, and I clearly see the wheels in his brain turning and turning.

“In that moment, when I thought everything we had was slipping away, I lost it. And if Mr Johnson hadn’t stopped me, I would have kept punching him and then turned on the others until they’d paid for what they’d done to you.”

Does it make me a bad person to wish I’d been there to see it? Watching as Shane defended me?

“You should have seen my father’s face. Me, the one who was never important enough, destroying his good name. He sent me away so he didn’t have to deal with me, and I believe he paid or made some kind of agreement with Dan’s parents so they didn’t press charges. I wouldn’t have cared.”

“He sent you away?”

“Yep, and it was the best thing ever, because I met my best friend Karl. I could talk to him about everything and I never felt judged. It was the second time that happened in my life.”

“Second time?”

“Yeah, the first time was with you.”

Why does my heart speed up at being his first in something? And why do I lean more towards him? I shouldn't be doing it, but I still don't move back.

“JJ, I'm sorry for what I did, for being a coward and for not being strong enough to protect you, and us.”

I don't say anything, but I don't let go of his hand. I lean against the cushion to let everything he said settle in.

“I hate that I waited for you to get hurt to finally see the errors of my ways. I hate that I waited for you to get hurt to go against my father.”

“I hate that too.” Even if he had his reasons, I've suffered a lot. Not only because they did what they did, but more because of Shane. Not understanding why he wouldn't talk, look, or acknowledge me is still something that weighs heavily on my heart.

“You were the most important fucking thing to me, and I failed you. What I did, I did for love. I'm sorry I wasn't able to be a better person for you, but I was afraid.”

“I'm sorry too.” Sorry because maybe what we shared is not enough, because maybe I'll never be able to forget or forgive. We both suffered, I can't deny it, because I'm witnessing it. But while I didn't have any choice in what happened to me, Shane had a choice. He chose to betray me, and he chose to save himself.

Where do we go from here? I have no idea...

While I understand more of the reasons why he did what he did, I'm still concerned about what's driving him now. He's in the same situation he was before. His dad still rules his life.

Nothing can change the past, but I hope we've taken a step in the right direction to change our future. Otherwise they, Dan, Toby and Tom, and also Shane's father will have won.

I let go of his hand, because between my whirlwind thoughts and the effect Shane's touch was having on me, I couldn't cope. My anxiety was playing up and taking my breath away.

I ran away, to hide from him and for myself, and I spent the rest of the day inside my room. My thoughts were in disarray, too fast and too focused for me to cope. Not even coding kept me focused enough to avoid a panic attack.

I lay in my bed, breathing four in, holding for four, and releasing for four, until I was able to breathe normally again.

What hit me the most was his behaviour, the real pain I couldn't see when we were talking but was clear when I was replaying everything in my mind.

Right now, I'm pacing inside my room, unable to sleep, and my thoughts are focused on the discussion we had, and how I ran away. I listened to him, to his excuses, trying to keep hold of the blame, the anger, and the need to hit something.

I slowly open my door and look outside, just in case Shane is unable to sleep like me and he's wandering around. The house is silent, so I walk to the kitchen without making any sounds.

Queen comes to greet me, but when I only scratch her head, she goes back to her bed. Soon, when Shane leaves it'll be only the two of us. It'll be strange not to have him here.

I fill a tall glass of water, and I slowly drink it, while my brain is busy trying to make sense of all the thoughts crowding my mind.

Dan played the both of us, and I believe the others merely followed him. Shane chose to side with Dan to protect himself, while also hoping to protect me. I thought about that day, the day I died inside... the knowledge of him saving me, of him calling someone because he knew right from wrong... because he cared for me.

I place the glass down and walk towards the bedroom, but I stop in front of his door. There's no sound coming through so he must be sleeping. I should turn away, but I need an answer to the question whirling inside my mind.

Did he stop them because he cared for me?

I open the door and Shane is in bed. I can see him clearly under the sheet, his face towards the door, his eyes closed, and his hair caressing the pillow. I take a step forward, and then the next, until I'm standing close to the bed.

I watch him for a while, asking myself what I'm doing here but unable to leave. I sit on the chair close to the bed and lean forward, then move my hand until it's caressing his hair. It's as soft as I imagine.

Why does touching him affect me so much? Why is he like a drug? Why can't I walk away like he once did?

"I still don't understand. Why? Why did you break my heart? I was lost without you. Why should I give you the power to break me again? Why won't these feelings I have

for you disappear? Why can't I leave you behind like you did me?" I whisper to the room, knowing in his sleep he won't hear me.

I wait for an answer but there is none. When the silence seems to suffocate me, I stand.

My hand is engulfed by Shane's, stopping me from leaving.

"Stay. Don't leave me."

I'm weak to his request, and I stand there.

Then he pulls me until I'm close to the bed. "Let me have you in my arms just once."

I pull the sheet back and join him.

He wraps his arms around me as if he never wants to let me go.

Being in his arms calms something inside me, and I relax inside them. I let my thoughts go, and enjoy how my body sings from his touch. My eyes get heavy and I struggle to keep them open, so I don't fight it. Tomorrow I can blame myself for being weak, but right now nothing can pull me away from him.

I let go.

After a while, and when I've almost slipped away into sleep, a light kiss lands on my head and I smile, but I don't move, my body feeling sluggish and my limbs heavy.

"I know I don't deserve a second chance, but I promise you, if you give it to me, I'll love you forever." Then he pulls me against his chest.

I fall asleep with hope rising inside my heart.

Chapter 20

Shane

Jamie wasn't in my arms this morning when I woke up, gone like a dream and yet to come back.

I don't know if he's gone or if he's still in his room, because I didn't have the courage to face him. What I know is that today I have an appointment with the doctor, and if they discharge me, my time with Jamie is done. He won't have to take care of me any longer, and our unresolved issues will stay unresolved.

Jamie appears at the door, looking as handsome as usual. He's gotten changed, and he's wearing jeans instead of the usual loose trousers.

"Do you need a hand to get changed?" he asks, and while I wish for him to touch me, and for him to let me touch him, I don't want him to feel obliged.

"I can manage."

"Okay, but call me if you need me."

"Will do."

I do my best to get ready quickly, and I'm sweaty when I finally make it out to the living room.

We don't talk until we reach the car, and then Jamie asks, "Are you happy you're going home?"

"Sure." I avoid saying how sad I'm going to be at not seeing him every day, or maybe ever again. Why did he have to ask me that?

I want to ask if I'm ever going to see him again, but I'm not sure I could deal with the answer.

When he stops the car, he doesn't turn it off.

"Are you not coming?"

"Nope. But I'll be here when you're done. Then I'll drive you to my place so you can pick your stuff, and I'll drive you home after that if you want."

Going home is the last thing I want to do, but at the same time I've imposed too much already, and since our talk, nothing's really changed.

What were you expecting? To be forgiven just because you were forced to make the wrong choices.

"Okay," I say while leaving the car. "I'll see you later." The more steps away from him I take, the more I want to run back. Is it crazy to not want to get better so I can stay with him longer?

