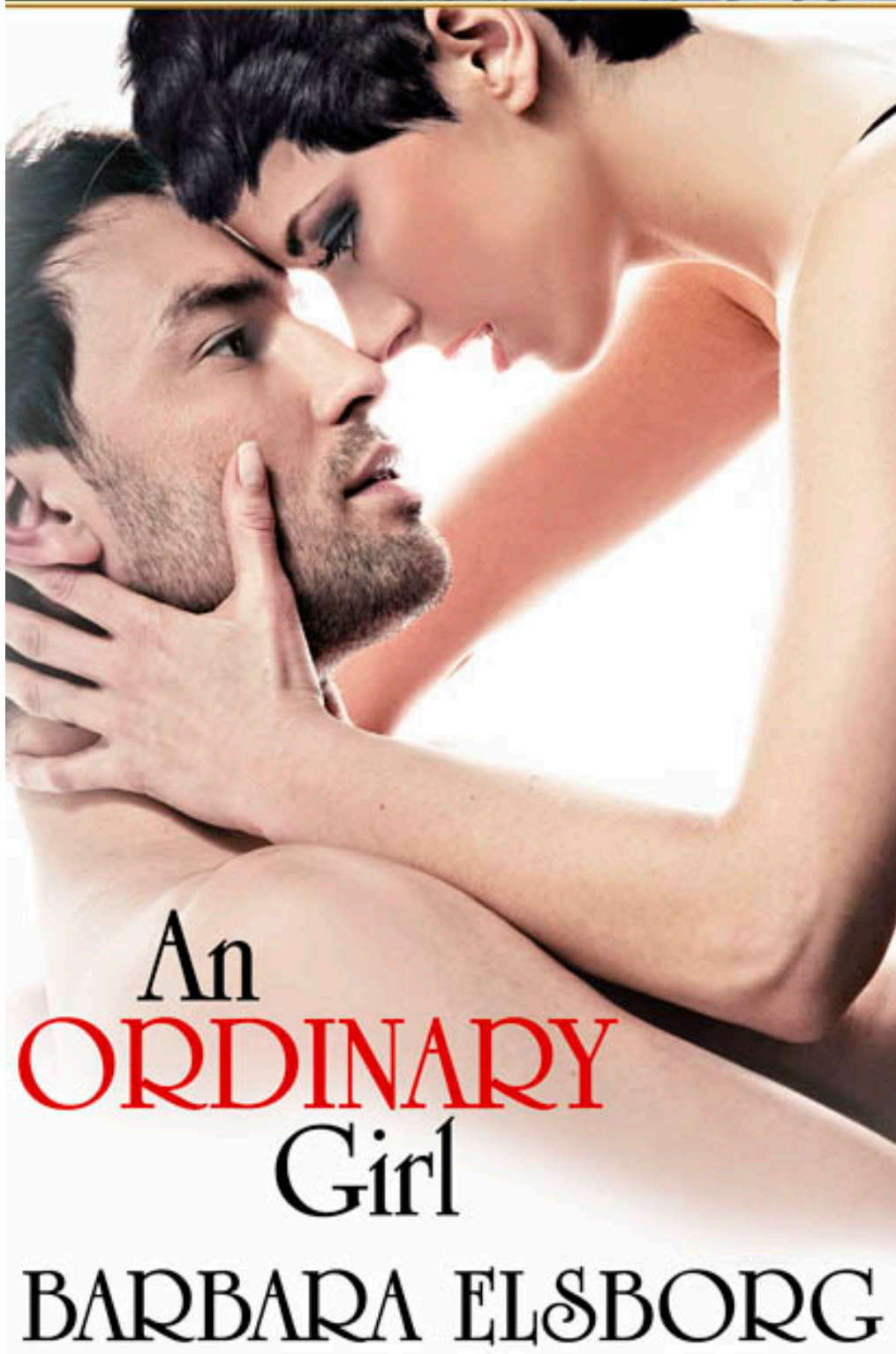


ELLORA'S CAVE *Moderne*



An
ORDINARY
Girl

BARBARA ELSBORG

An Ordinary Girl

Barbara Elsborg

Ash is an ordinary girl, leading an ordinary life, but behind her smile she hides a secret so damning she's sure no one could ever love her.