Waiting to see the doctors, talking to them, and then getting a long list of exercises to do while I wait for my appointment with the physio all happens in a haze. My thoughts all focus on Jamie and on what leaving his house means for us.

Is there even an us? Can I ask for an us?

When I leave the hospital, Jamie is there, just like he promised. He's sitting on a bench close to the entrance, and he has a takeaway cup in his hand. His face is turned up to the pallid sun, and his eyes are closed. He seems lost in thought, so I slowly walk towards him, and I don't stop until I'm shading him from the sun.

He opens his eyes, and some kind of emotion passes through them, but too quickly for me to recognise it.

"How did it go?"

"I have a long list of exercises to do while I wait for my physio appointment."

"You'll be a hundred percent soon."

"Talk to me," I say to him, and Jamie's gaze falls to the floor.

That bad, hey?

"I'm sorry—"

"Don't be sorry," I interrupt him. He never has to say sorry to me. None of what happened was his fault. He was a victim. I considered myself a victim of the circumstances I was in, but seeing Jamie lose his temper and shout his pain... That fucked me up, and it made me rethink my choices. It made me understand I should have stood up and fought.

"I need time. I need time to process everything and think about what's best for me."

"I understand." I don't want to understand, but I need to respect his wishes. I didn't go through what he did, so I don't know how he feels. I trust Jamie enough to know that he's not getting his revenge on me, he's just looking out for himself. He has the

right to do it.

“I’m not walking away.”

I nearly go down to my knees from the tension leaving my body at his words. Words of hope that I don’t deserve.

“I want us to be friends. I want to start afresh. We’re different people now and we don’t know each other anymore. I don’t want to adjust a past that cannot be adjusted. Mistakes were made, and apologies have been given. Pushing you away would mean letting them win, and I don’t want that. What I want is to build something new, something that’s not linked to the past.”

I watch him, trying to understand if there’s something I’m missing, but Jamie seems strangely open, as if he’s trying to tell me he trusts me.

Friends. I never thought I’d have the chance to have him back in my life. And even if being friends it’s the only thing he’s offering, I’m willing to take it.

“Friends,” I say while extending my hand to take his.

I push away the fear of this being probably the last time I’m going to touch him, and instead, I look forward to the opportunity to get to know him.

Six weeks have passed, and I’m still missing him like crazy.

I really tried to avoid texting Jamie, but I didn’t last a day. Since then, though, we’ve been speaking daily. Not about forgiving me and giving me a second chance, but about who we are now, and how our days, weeks, and months are going.

When I was living at his house there was too much of the past that needed to be

purged, so we never had the chance to get to know the men we are now.

It's always me initiating the conversation, but he never leaves me hanging. There's no sarcasm or anger in his texts, and like he promised when he left me in front of my building, he was doing his best to be a friend.

Texting him is the highlight of my day, because since I came back from what my dad defined as a holiday, he's been riding me pretty hard. I wish I could quit, but I can't abandon those kids just because my life is not comfortable.

Having Jamie as a friend is not what I really want, but not having him in my life at all is something I can't cope with, so friends it is.

"Hey man, are you back home?" Karl says as soon as I answer the phone.

"Yeah."

"What happened?"

"Just frustrated. I wish there was something more I could do, other than pining for him."

"I'm sorry, man. Please do not become a stalker again."

I laugh, because if I wasn't still recovering, I probably would be stalking him again.

"He's still replying to your texts, isn't he?"

"Yes, he is." I'm so damn happy about it.

"Then stop complaining. If he hasn't sent you packing, that means he still has

feelings for you.”

How can I believe him after everything I put Jamie through. “Come over and help me get smashed.”

“Why don’t you come to the meeting I have with that company I told you about, so you can meet them?”

“I don’t feel like it.”

“Please man. I need you there.”

When my silence goes on for a little too long, Karl speaks again. “Please, mate. Please come.” His childish voice makes me laugh. That’s what he did the first time we met.

“I love you, man,” I say, touched at the way he’s always there for me. “Okay, but you’ll have to pick me up.”

“Of course, Mr Campbell.”

“No, please. Don’t do that to me. My father is someone I don’t want to talk about.”

“I love you too, Shay. And fuck your father.”

“I’ll see you later. Over and out.”

I’ve got just enough time to get changed, because an hour later the doorbell rings. I walk slowly to the door, and laugh when it rings another three times before I can reach it.

“I’m coming,” I say into the receiver.

“Come on, we’re late.” Karl’s voice fills my ears and makes me laugh.

I put the receiver back. I look at myself in the mirror, and then pick up my wallet and key, and I’m out the door.

“Princess, your chauffeur is here to drive you to the ball,” Karl shouts as soon as I exit the building.

“Stop it, you crazy old man.”

“Says the one older than me.”

As soon as he enters the traffic, I talk business.

“So, tell me more about this company.”

“So, they’re working with all the best Fortune five hundred companies, and dealing with their internal security. They came from nothing, just like me, and they’re one of the best in the market, if not the best.”

“Okay, I like what I’m hearing. Why do they want to work with us?”

“They don’t. That’s why you’re here, to convince them.”

“They mostly work with companies that are involved in LGBTQ+, so that’s a good advantage we have.”

“What are we hiring them for?”

“We are not. We are going to sell them that little project you have.”

“You mean convince them to come to our foundation and teach our kids technology, and to help them by offering them apprenticeships? That project?”

“Yep. This is your chance to get your dad off your back, and to do something good for those kids.”

“I’m not ready for this.”

“Mate, you were born ready.”

We banter like this until an hour later he’s parking the car. I’ve never been here, but I’ve heard of this place. They’re very LGBTQ+ friendly.

“Are you sure this is the right place?”

“Yep, it was their choice.”

I’m not sure what to expect when we enter the place, but I immediately love the cacophony of colours, all in theme with what this pub-slash-restaurant represents.

“We have a reservation under Witman,” Karl says as soon as the manager appears.

“Please follow me,” she says while picking up the menus.

The table is still empty, and I choose the spot facing the restaurant so I can distract myself from my plaguing thoughts of Jamie and what’s going to happen between us.

I pull my phone out of my pocket to check whether he’s texted me back, when a familiar voice has me raising my head. Jamie is here in the flesh with his friend

Alexi, a beautiful grin on his face.

“Are you following me?” he jokes, leaving me breathless.

I keep looking at him as if I’m seeing a ghost, and his grin fades and his face falls.

“I was here first.” I want to smack myself. Could I be any more lame?

His grin comes back, and if that’s what lame gets me, I want to be lame all my life.

“Do you know each other?” Karl asks, and I turn to him ready to explain, but his smug smile tells me all I need to know. He knew Jamie was going to be here. He must have planned everything.

If Jamie wasn’t here, I would have kissed him and kicked him at the same time.

I watch in trepidation as they get settled. Please, sit next to me, I keep praying.

I’m out of my skin with happiness when Jamie chooses to sit next to me, and I can’t stop myself from touching his leg with mine, just needing to be sure he’s really here with me.

The zing of pleasure that shoots from our point of contact has my cock taking interest, and by the way Jamie is looking at me, he felt something too. I love his pink cheeks, and I wish I could be doing something to spread that redness way below his chin.