Noah is a war photographer who's come back from Afghanistan with a secret so dark he can't escape its smothering grip.

Both need redemption. Ash looks for it by making people happy. Noah seeks it under the whip of a Dom. They're damaged souls, drowning in guilt, unable to escape the legacies of their pasts. Then their worlds collide in an explosion of fireworks so strong it singes not only them, but those around them. It's said love heals all wounds, but sometimes before love enters the heart, the intense fire of passion has to burn a path, lighting the way.

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An Ordinary Girl

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AN ORDINARY GIRL

Barbara Elsborg

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Chapter One

Noah was a bad boy.

As the leather strap tightened around his balls, pain surged into his left leg. Noah jerked and a loud groan escaped his lips. *Fuck it.*

"Sorry," Noah panted.

The masked face moved closer to his. "I don't think you're sorry at all. My instructions were quite clear. I said don't move and you moved. I said no sound and you not only groaned you compounded your error by speaking."

A muscle in Noah's leg had gone into spasm. He hadn't been able to help moving, but he knew in this room there was no excuse. He hung naked from a hook, secured by his wrists, feet just touching the floor, backside pressed against the wall. The leather cuffs were tight but lined with silk to leave no mark. Considering what went on in here, the irony didn't escape him. Nor did the sad truth that he was paying for this crap.

Apart from Noah and his tormentor, the room was empty. The windows were covered. Nothing hung on the walls. The floor was sanded boards. But the air swirled with Noah's pain and humiliation along with the Dom's lust and excitement.

The masked man spun him to face the wall and Noah automatically braced himself, his shoulders tensing.

"Don't move," the guy snapped.

Christ. All he'd done was — The crack sounded overloud as the whip snapped in the air. Noah held his breath and waited. The Dom feathered the whip down his back, over his butt and legs in gentle, delicate lashes, though Noah flinched at each one because he knew what was coming.

He pressed his cheek to the rough plaster and fixed his gaze on a stain where a bug had been squashed on the adjacent wall. The parallel with his situation was something else that didn't escape him. Noah sucked in a breath. Crazy that he could be thinking with any clarity while at the mercy of a sadist, yet wasn't that what he was paying for? The lashes grew stronger, faster and turned cruel. Fiery rain fell on his skin, heat ripping through him until his entire body blazed. Noah bit into his cheeks to stop himself from calling out and tasted blood.

The Dom grunted as he struck him. Noah didn't want any lasting scars. Those he had were enough. What he needed was the pain, to be burned by the whip, for angry welts to be raised on his skin but no more.

Yet it wasn't enough. Nothing was ever enough.

Clear thinking, my ass.

The whip landed more gently on his shoulder and the tail slithered the length of his spine to trickle down the crease of his butt. The guy came up close, pressed his body into Noah's tender back and jammed the hard ridge of an erection against him.

"I can't go any further without shedding blood," the Dom said in a cool voice. "We should try something new."

He moved back and Noah felt the pressure of the whip handle nudge his anus.

"No," Noah barked.

Spun round to face his tormentor, he wondered if he'd be made to pay for that denial. Noah was supposed to be in control, wasn't he? Wasn't that what this was all about? The submissive had all the power. He only needed to say one word to make it end.

So why had he blurted "no" and not the safe word?

Because I don't want this to stop. Noah filled his lungs and yet felt as if he'd dragged in no air. He was afraid he wanted to let things go too far.

The Dom stared at him. The mask covered three quarters of his face. All Noah could see were dark brown eyes, tight lips and a square chin.

"Why do you want to be whipped?" the Dom asked.

"Why do you like to whip?" Noah sucked in his cheeks. If he was going to be punished for not answering, he might as well make his defiance worthwhile.

"Power," the Dom said. He trailed the whip handle from Noah's shoulder to his groin and pressed it into the delicate skin of the crease. "Pleasure." He teased Noah's erection, held tight in a leather cage, tip exposed, rubbing it with the warm handle. "The combination of sex and danger is a huge rush."