I reign my wild thoughts in. Him being here doesn’t mean he wants more.

We go through the motion of reading the menu and ordering, and I still can’t stop looking at him.

“How are you?” Jamie asks, leaning forward and making me believe we’re the only ones in the world.

“I’m good. I was discharged today, and I’m going for a long ride tomorrow.”

“Are you in need of freedom?”

Even when we were still at war, when we were enemies, he was really listening to me. That makes me so happy I can’t stop a smile from taking over my face, and the euphoria coming from Jamie’s vicinity makes me bold.

“Do you want to come with me?” I say it as if I’m not dying to receive a yes from him.

“Yeah, I’d really love that.”

I’m speechless. For a few seconds my brain goes haywire, a red alarm blaring and a robotic voice saying malfunction, malfunction. Then a big sign pops up showing the words, “He said yes .”

What the heck just happened? Do I have a date with Jamie?

“Please kick me, because I believe I’m dreaming,” I say to him in a shaky voice.

Tears pop out while I watch Jamie with his head thrown backwards, and he’s laughing. And I’m struck by a thunderbolt.

I love him. I’ve never stopped loving him.

I open my mouth to tell him, but Karl chooses that moment to pull us into their conversation. I could kill him if I wasn’t so happy. I turn towards him and Alexi,

while I keep my leg plastered to Jamie, and my joy grows when he pushes back.

Maybe, just maybe—because I’ve suffered a lot believing he would never forgive me—it was worth being separated for a while. We both needed time to come to terms with the pain we inflicted and received.

“Tell me more about this project of yours,” Jamie says looking very interested.

“You probably know I’m very involved with the Pride to Be foundation. It’s my baby, even if I’m not really part of the committee.” I stop for a moment because that always hits me hard, being at the mercy of my father and not having any control over something I love and I want to make grow. But I learnt a long time ago that life is unfair and kicks you when you’re down.

“Yeah,” Jamie says, and I’m sure he’s remembering that conversation I had with my dad on the phone.

“Anyway, just because I’m not in charge doesn’t mean I can’t do anything to help them have a future.”

“Mate,” Karl says, but I wave him off.

I don’t look at Jamie because I don’t want to see pity there. Ten years and I’m still under my father’s thumb so much that I can’t protect something I love. I only hope that this time I’m making the correct choices.

“My idea is to have coding classes, or anything linked to technology, as we all know that’s the future. I can have that with other companies, but we would like to work with you, because on top of that we want them to have the chance to do apprenticeships. Because they’ve suffered already, I don’t want them to end up working for someone who’ll make them feel less because of who they are, or who

they love.” I look at Jamie straight in the eyes, because I know he’ll understand where I’m coming from. He lived that. We both lived that in our skin.

His eyes are wet, and unconsciously I extend my hand under the table and place it on his leg. My own eyes get wet when he places his hand on top of mine.

I don’t want to believe we’re okay until he tells me so, because if it’s not true, I’ll be devastated.

“I’m aware that your company works primarily with LGBTQ+ organisations, and I’d like for you to offer the people we support a chance, so they can go out into the world as functional members of society. I want to give them a chance to be happy, to be proud of who they are.”

“We do that,” Alexi says. “But we aren’t big enough to support a project like this.”

I understand, but they have the right contacts to make this project a success.

“We do have the right contacts, though,” Jamie says to Alexi.

I want to laugh out loud at Alexi’s face clearly saying, “I was trying to save you from spending time with your old bully.”

Jamie continues, unaware of his friend’s turmoil. “We’ll have to oversee everything, because I don’t want to have any problems, but I believe we can do that.”

“So, we’re doing this?” Alexi asks, placing a hand on Jamie’s arm.

I want to move it away, because I don’t want anyone touching him, especially when nothing between us has been settled. And also because I’m afraid he’ll change his mind and I’ll lose the opportunity to spend more time with him, and to give a better

chance at life to my kids.

“Yeah, we are,” Jamie says, and he pats his friend’s hand before pulling away.

I want his attention back on me, so I lean closer.

“Are you going to teach classes?” The idea of Jamie being a teacher and wearing those hot as fuck glasses makes me hard. If we ever get to make love one day, I want to fuck him with his glasses on.

My face goes ablaze when I notice all eyes on me. Jamie’s smirk and bashful eyes tell me we were on the same wave of dirty thoughts.

How I wish it was only the two of us, in a place where there weren’t eyes to watch me kissing him until we were both hard and ready for more.

I shake my head, because this is not the time or place to have these thoughts.

I’m glad the food comes and distracts me. While we eat we set up a plan of actions, and book another meeting to discuss further.

The evening is one of the best I’ve ever had, and I’m not even counting having Jamie so close to me we can touch.

“You need to try this,” I say to him, while raising my fork to share some halloumi cheese and cucumber salad with him.

When he looks at me as if I’ve gone mad, it hits me that this is a business meeting. We are not together and we’re barely friends.

My face goes up in flames, and I look around to check whether anyone noticed my

idiotic behaviour. I'm glad when even our companions are too busy with what they have on their plate.

"Jamie, I'm sorry," I say while pulling my hand back, but he stops me mid-action.

He pulls my arm until the fork is close to his mouth, and I watch in awe as he opens and leans in so he can close his mouth on it. The fork goes in, his lips close on it, and then the fork moves backwards.

Sexy as hell.

My cock replies in turn by filling up and pushing against my zipper. When Jamie's tongue makes an appearance to clean his lips, my eyes dart up to look at him, and there he is, teasing me. He winks at me and sends my brain into the gutter, filling with visions of Jamie sprawled on my bed, naked and needy.

A smack to my hand brings my attention back to the room, and to Jamie.

"Did Kitty eat your tongue?"

Fuck if I don't love him like this, and if I don't love the nickname I gave him.

"Yeah, he did. But I'm hoping Kitty will allow me to savour him at some point."

"Kitty is free tonight."

What? Is he really asking me to go home with him? To lay him on the bed and make all my dreams come true?

"Are you—"

“What are you talking about?” Karl asks, and Alexi turns to us as well.

The smile on Jamie’s face tells me he won’t reply, but there’s no need as Karl continues. “What happened to your face? Is that salad so spicy?”

I watch Jamie throw his head back and laugh. Happiness spreads out of him in waves, and I’m thrilled that my discomfort and my wicked mind are giving him joy.

“Nothing that concerns you, and yes, something is very spicy in here.”

Another burst of laughter from Jamie, and I follow him, while those two look at us as if we’re crazy.

We go back to our meeting and keep jumping ideas off each other. This is one of the best evenings I’ve had in years, and I don’t want it to ever end.

Especially if it means losing Jamie.

Chapter 21

Jamie

He looks so cute, flustered by my behaviour, which is less than perfect in a meeting situation. I'm not very good at flirting but doing it with Shane is fun and comes naturally.

I couldn't resist when Shane, without thinking, offered me some food using his fork, as if we were boyfriends.

The word sounds so hot.

Actually, since he talked about his foundation, about his need to help those kids, and about his project, I'm hot for him. I knew he was clever, and I knew he was always willing to help, but I never knew he was so selfless as to give up on his dreams to make it possible for others to have one.