Noah had noticed. He looked down at the Dom's massive boner. The naked body was that of a man no older than Noah but with a superior physique, one honed at a gym. He wondered what the guy did for a living, whether he had a wife and kids, whether he was only like this inside this room. Could Noah divide his life in the same way? Was that the way forward he was looking for?

"In my hands, this whip can be as soft as a lover's tongue, explosive as lightning or vicious as a tiger's claw. I use it to bring what my subs desire. But you..." His voice trailed into silence.

"But me what?" Noah asked.

A hand circled his cock and squeezed. Noah restrained his shudder of fear.

"The whole point of these sessions is that they're the meeting of opposites. I like to hurt and you should like to *be* hurt, but that's not what's happening. You feel no pleasure when I inflict pain. Lucky for you, I'm capable of stopping."

A brush over Noah's glistening cock head and the guy brought his thumb to Noah's mouth and rubbed it over his tongue before Noah could press his lips together.

"You're not a pain slut," the Dom said. "There's nothing submissive about you. No matter how hard you try to play the game, I know you don't like to be dominated. Neither is this a sexual thing for you."

Try telling my cock that. Noah's dick was erect despite his mental pleading. He wasn't gay, so why the fuck did the thing have to fill with blood?

"The only thing that allows me to encourage you to keep coming here is that I like to be cruel, and whatever else is happening in this room, you're suffering and that pleases me. What I'm not sure about is whether I'm the cause." His mouth quirked in a grin. "I fear not. So in order to rectify that, I'm inclined to find a way of persuading you to tell me what the fuck is wrong with you."

Noah didn't like the sound of that. "This is about punishment. That's all." The lump in his throat grew larger.

"Punishment for what?"

"Something that has nothing to do with you."

The Dom's eyes darkened. He stared at Noah for a long time before he moved away. He came back holding a length of black material and a sharp knife, the blade glittering under the spotlights. Noah's balls tingled. *Fuck, fuck, fuck.*

"You're here in my realm where I am king. It has everything to do with me." He tied a blindfold around Noah's eyes.

"No." Noah struggled, thrashing from side to side, but the world disappeared. He wanted to scream his safe word, it hovered on his lips, but the knowledge that he didn't deserve to say it kept him quiet.

"Hold still," the Dom snapped.

Noah stopped moving, but his breathing was ragged. It ceased altogether when he felt something sharp press into his chest below his breastbone. *Oh shit.*

"What are you escaping from?" The Dom's voice was smooth, deep and hypnotic. "The stresses of life? Conflicted about your sexuality? Overwhelmed by onerous responsibility? Guilt? What did you do?"

Noah could feel himself shaking, limbs twitching, jaw juddering.

"Answer," the Dom growled.

He trailed the blade up Noah's chest to his collarbone. *Is he cutting me?* For a split second Noah wished the guy would kill him. Then common sense kicked in. If he died like this, his father would kill the Dom and join him in hell. Not a pleasant thought.

"How did you get those scars? They look new."

Noah's brain lost connection with his mouth.

"This knife is sharp. Don't make me force you to speak."

"An explosion," Noah blurted.

The Dom sighed. "You gave that up much too easily – which proves my point."

Rage roared through Noah. He was *not* a coward. Not one more word.

The knife slid down Noah's body toward his cock. His belly tensed and he clenched his fists in the cuffs.

The Dom's laugh echoed in the room. "Some find knife play highly erotic." The blade reached Noah's groin. "How do you feel?"

Scared shitless. Afraid I'll wet myself. Afraid I'll tell you the truth. Noah tried to bring moisture back to his mouth and failed.

"Intense physical and psychological reactions are normal when someone is afraid. A raging erection or a wilting cock. Tears or laughter. Pleading or silence. I've seen them all. But don't worry. I'm an expert in knife play."

The blade caressed his balls and Noah felt them run for cover. His bloody cock remained hard. *Idiot.*

"Are you a guy who wants to live on the edge?" the Dom asked. "You like tasting danger? Or do you just like being controlled by someone stronger than you?" The man's sweet breath washed against Noah's cheek. "Does that make you feel safe and protected? The thought that you can cede control to another? Answer."

"No."

The Dom laughed. "I didn't think so. You *do* have some sort of control issue though. I just can't quite figure it out. Nor how far you want me to go." The blade rose to linger on Noah's ribs and pressed between them.

He's cutting me. Noah began to shake. *I could tell him. I could tell him.*

"You only have to say the word if you want me to stop. Pain or pleasure? Your choice."

And like that, the moment was lost because this was about neither pain nor pleasure. Only about choice.

"Nikon," Noah said, and the blade fell away.

The blindfold dropped from his eyes and he looked at the blunt knife in the Dom's hand and then down to the sharp one on the floor.

"I don't take stupid risks especially with people I don't understand." The Dom freed Noah's hands.

His entire body hurt, but the pain in his arms made him gasp. Noah fumbled with the contraption around his cock and balls.

"Need help?" the Dom asked.

Christ no. "I got it."

Noah sighed when the last leather strap fell away. He looked straight into the eyes of the man he paid to torment him. "I'm not coming back."

"That's what you said last time."

"I mean it," Noah snapped.

"You said that too."

The Dom caught hold of Noah's hair and yanked his head back. *Shit, that hurt.*

"You *will* tell me what the hell it is you're hiding. I know you want to. What did you do? Fuck your mother?"

"I'm not a fucking pervert. My mother's dead."

"Did you kill her?"

"No. I wish I had."

The Dom smiled and let him go. Noah headed for his clothes and dressed as fast as he could.

"Give me a call," the Dom said.

"I won't be doing that." Noah opened the door.

"I'm cheaper than a psychiatrist and much more fun." The guy laughed.

Noah slammed the door behind him in a fit of childish pique and clattered down the stairs to emerge onto a bustling Knightsbridge street.

* * * * *

Ash was a good girl. Everyone said so. She'd just given up her seat on the bus to an elderly lady and been rewarded with a big smile. On her way home, after a day working as an advisor for the Citizens Advice Bureau, the CAB, Ash was brimming with thanks.

"I don't know what we'd do without you, Ash," Phil Smith, head of southeast London's CAB, had said.

Maisie Blackburn clutched Ash's arm before she left work. "You've saved my life. It's thanks to you we still have our home."

Then Karl Williams had collared her outside the door. "I don't know how you persuaded them all to agree, but I'm certain I can manage the debt now, Ms. Elleston. You're a star."

The old lady got off the bus, and before Ash could reclaim her seat, a teenager grabbed it, the thumping music coming from his earphones audible to everyone in the vicinity. Ash thought better of advising him he'd damage his hearing. She clung to the pole and tried not to inhale the body odor of the guy standing next to her.

One day a week, Ash worked as an advisor for the CAB, a registered charity reliant on the services of volunteers, providing support for local communities. She'd been trained to help people resolve legal, financial and every other sort of problem by providing independent, confidential advice that was totally free. It was fascinating work and it made Ash feel good when she managed to sort out issues people had been unable to deal with themselves.

Extra-good when they told her how grateful they were.

Until pangs of guilt hit hard, because how could it be right to feel do-goody satisfaction by helping unhappy people? By the end of a day spent listening to a catalogue of disasters ranging from workmen who'd left a bathroom without running

water, to a woman who just needed to talk to someone after she'd had to put down a dog she'd had for seventeen years, Ash's warm feeling had usually submerged under exhaustion though she never let it show. Ash never let anything show.

By the time she opened the door of the house in Greenwich she shared with three others, Ash had her happy face firmly in place. Ronan's motorcycle leathers lay sprawled up the stairs like a headless drunk, and Ash hung them on the hook. She went into the kitchen to find Ronan wearing a suit and pacing. It was the first time she'd seen the six-two guy in anything smart. Ash hadn't known he even had a suit.

"I'm not late, am I?" she asked.

"No. I'm just anxious to get this over with."

Ash sighed. "I'll go and get changed."