Before, I couldn't see, too blinded by what had happened in the past and by my own memories and desires.

It didn't take me a day to forgive him, and I'm not sure I even have, in full. When those memories attack me, I still want him to save me, to side with me, and to protect me. The past cannot be rewritten, and it's never going to change, but sometimes I wish it could because then our love would be perfect.

But love rarely is.

Sometimes I wish I could turn my brain off and just enjoy a day without thinking, without worrying.

I spent hours after he left, talking with my mum, Ruby, and Alexi. I've also spent time rethinking our conversations, measuring every single word and trying to understand if he was lying to me.

Until I realised that he'd never lied to me. He'd avoided me, pushed me away, but not once he did lie to me.

What convinced me to give him a second chance before today, before witnessing his selfless behaviour, was his call with his father, and everything he said about living with him, and what I witnessed myself when he didn't even ask Shane how he was.

Today, though, sealed the deal. Because no one with a family like his would stay put if others weren't important to him.

I always thought he was free, rich, and with no problems, but instead he was suffering as much as I was.

I don't want to think about our past today. Instead, I want to create a new wonderful memory.

After more than a month of texting, I should have asked him for a date instead of asking him to take me home. But I've always been weak for a happy, funny, and bold Shane, and tonight he was that and so much more.

I love his brain, I love the way he talked about the kids at the foundation, and I love the project he's putting in place to help them. Tonight he showed me how much he's changed, how selfless he is, and how much he's fighting to keep the place going, even if that means dealing with his father.

Now I understand what his father meant during the call, when he talked about his stupid project, or something like that.

If I hadn't seen him tonight, talking about those kids as if they were his, it would probably have taken me a long time to trust him again, and to allow myself to acknowledge the feelings I have for him.

"Guys, I'm leaving," Karl says while standing up. "I have a lot to do tomorrow, before the weekend." Then he turns to Shane. "Do you still need a lift?"

Alexi takes that as an invite to do the same. "I need to leave as well." Then he turns to me. "Are you coming with me?"

Shane's hand lands on my thigh, and if I had any doubts before about what to do, they would have disappeared at the touch. However, I don't have any doubts. I know where I want to be, and that's in Shane's bed, in his arms.

"No, I don't." He answers Karl's question, and his hand grips my thigh a bit harder, as if he doesn't want to let me go.

He shouldn't worry, because I'm not going anywhere.

I turn to Alexi. "I'm staying a little longer."

His smile is full of understanding and his lips curve in a beautiful smile. Sometimes I wonder why he doesn't have anyone. He's such a catch, and not as awkward as I am. Maybe now that I'm not so egotistically focused on myself, I should prod Alexi a little more.

"Okay, then. I'll see you tomorrow."

“Yeah... maybe,” I say with a grin.

Once they’re gone, we look at each other, and we both stand up at the same time. I hope he’s as eager as me to be alone.

We stop at the till and then head outside to catch a cab.

We jump in as soon as one stops, and Shane gives the driver his address. As soon as we’re on the way, Shane takes my hand in his, and I find the gesture reassuring and exciting at the same time.

I don’t look at Shane, instead I look out of the window, still in some way surprised to be here with him. The night is quiet and the world seems to have slowed down. The lights of the city look like stars, and even the traffic seems less chaotic, just like the emotions I’ve had spinning inside me since the last time we saw each other, and long before that. Until Shane takes my hand in his.

I glance at him and our gazes lock, and everything around us fades away. The car seems to fill with energy, and my heart begins to race, making me wish we were at his flat already. There’s nothing more in this moment that I desire more than a kiss from Shane. Our first kiss.

We’ve been here before, but it never felt right, or as right as it feels right now. Only once before we were as close as we are today, and that was ten years ago.

The stolen glances, those quiet and bold touches we exchanged, and his hand lingering on mine, they all led to now. To the now where we’re sitting next to each other, and giving a go to what we missed ten years ago.

Shane lets go of my hand when the taxi stops in front of his building, and I’m pleasantly surprised when he jogs to my side to open the door then holds his hand out

for me to take. I do, and I like to believe I'll be doing this in all our future lives when we meet again.

As our bodies brush against each other my breath becomes shallow, and everything around me goes silent as if the world around us has stopped to witness this moment between us.

As if this moment is fated .

The silence extends as we look at each other, and my body fills with tenderness and love.

Our fingers brush together, then intertwine, and then we take a step closer to each other at the same time. When our chests brush, I watch Shane shake his head, and uneasiness fills me, but he crashes it immediately with his words.

“Not here. Once I start kissing you, I won't be able to stop.” His grin is needy and wicked, and I love it very much.

He pulls me behind him, and in passing we greet the man at the reception, but we're still in a world made of us. I don't even remember the way up to Shane's flat, the only thing I remember is his thumb caressing my palm and making my body and my cock ache.

He lets go of my hand when we reach the door, and I watch in awe at the way his hand trembles while he tries to open the door. That settles something inside me.

I want to be with him, and I love his touch on me. I'm worried about the memories that could make today a failure, but being with him overshadows everything. I follow him inside because nothing, not even the past, can keep me away from him right now.

When he pulls me inside and then plasters me against the door, I chuckle, but it dies when our eyes meet. The hunger in his makes my insides do somersaults.

He places his big hand on the side of my face, his fingers enveloping my neck and one resting on my ear, while his thumb rests on my chin, making me feel protected and wanted. I love how his eyes lock on mine, as if there's nothing more important to him than me. As if I'm all he sees.

I watch as he leans closer, and I don't even blink, because no way in hell am I missing any of this. He does it slowly, leaving me time to avoid the kiss if I want.

There's no way I don't want this.

I'm yearning to taste him, and to have his lips pressed against mine.

For a moment my fears take over, and my brain convinces me that something bad is going to happen, and it's going to rob me again of what I desire most. Rob me of this so much awaited and desired kiss. But then... Shane's lips touch mine, and the past is cloaked under the rightness of our lips locked together. Finally, after ten long years, I've got to kiss the boy I loved.

The first brush of his mouth is tentative and sweet, as if he doesn't believe we're here doing this. It doesn't take away anything from the kiss, though, because it's still like I imagined it ten years ago. Yet it's so much more.

Emotions, need, and love explode inside me, and I moan when his lips move slowly against mine. Goosebumps rise across my body at the intensity of the feelings inside me.

Shane pulls back, and I miss his lips already. His forehead comes to rest against mine, and in his eyes is everything I need to know. There's the same want and the same joy

because finally we're together.

While we stay there for a moment there's no need for words, as the kiss has expressed everything we have inside.

He leans in once more, and again I expect the kiss to be hard and passionate, but instead it's a caress of lips that when it's gone leaves me wanting more.

Shane pulls away, and I place my hand on his hip to keep him close. He leans his head against mine, and our eyes lock, capturing both in a world made only of us . A beautiful reminder of the past. A past where we didn't know yet, how much pain we would go through. A past full of hope and now, I believe, love. I'm not sure we can be those people anymore, but we survived, and because of this we'll be able to appreciate even more the second chance we've been given.