Ronan followed her up the stairs. "What are you going to wear? The blue dress with the daisies?"

"If you like."

"Your heels?"

"Whatever you want, Ronan." Ash tossed her coat on the bed.

"I'll look through your wardrobe while you shower."

This was not an evening she looked forward to. She shouldn't have agreed to go, but Ronan had pleaded, and Ash had given in. She was a pushover and Ronan a skilled persuader.

She emerged from the bathroom to find Mr. Control-freak had gone though he'd laid out her clothes on the bed. Ash towel-dried her short, black hair, sprayed it with a stay-in conditioner and slipped into the dress. Shoes and jacket on, she went downstairs.

Mike, her other male housemate, was in the kitchen with Ronan.

"Oh, the luscious girlfriend." Mike winked at her.

"You look great," Ronan said. "Ready to go?"

Ash nodded.

Mike put his mouth to her ear. "Don't use tongues. You don't know where his has been."

"I heard that," Ronan said.

"You were meant to." Mike grinned.

Ronan grabbed Ash's hand and propelled her out of the house in the direction of the station.

"Sure you can remember everything I told you?" he asked.

"Yes, but –"

"My dad despises liberals, vegetarians, cats and me."

"Don't you –"

"Oh, and don't bring up global warming unless you want a lecture."

Ash yanked at his hand. "Ronan, you've not seen your parents for ten years. I don't think your father wants to talk about global warming."

He shot her an anguished glance. This was a Ronan she'd never seen before. He was usually so cool and collected.

"You're scaring me," she said. "What's wrong?"

"They're my one weakness." Ronan's grip tightened. "What were your parents like?"

"Ordinary."

"Lucky you."

Ash smiled. "Yep, lucky me."

* * * * *

Ronan's parents were already seated in the restaurant. Ronan looked like his father—tall and fair-haired. He and his father shook hands. His mother hugged him. When she let Ronan go, there were tears in her eyes. She beamed at Ash, gave her a hug too, and Ash realized she'd been mistaken for Ronan's girlfriend. Ash wanted to kill her housemate. Ronan hadn't explained *why* he hadn't seen his parents for ten years and now Ash wondered if it was because he hadn't told them he was gay.

"How lovely to meet you, Ash. Please call me Dee."

"Stick to Your Honor for Dad," Ronan muttered, and his father glared.

Off to a good start then. It would be frighteningly easy to pretend Ronan and she were an item. They'd lived together for almost nine months, plenty of time to get to know each other, though of course, Ronan didn't really know her at all.

His mother quizzed her. "How long have you been together?"

"Nine months but—"

"He needs his hair cut, don't you think?"

Yes, Ash thought, he needed his hair cut.

Yes, Ash agreed, he was a brilliant artist.

No, she made him do his own ironing.

Ash kept kicking Ronan under the table, but he seemed intent on letting the ball roll, and in the end, Ash gave in. It wasn't her place to tell them Ronan wasn't gay. She found his father easier to get on with than Ronan had suggested, though his views on everything appeared alarmingly extreme.

"Do you ever sit on the fence?" Ash had asked, and he looked at her as though she'd sprouted horns.

"What would be the point in that? I'm a circuit judge. Life's all about making decisions. Some of them hard, but they have to be made."

Ash wondered if Ronan's mother ever got to have a say in anything. His father was like a tidal wave, and Ash didn't like being swamped or watching others submerge.

"How do you feel about people who don't have the same view as you?" Ash asked. "Candidates for being hung, drawn and quartered?"

Now it was Ronan kicking *her*.

"They're entitled to their opinion. They're just wrong." His father raised an eyebrow, as if challenging her to disagree.

"Do you believe in God?" Ash asked.

"Yes."

"Euthanasia?"

"No." Ash didn't miss the catch in his breath before he answered. The first sign of someone who wasn't in complete control.

"Capital punishment?"

"No."

"Racial equality?"

Ronan pinched her thigh.

"Yes, and sexual equality." His father smiled at her. "Though there are instances where equality is actually unfair. Women tennis players receive prize money well in excess of —"

"Ash, would you come and help me find the bathroom?" Dee rose to her feet.