He frames my face with his hands and leans in again, aiming for my mouth. His warm breath washes over me, and I inhale his scent, and for a moment I'm back there, at that moment when we were close to kissing for the first time.

I open under his questing lips and welcome his tongue in my mouth when he searches for more. I moan under his assault, give him everything. I groan when he takes it and doesn't leave any part of my mouth untouched.

Between his kiss and his touch, when he pulls away I'm a mess. My legs are trembling and I'm glad I'm pressed against the door, because they can't hold my weight.

"Finally," he says, and his relief, so similar to mine, makes me chuckle. "I can't believe I had to wait ten years to kiss you."

"Ditto. But let's not wait that long for our second, third..."

He takes my mouth with his and stops me from babbling. When I'm moaning again from pleasure he pulls back.

"There won't be any other kisses but mine."

And damn if Shane staking his claim doesn't make my cock fill, eager for more. And damn if I don't like his possessiveness way too much. Maybe I shouldn't, but after what happened between us, I need him to show me how much he wants me so I can believe it's real.

"Does that mean you're mine?" I ask, only half jokingly. Because somewhere inside me, I still can't believe he's really here, and that we really are doing this.

"I've always been yours. I've been yours since the first time we met." He places a gentle kiss on my lips before continuing. "It just took me a while to find my way back to you." His hands grip me a bit too tight and his body presses a little more against the door, showing me how vulnerable Shane is.

Damn, though, if what he said doesn't deserve a kiss.

I'm more than willing to oblige, so I stretch up, like a purring cat looking for cuddles, until I reach his mouth. I press my lips to his, letting the desire, passion, and need I have for him show.

Chapter 22

Shane

I don't want our first time together to be against the front door. One day, for sure, but not today.

Today I want it to be perfect. This is our first time together and I want it to be like our first kiss, special and unforgettable.

Before we become one, I want to know Jamie's body as well as I know my own. I want to explore every single inch and make him sob in pleasure. I want to love every single part of Jamie. I want to kiss, lick, and adore him until he's lost in want and lust.

I want him—after I'm done loving him—to forget about everything that isn't me.

I pull away, because I need us in a more comfortable position, a position that will allow me to have access to his whole body.

“Don't stop,” Jamie says, eyes closed and head thrown back against the door.

He's sexy as hell, and all fucking mine.

“I'm never letting you go.”

“Promise.” His throaty voice goes directly to my cock.

“I promise.” And I take his lips again in a passionate kiss, to seal my commitment to him, to us.

The idea of driving to Jamie’s house is not as inviting as before, so instead I take his hand and lead him to my bedroom.

“Come,” I say to him when he resists. “We’ll be more comfortable in my bed.”

“Okay.”

His hand feels wet in my grip, and that makes me pause. If he’s not ready, we don’t have to go all the way. I’ll be more than happy just to have him in my arms for the rest of the night, just like I did last time I was at his apartment. One of the best nights of my life in a long time.

“Are you okay?” I ask to make sure this is still what he wants.

“Yeah, just nervous.”

“We don’t have to do more than kissing. And I won’t do anything you’re not comfortable with.” I lean in and place a kiss on his lips, hoping to make him understand how serious I am.

Jamie comes first, always.

“I want this, and I want you,” he says after I let go of his lips.

I hold out my hand palm up for him to take when he’s ready.

My heart soars when he takes it without a second thought. When our fingers touch, the tension I’ve been filled with goes away. I pull him close and kiss him again,

telling him with my lips how happy I am to have him here and that he's trusting me.

When we're both panting, I pull back and turn around, leading him to my room. I'm not sure if it's Jamie's presence, or maybe because I've changed, but right now my flat doesn't feel as estranged and cold as it usually does.

Jamie always makes things better.

When I stop in front of the closed door, Jamie bumps into me.

"Sorry," he says, and I chuckle, turning my head around to find him rubbing his nose.

I love the chuckle that fills the apartment and makes my inside quiver in joy. I turn around and hug him tight. "I'm so grateful you gave me a second chance." I hide my face in the place where his neck meets his shoulder and inhale his calming scent.

I let him go, but it's not enough, so I use our linked hands to pull him closer to my side again and lean in to kiss him. I love how he opens up for me, and how red his face goes.

I turn around, open the door, and pull Jamie inside behind me. Then I do the same thing I did when we entered the flat and I push him against the door.

I frame his face in between my hands, angle his head for better access, and then I take his lips in a demanding kiss, hoping it'll express how much I want him right now. How much I need him in my life.

Jamie's hands come up to grip my wrists, as if he needs an anchor in the storm our passion for each other is creating. His touch, as usual, enhances my need for him, and I deepen the kiss, wanting everything he has to give.

When he's moaning and panting hard, I let go of his lips. Sliding towards his cheek, I stop for a moment to kiss the corner of his mouth, reluctant to let go. I move across his jaw, leaving a trail of licks and kisses, and enjoying the scrape of my tongue against Jamie's stubble. I continue this path until I reach his ear, and I gently nip at his lobe, making him arch against me and whimper in pleasure.

I love how responsive he is to everything I do to him.

"Shane..." he breathes out, and my heart rate goes from fifty to a hundred in a second.

I've never loved my name as much as I do when it falls from his lips.

"I need to touch you," I growl against Jamie's ear. I love how his body shudders, and I love the little sounds of pleasure he lets out.

I move away slightly to pull my shirt over my head, because right now I need skin-on-skin contact with Jamie. Once I'm done with mine, I turn to Jamie, who has his eyes glued to my exposed body. The way they roam my chest and my arms, and the way his tongue peeks out, tells me how much he likes what he sees.

I've never been interested in how my body looks, but now I'm glad for the time I've spent at the gym.

I take my time to unbutton his shirt and kiss every part of his skin I reveal. Once I'm done I peel it open, loving what I'm seeing.

"You're beautiful, baby." Jamie's skin is pale and soft to the touch.

"You are handsome," he says while placing his hands on my shoulders, and sliding them down to touch my biceps.

I push the two sides of his shirt out of the way and plant a kiss on his clavicle, and then I follow an imaginary trail down to his nipple.

I lick there, and when Jamie trembles and pushes his chest up, I suck it inside my mouth until it's hard and wet and Jamie is humping my leg.

"Oh, God..." Jamie whimpers, pushing me to take and give more.

I let the little nub go and bestow the same treatment on the other, and I'm in heaven when Jamie takes my head in between his hands and pushes me close, wanting more. I'm more than willing to please him, and I increase my effort to bring him pleasure.

"Shane..."

"Yes, baby." I soothe him, after letting go of my treasure.

"I need more," he whines, and my cock nearly breaks through my zipper at the want in his voice.

I push his shirt off as slowly as my need for him allows me. I kiss every inch of skin I discover and love every single shiver going through Jamie's body. I let go of his shirt only after I drive it over his shoulders, so that his chest is now completely exposed to my gaze.

I kiss and lick my way back to the centre and then find the hollow of his neck. I suck that sensible area, enjoying the body shiver taking over Jamie. I love the way he throws his head back to give me the space I need to explore.

There's nothing more exciting than Jamie trusting me.

I return to his mouth to steal another kiss, never satiated by his sweetness. Again,

Jamie opens up as soon as our lips touch. I slide my fingers down, caressing his sides until I reach the hem of his trousers, then slide my fingers to his front until I find the button.

I play with it without pulling it open, and when Jamie thrusts his hips as if searching for my touch, I'm more than happy to oblige. I move my fingers until they touch his erection straining against the zipper. Jamie's breath accelerates, sounding like a plane taking off the ground. That's where I want him to be.

I want him soaring into the sky, free from the burdens of past memories.

I want him happy, free and utterly mine.

When Jamie's legs give out under the insistence of my touch, I pull away.

"Baby, let's move to the bed," I whisper in his ear after releasing his mouth.

"Yeah," he answers, but he doesn't move.

I embrace him, pulling him away from the door, turning us until we're side by side. Then, using my body as a support, I walk to the bed and gently help Jamie to lie on it.

I watch him from above, enjoying his naked chest, his open trousers, and most of all the erection peeking out from his boxers. He looks so devastatingly beautiful with his reddish face, bright and dreamy big eyes, and raw puffy lips all because of my kisses.

I need so much more, because only a taste of Jamie is not enough to quench my thirst.

"Baby, I'm removing your trousers and boxers."

"Yes, please. I want to feel you."

I lean in and pull the zipper down, slip my hand in between, and then slide everything down until his cock is standing proud and his body is on display for me to enjoy. For me to make it mine.

“Touch me,” Jamie demands.

There’s nothing I want more than to devour him, but I can’t forget what he went through, and I need him to tell me when he’s ready for more.

Jamie places a hand at the nape of my neck, the heat of his palm seeping through my body and making my groin burn. “You. Me. Us. Nothing has ever felt so right.”

Leaning in to steal his lips in another kiss, and then another, and so many more, I press my body over his, never letting my full weight sink, afraid it’ll scare him.

Instead, as soon as my body is pressed against his, Jamie pulls me even closer, and his legs cross over my arse. His hips push up looking for more contact, and his hands skim down my back and cup my cheeks, pulling me against him as he pushes up.

His touch burns even through my clothes and makes me lose my mind.

“Love, I need to be naked. I need to be inside you.”

Jamie’s hands fly from my cheeks to the button of my trousers, and I chuckle at his impatience. But it soon dies when he presses his palm against my hard-on and nearly makes me come.

My groan fills the room, spurring Jamie on to have me naked.

He tugs at my clothes, trying to get rid of them, but my weight is keeping them in place. So I help him, and I hiss when his fingers scrape at my thighs, starting a fire

that spreads toward the part of me desperate for his touch.

Once everything is on the floor, I resume my position on top of him, but angle my body so I can reach his cock while I explore the rest of him.

“Touch me, Shay.”

I do. I wrap my hand around him, loving how hot he is. I slide up and rub my palm over his head to gather his precum, and then slide down to the root, making Jamie’s back arch of the bed. I take his nipple closer to me inside my mouth, and work on making him crazy by nibbling on it and then flicking my tongue to soothe it.

I let him go and reach for the drawer to grab a condom and lube, and throw them on the bed while I resume pleasuring Jamie. I get up on my knees without letting go of him, and with my free hand I open the lube. I squeeze some onto my finger, and after warming it up, I trail down his cock, until I reach his perineum and rub him there.

Jamie goes wild. His head pushes against the sheet, as if trying to get away from me, while his hips arch off the bed to heighten the contact. I rub him there until his legs tremble and he’s sobbing in pleasure. Only then do I move to caress his hole, over and over, until it relaxes and opens a little as if inviting me to enter.

I do, because there is nothing I want more than to be inside him and make him mine forever.

When I push in, his legs close a little and then fall open again as if giving me permission to go deeper. I push in to the second knuckle, and then stop to give Jamie time to get used to me. I pull back and push in a couple of times, and then press two fingers inside him. He hisses, and I pull back slightly, opening my fingers to create more space, and then I push in again. I do this until I can push my fingers in with only a small resistance, and then I move my fingers around until Jamie shouts and

arches up.

“Shay...” His trembling voice matches his trembling body. His hands roam over those parts of my body he can reach, and I love every single touch.

“Soon, love.”

I press over and over against his prostate, until his passage relaxes enough for me to press three fingers in, and I resume my ministrations until I’m sure he’s ready to accept me.

I take my place in between his legs, after pulling them up to accommodate me. I lean in and whisper against his ear. “Love, I’m going to push in.”

“Please, Shay...” he says in a desperate tone that matches my need to be inside him.

I search for the condom with my hand, then tear the packet open and put it on before taking Jamie’s lips in a kiss. I push in, stopping only when there’s too much resistance.

I let go of his lips, needing to tell him what’s in my heart. “I love you, Jamie,” I say.

He opens his eyes and focuses them on me. “I love you, Shay.”

I seal our declaration of love by pushing all the way inside him. I grit my teeth to stop myself from coming too soon.

I’m inside Jamie.

“Are you okay?” I ask Jamie.

“Yes. Please move, now.”

And I do, surging inside him over and over again, bumping against Jamie’s prostate every other push, until he’s shouting and coming all over his chest. I don’t stop, and while he contracts around my cock in the aftermath of his orgasm, I come deep inside him.

I stay inside him while I cover his body with mine and land another kiss on his lips.

We stay close for a while, both of us trying to get our breaths back to normal. There’s no need for words because our bodies express what there is inside our hearts.

When Jamie’s hands move and caress my skin, I lift up, feeling the need to look at him. To make sure we’re on the same page, to make sure that what we shared wasn’t on the spur of the moment. I place my hand on his face and rub my thumb on his lips. His eyes when they open are as bright as the sun, and the joy inside them warms me up a little bit more.

“Thank you.”

“I’m glad it was you,” Jamie says.

“I love you.” I want him to know, now that our minds are free from lust.

“I love you too.”

I kiss him, feeling as if I don’t deserve him. I made his life impossible, and here he is giving himself to me, as if I’m worthy of him. I’m not, but I’ll do everything in my power to make him happy.

Jamie will never have to regret giving me a second chance.

Chapter 23

Jamie

I open my eyes to a body that's achy but satisfied and a big body pressed so tight against me I can't move. Not that I want to. I want to spend hours, days, years with Shane pressed against me.

We spent the weekend together, and he's been a revelation. What I'd seen up until recently was nothing like the real Shane, the one I met these last few days. His passion for motorbikes is the most surprising thing, and I can't wait to do it all over again, maybe next weekend.

We really shed our masks and let our true selves roam free.

My alarm goes off, and I groan, unhappy that life is calling me back to reality. A reality where I can't spend all my time with Shane.

"Morning, sunshine," Shane whispers against my skin, awakening all my cells and all my wants.

"Morning," I say while turning around to face him. When my alarm goes off again, I groan and Shane grins.

I lean in to give him a peck on the lips, but it's not enough to satisfy either of us. So Shane pulls up on his elbow and leans in, taking my mouth in a deep and very welcome kiss. I open, and caress his lower lip with the tip of my tongue. Shane

groans and takes ownership by invading my mouth with his.