A metaphorical pinch from Ronan's mother and Ash accompanied her.

As the door swung shut behind them, Dee turned to her. "Best not to get him worked up. His heart."

Ash was mortified. "I'm so sorry." She gulped. "Is that why you wanted to see Ronan again after all this time?"

"Not for Terrance, dear. For me. The doctor tells me I won't see another year."

Dee gave her a tight, little smile and Ash sagged.

"Coming face-to-face with your mortality puts things in perspective. I've found a strength these last couple of months that I didn't know I had. Terrance, on the other hand, has finally shown a weakness. Did Ronan tell you why we haven't spoken in ten years?" Dee asked.

Ash shook her head.

"His story to tell then."

"So, it's not when you found out he was...er...?" Ash crossed her fingers behind her back and hoped she'd not misjudged this.

"Gay?"

Ash frowned. "If you know, what was all that about how long we'd been together?"

"Because I had hoped he might be – ah well, I knew before he told me of course. He had far too much interest in the boy next door. Terrance didn't take it well, but it might have been all right had it not been for the 'incident'."

The incident that stopped him from speaking to his parents for ten years. Ash wondered if Ronan would ever tell her.

"We'll give them a bit longer. I'm hoping they manage to talk without biting each other's head off."

Oh God. "Does Ronan know about his dad's heart problem?"

"Terrance doesn't want Ronan to know, nor about me. He hates to think anyone would find him weak in any way. He only agreed to do this tonight because I begged him. I don't often do that. Ronan is exactly the same as his father. Pigheaded. I'm surprised but delighted he brought someone with him. How did he persuade you?"

"Thumb screws and the rack."

Dee laughed. "As controlling as his father too."

"Ronan is one of the nicest guys I've met. He'd rush to my protection in an instant. He's like the brother I wanted but never had." Ash took Dee's hand. "I think you should tell him the truth about why you wanted to see him. He'll make something up if you don't. We'll walk you back to the station and I'll go on ahead with your husband. I won't bring up global warming."

Dee laughed. "What a pity you two are only friends. I'd have liked you as a daughter."

Ronan shot Ash a suspicious look when they returned to the table, but she gave him a reassuring smile. Lack of communication was at the heart of so many problems. Most of what she listened to at the CAB was because people didn't talk to each other or didn't listen properly.

As they left the restaurant, Ash hooked her arm into the arm of Ronan's father. "It's warm, isn't it?"

Even as the words came out of her mouth, Ash realized her mistake. By the time they reached the station, she'd been subjected to a lecture on why those scientists who believed in global warming were wrong. The changes affecting the Earth were due more to natural climatic adjustments than a result of the burning of fossil fuels. Terrance was such an overwhelming wave of a man, Ash could see how hard it would be for Ronan to talk to him, though Ronan could be just as domineering. When they looked back, Ronan and his mother were a long way away down the road.

"Is she telling him?" Terrance asked.

Ash's heart hiccupped. She opened her mouth and then closed it again.

"I didn't want him to come tonight just because she's ill." His jaw twitched. "I wanted it... I don't want him to be...the way he is, but he's my son and I love him."

Ash regretted her earlier dislike of Ronan's father. She slid her hand into his and squeezed his fingers. "Tell him."

"What can I say?"

"Exactly what you just said to me. Sometimes life isn't a matter of choice. Ronan is who he is and nothing is going to change that. Life is short and precious. We should live it to the full."

Ash pulled away and went to stand in the entrance to the station, out of earshot. Ronan and his mother came up to his dad, and then Ronan threw his arms around his father. Ash held her breath until the embrace was returned and then she exhaled.

One housemate down, two to go.

That bit of meddling could have gone so wrong. Ronan was a lucky guy.

Chapter Two

Complete peace. It was only first thing in the morning that Ash felt as though the house belonged to her. She sat in the kitchen, cradling a mug of black coffee, listening to nothing. No water running, no one clattering up and down the stairs, no music playing.

Beeeeep. Beeeeep. Beeeeep.