When he pulls back, we're both very ready to continue, but my alarm once again breaks the moment.

"Reality check."

"Yeah, I wish I could stay here."

"I wish you could stay here too, but we both need to work." It's not a good idea to piss Shane's father off more than he already is.

"Mmmh, I have better ideas for how to spend our days."

"I have one that we can do now." His wicked smile makes my cock take notice.

I lean in and whisper against his lips, "I'm all ears." And I take a nip because I can't resist, and because I can. He's all mine.

Shane jumps out of bed and jogs around to my side, removes the covers, and takes my hand to help me out of bed. Then he walks to the bathroom, and only when he turns on the water in the shower do I understand his intentions, and I'm more than happy to see his idea through.

We remove our boxers, and then jump in. I moan under the first blast of hot water, just to shiver when Shane pushes me against the cold tiles.

"Cleaning up before going out is a good idea," he says, taking my lips in a kiss and forcing my mouth open with his tongue.

I give as good as I take, and use my hands to caress his nape, his shoulders, and trace

every muscle I find in my quest to his arse. The more I play with his body the closer Shane presses me against him. By the time I reach his cheeks, not even water can pass in between our bodies.

My head is spinning, and I'm nearly out of breath when he pulls away. I hear the sound of a cap being opened, and I watch Shane drop some shower gel into his hands.

"Let me clean you." His eyes roaming my body as if I'm a precious thing make my heart skip, and my body reacts.

"Please..."

I shiver when his hands land on my shoulders and then slide until they're at the sides of my neck, and then back to my shoulder. Then they move down to my chest making my nipples hard without even touching them. When he does, my knees buckle. I never knew my nipples were that sensitive.

Shane's fingers play with them, pinching and scraping until my cock is jutting out, as if trying to reach Shane or inviting him to take it in his hand. I moan when he pinches me harder than before, and precum forms at my tip.

I glance at his face and his satisfied expression makes me rebel. So I do the same. I pick up the shower gel bottle and place some of the gel in my hand, and I mimic what Shane is doing to me.

Damn. I never knew how hot it would be to make him crazy for me.

I play with his nipples, and I love how his breath speeds up and a warm puff of his breath washes over my face. I groan when he does the same to me, and then we're kissing as if we haven't done so for years, taking everything each other has to offer.

I trail down, stopping to wash and play with the muscles of his abdomen, until his breath catches and he brushes his now standing-up-proud cock against my arm.

Shane does the same with me and then drops his fingers down to play with the fine hair on my groin, and overwhelmed with desire I push against him, to rub my erection on him. I move two or three times while he teases me, until I remember I need and want to do the same to him.

It doesn't take long for the both of us to press close, and to circle both of our cocks with our hands.

"Oh, fuck. You feel so good," Shane says just before stealing a kiss.

"You too." My words end on a whine as I come all over us.

"I love your ideas."

"I love my ideas when you are involved."

My alarm goes off in the other room. We make quick work of washing up this time, and are soon out of the shower.

We kiss for a long moment as if we are going to be separated for months.

"Love you," Shane says while pulling me against him again before I open the door.

"Love you too." I say, before stealing another kiss.

Leaving is a hard moment, but knowing I'll be with him soon is a sweet one.

When I arrive at the office later than usual, because I had to stop home to get

changed, Alexi is already there.

“Hey man.” A smile as big as eternity is plastered on my face.

“Hey,” he says, glancing up at me. “Someone’s happy.”

“I am. Totally in love with him.”

Something passes over Alexi’s face, and before I can ask he continues. “We have to talk, and you’re not going to like it.”

Not what I want to hear after spending some happy time with Shane.

“I’m ready.” But I’m not sure I am.

“You know how diligent I am in my work. Before deciding, I have to ponder all the variables.”

“Yes,” I say and nod, because he is that anal. But I’m grateful for it, because Alexi has saved our asses more than once.

“I had a chat with one of my contacts, and apparently Proud to Be is up for grabs.”

“What?” Why did Shane not say anything? Does he know?

“Yes. It is not advertised, though. I don’t think they want people to know.”

Or just one person.

“Can I buy it?”

“I knew you’d say something like that, so I’ve already put a feeler out.”

I walk to him and plant a kiss on his forehead. “That’s why I love you, you wonderful man.”

“I love you too, you pain in my arse.”

“It has to be mine. I don’t want anyone knowing I’m buying, and I don’t want to fight to have it.”

“I’ll make him an offer he can’t refuse.”

I chuckle at the Godfather reference. “Thank you, man.”

I don’t want that bastard to win. I’m tired of him owning Shane because of the things he loves.

This time I’m going to set him free.

Three weeks. It took us three weeks to settle everything down.

Twenty-one bloody days spent away from Shane. I only had time to text when I was in between meetings, and I couldn’t spend the night because Alexi and I were planning the next move to win.

Turns out that buying another company is a bloody long process, and finding the money to buy it’s even more complicated. I couldn’t have done it without Alexi, Ruby, and Liam. They all chipped in, with Alexi being the face of the operation and the mind behind it, and with Liam’s help and talent in knowing when to make a move, we were able to beat the competition.

There's only one more thing I need to do, so everything is how it should be.

"Jamie Wilson," I say when I approach the reception.

"Good morning, sir. Eleventh floor," she says after checking the screen.

I press the button after entering the lift, and then nervously tap my fingers on my thigh until the door opens and I put my mask on.

No weaknesses today.

I walk out of the lift, and I'm welcomed by another desk, but there's no person to welcome me. I stand there, unsure of what to do, when voices coming from the door behind the desk get my attention.

I recognise one of the voices, so I walk towards the door.

"Sir? Sir, please. You can't go in. I have to let Mr Campbell know you have arrived."

I glance at the person, noticing how far they are from me, and then ignore their request to stop, open the door, walk in, and close it behind my back.

The first thing I notice is Shane. He's wild, something I've never seen before. He's usually so controlled and calm, but now it seems as if he can't contain the rage he has inside.

"How could you?" he shouts.

I hate when his father looks at him as if he's a fly bothering him.

"It's my company, and I can do what I want with it."

“You promised. I did everything you asked of me.”

“I told you to stop wasting time with it.”

Shane goes to talk, but his father raises a hand, shutting him down.

“You always do what you want and then cry when things don’t go your way.”

“In my life I’ve only asked you for one thing, and that was to keep the foundation.”

“I did, while it was useful for me. Now it’s not.”

“You did it to punish me, didn’t you? Because I didn’t come back when you asked me to. I was injured, and you never even asked me how I was. What the fuck am I to you?”

“I do not tolerate this language. If you have to resort to this, leave my office.”

That’s enough for me. I won’t allow anyone to treat Shane this way. This fucktard doesn’t deserve him.

I clear my throat, and two surprised faces turn towards me.

I love how Shane’s features go from angry and upset to sparkling with the love he has for me.

“Jamie? What are you doing here?”

“Shane,” I say to him, my voice going all soft and soaked with longing. I’ve missed him so damn much.