Shhhhit. Ash grabbed a dishcloth and ran out of the kitchen, slamming the door behind her. She slapped air up and down over the hall smoke alarm until it stopped shrieking and then dashed back into the kitchen to find two uninviting slices poking out of the toaster.

Wails of annoyance sounded from upstairs and Ash winced. She opened the window to get rid of the acrid smell and then flicked the burnt offerings onto a plate. If her housemates wanted toast, there wasn't enough bread left for her to burn fresh ones for herself. Ash tried to scrape off the worst of the black bits and the toast fell apart. She carefully buttered the fragments and smeared them with Marmite. Enough of the black, salty spread and she'd not notice the taste of charcoal.

The door opened and Mike came in dragging his fingers through his shaggy, brown hair. "I'm beginning to wonder if your parents forgot to invite a fairy to your christening. Although maybe it's us who's cursed because we have to put up with you."

Ash sighed. "Sorry."

He smiled. "Hey, I'm kidding, little firestarter. That's only the second time this week, so you're getting better. And by the look of it, we don't need a new toaster." He flicked on the kettle and then gaped as he looked at her. "You're not eating that?"

"It's fine," Ash lied.

Mike grimaced. "How'd it go last night? They pencil in a date for your wedding?"

"They know Ronan's gay."

Mike almost dropped the milk. "So why the fuck hasn't he spoken to them for ten years?"

"No idea." Ash hadn't asked.

Mike snorted and poured two mugs of tea.

"Anyone I know?" Ash sipped her coffee.

"Nope. Her name's Sharon. Don't bother remembering it." He grinned.

Ash rolled her eyes and Mike left with the tea. He claimed he wanted a steady girlfriend, but Ash wasn't so sure. If he did, he'd need to learn that women didn't think a bag of chips in front of the TV was the perfect date. Ash rinsed her mug in the sink, threw away the rest of her toast and stared at the remains of the takeout Kay had

ordered last night. She *tsked* then scraped the rice into the bin and put the plate in the dishwasher.

In all Ash's twenty-seven years, she'd always shared her accommodations with someone—parents, care homes, foster parents. She often wondered what it would be like to live alone, to come home from work and find everything exactly as she'd left it. Lonely, she guessed. Yet wasn't that how she felt now? She shared a house with three friends who always seemed to have people staying—brothers, sisters, friends, lovers. Ash felt like an outsider. Maybe that would always be the case.

On her way to the stairs, she passed Mike's shoes, lying where he'd kicked them off, and she set them together on the mat. She'd resisted meddling on the way down only to capitulate on the way up. So much for her self-control.

She ran up the last flight to the top floor and sat on her bed with her phone to check that she'd had no new messages and to read *the* text again.

Something important to tell you. Garden at 10 on Friday? James x.

Ash smiled. Something important to tell her, in a place special to both of them and sealed with a kiss. *Yesssss*. She smiled through her shower, smiled as she dressed, undressed and dressed again until she was satisfied with the way she looked. Little pink dress and makeup.

By the time Ash went downstairs, the house was *their* house. She could hear Kay and Mike arguing in the kitchen. Ronan was on his way to the front door, gym bag over his shoulder, holding a slice of perfect toast, butter dripping onto the wooden floor.

"Morning, Ash." He grinned at her. "Thanks for the wakeup call."

"Sorry."

"Thanks for last night too. So today's the day?"

Ash groaned. "I thought you might have forgotten."

"You're kidding. You've talked about this guy for weeks. We've bought popcorn for when you sit and tell us all about it. It'll have to be tomorrow. Kay and I are working tonight. Nice dress. Good luck."

Ronan stuffed the last of the toast in his mouth and dashed out the door. He'd joined the gym where a guy he fancied worked then gone off the guy but not the gym.

Mike wolf-whistled when Ash walked into the kitchen. "My God. Legs. Bre—"

"Careful." Kay tapped him on the head with her cereal spoon then glared at the spoon and wiped it on her T-shirt.

"Do I look okay?" Ash asked.

"James won't recognize you," Kay said.

That wasn't what Ash wanted. "Too much makeup?" Her confidence poured from a widening crack.