“Who are you?” His father has the same voice I remember from the past, but right now it’s missing its usual charisma. He’s aged, and not in a gracious way. Now more than ever, the dark heart he has shows on his ugly face, transforming the once likable man into a mean one.

At the same time Shane asks, “What are you doing here?”

I reply to the old man. “Jamie Wilson. Your appointment.”

“Hi Shane.” I smile at him, trying to convey that everything’s fine, that he no longer has to worry about his father.

“Hi,” he says with confusion showing in his tone and on his face. “What—“ Shane never gets to finish because his dad jumps in.

“Do you know him?” he asks Shane, and then he turns towards me and with manners as fake as a one-pound bill says, “I’m sorry about my secretary. She should have waited to let you in until I was done with this meeting with my employee.”

“You mean Shane, your son, right?” I can’t stand this man and I’ve been here less than a minute.

“Who are you, again?” I love how suspicious he’s become, only because I mentioned Shane and son in the same sentence.

“Someone who can buy your company and everything inside it.”

“My company is not for sale.”

“Only because Shane doesn’t want it.” I wink at Shane and then return my attention to his father. I love to see the anger in his eyes.

“Then why are you here?” he bites back, but I had worse bullies than him growing up.

“I’m here to thank you.”

“What? Why?” he asks, surprised.

“For Shane and for the foundation.”

“That’s my foundation, and I won’t allow a charity case like you to use it to your advantage,” Mr Campbell says, and I hate that he doesn’t acknowledge Shane even now.

I smirk. “It’s not your foundation anymore. It’s Shane’s. If he wants it.” I turn to look at my lover for a second, and smile at him, then turn back to his father. I love to see his face is going white, as if he’s seen a ghost.

“Shane can’t run your foundation, he works for me.”

“I’m not. I’m resigning now.” He looks at me and I nod, hoping he understands how proud of him I am right now.

I love to see Shane’s face illuminated by a smile, a proud one, because for the first time he’s facing his fears and coming to terms with his regrets.

“If you do this, you’ll no longer be part of the family.”

A snake is always a snake, and that’s what Shane’s father is. That’s a low blow, so I move closer to Shane in my need to protect him from this monster. Instead he stands proud and fearless, and so fucking hot I want to whisk him away so we can do wicked things together.

“I never was part of the family. You made it clear over and over again, every single time I didn’t rise to match your expectations. You know what? I’m tired of not being enough or not being what you want. I am me, and I’m proud of what I’ve achieved.” Shane’s gaze lands on me and I don’t like the shame showing on his face. So I walk closer to him and stand at his side, telling him without words that I’m proud of him too.

I’m not denying the bad things that happened between us, but I can’t blame him for doing everything he could to be part of a family he loved and should have loved him.

We will have to work through our past, but I’m sure that with the love we share we’ll make it.

“I’ll strip you of your name.”

“I never wanted it.” He trembles while he says that, so I take his hand in mine, not worrying about what this despicable man will think. I’m past worrying about what others think, and I have enough money to crush him and his company.

“Leave,” Mr Campbell says, his eyes sending daggers my way, and I’ll never be so proud of being hated by someone.

“I’ll take good care of him,” I say to him before closing the door behind me. I look at Shane, and the trembling smile on his lips has me wanting to hug him, not caring about the people surrounding us, but I don’t want our love to be displayed in front of everyone. It’s still so fresh and new that I want to hide it from everyone’s eyes, just in case they ruin it like they did ten years ago.

I jump out of my skin when Shane takes my hand in his, and with his head raised high walks away from his old company, from his family, from his past, and into the future.

A future I swear to make amazing for the both of us.

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 10:08 am

Jamie

Six months later

I roll the liquid around inside the glass, wondering how long I have to stay so as not to look rude. Glancing around, I watch everyone engaged in conversations, all happy to be here.

I would be happy if it weren't for the fact that Shane wasn't next to me. He promised to spend time with me, so here I am, passing time before he shows up.

I let my mind wander to the last six months we've spent together. We still have our own places, but Shane spends most of his time at mine, unless he's busy like today, and then it's me following him around.

I would never have guessed that Shane was—is—as broken as I am. That horrible day robbed him of his life just as much as it did mine.

Can I say we are no longer broken?

No. I can't.

There are days when I'm still angry at him because he chose to follow his father's teachings and have an easy life.

There are other days that we support each other through the difficulties of life.

Then there are those days... the days I love the most, when everything but us seems unimportant. Those days when we love each other like we did ten years ago. No judgment, no fear, and no trauma.

I love those days. We take the bike and go out for a ride. A freedom I never had before fills me, and some of the pain goes away.

Our life is not a bed of roses, but I wouldn't change any of it.

I love when I'm at my desk and Shane and Queeny come in to pull me out and remind me I have a life outside of work. Shane always brings a cup of hot chocolate because life is better with something sweet. Then he pulls me up and moves us around until I'm sitting on his lap. Once we're settled, he does things to me that make Queeny run away.

Even my Queeny loves Shane. Sometimes I believe she loves him more than me, but I don't complain. After all, he risked his life to save hers.

I take a sip of my drink and glance around the room again. I don't want to be someone else anymore. I'm happy to be me.

Movement to my right pulls me away from my thoughts. I watch as his lips touch the glass, and then my face goes up in flames when he licks them, and my cock pushes against my slacks.

"That should be illegal," I murmur to myself, but the laugh coming from him tells me I wasn't low enough.

"Red really suits you," he says, leaning so close that his breath washes over me, capturing all my attention.

My face gets even brighter, but his wink makes me laugh.

He smiles at me, leaning closer, leaving about an inch between our lips. “Have we met before?”

I shake my head, trying to bring the blood back. “Yes, we have. It’s John , isn’t it?”

His laugh fills the room, and every head turns around to look at us.

“Can I show you the gardens, Kitty ?”

Silly man, using those silly nicknames we gave each other at the charity event. It’s been a long time since I thought about the encounter that set us up to overcome the past and finally have a go at loving each other.

“You can show me everything, love,” I say, pulling him closer to kiss him.

“Are you okay?”

“I’m always okay when you’re with me, John .”

“Good,” he says, playing with my tie.

I don’t force him to tell me what’s on his mind because we’re past the time when he didn’t share with me.

We tell each other everything, the good, the bad, and what’s in between. No secrets and no hiding, only love and acceptance for the imperfect people we are.

“I love you,” he says, and my lips curve in a small smile.

I live for those moments when he tells me and I get the chance to say it back. “I love you too.”

“Enough to live with me twenty-four seven?”

I take his face in between my palms. “You. Shane. Campbell. Make. Me. Happy.” I stress each word with a kiss. I love how his lips tremble and how his arms pull me towards him to keep me close. “I want to live with you until we’re old and grey.”

“I want that too, Kitty.”

“Then take me home and make me happy,” I whisper against his ear, and I chuckle when he shivers and curses.

“Oh, damn,” he says, standing up and pulling me with him. “Forever, Kitty. I’ll make you happy forever.”

I still can’t believe he’s mine.

But there is one thing I trust.

I’ll fight everyone and everything to have him, to keep him, to love him.

Every minute.

Every day.

Forever .