"You don't need it," Mike said.

Kay mock glared at her. "You're so lucky. All that work outside in wind, rain and shine and your skin is perfect. I have to spend a fortune keeping spots under control."

Ash went back upstairs. If Kay got a zit on her face, it was as if the world had ended. The slightest blemish was subjected to a battle plan a general would be proud of. As Ash washed her face, she managed to spray water all over her dress. When she tried to dry it with her hairdryer, the material remained spotty. *Shit*. Ash gave up and changed into the blue dress she'd worn last night.

She skipped downstairs and heard Kay singing in the bathroom. No sign of Mike, but on the kitchen table, along with dirty bowls and half-finished mugs of tea, were the words *GOOD LUCK* spelled out in cereal. Ash smiled, started to reach for the bowls and drew back her fingers. She'd probably tip milk all over her shoes.

On her way out, Ash picked up her work bag holding her gardening gloves, hand tools and a sack for weeds, and headed for the bus stop. She told herself she'd grabbed the bag out of habit, but that wasn't quite true. It was more of an excuse if James didn't turn up, even though she'd look an idiot gardening in this dress.

By the time she got off the bus, Ash fizzed with excitement. Eight months and two weeks since a guy had asked her out. No point counting the meal with Ronan. Eight months, two weeks and one day since she'd been out with a guy. Because what had seemed interesting in the bar had bored in daylight, though he'd never phoned, so maybe she was boring too.

As Ash turned the corner onto Leopold Road, her heartbeat quickened. Excitement morphed into anxiety. There was nothing to fear on this suburban street, yet the memory of the time when there had been sent icy shivers trickling down her spine. For a brief moment, she was a small child coming home from school, dragging her book bag along the pavement, dragging her feet even more.

When Ash's throat began to close, she straightened and picked up her pace. No such thing as ghosts. Nothing could hurt her now except herself, and she wasn't going to let that happen. James asking her out would banish the last of the bad memories and make this street like any other. Better than any other because she'd have a happy memory of it instead.

There was a gap in the line of identical detached bay-fronted houses where a dilapidated residence had been demolished. Now a communal garden bloomed in its place. Ash pushed open wrought iron gates and took in the lines of red dogwood, the beds of hellebores, colorful hollyhocks and morning glory. The gravel path wound in a figure eight from front to back of the plot with five wooden seats placed under juvenile trees. No one was here.

Ash felt passionate about the conversion of brown space in urban areas into city gardens. In creating new life from old, beauty from ugliness, they offered a green oasis in a busy, concrete world. This was the seventh project she'd been involved with, though for her, the most difficult.

Ash put on her gloves, picked up a few pieces of litter and then weeded around the base of two Japanese maples. It had been seven weeks since she'd met James. He'd been sitting at the back of this half-finished garden with his head in his hands. Ash had been struggling to shift a heavy stone, he'd walked over to help and then inexplicably cried. A word of comfort and James unraveled like a ribbon. His wife had died a year ago, she'd campaigned for the house to be demolished and this garden to be created, and he wished she'd lived to see it come to fruition. Ash had felt guilty it all hadn't happened sooner.

James joined the ragbag team of volunteers converting the site. He'd come to help after work, which encouraged Ash to stay when she'd have normally gone home. She quickly realized she no longer came to work on the garden—she came to work on James. Ash wanted to make his world bright again, to see him smile. Ash wanted everyone to smile.

She'd spent seven weeks wondering if he liked her as much as she liked him.

Six weeks hoping he saw her as more than someone to talk to.

Five weeks wishing he'd ask her out.

Ash waved and smiled when James pushed open the gate exactly on time. He looked immaculate in cream chinos and a blue, dress shirt. Ash had already smudged her dress. *Damn*. She took off her gloves and then blinked. He'd brought flowers. No one had ever given her flowers. Ash swallowed the lump in her throat as he approached. James had light brown hair and crinkly eyes and a huge grin on his face. He warmed her heart though he didn't make it jump, but maybe that was a good thing. He was steady, dependable and kind. Ash thought that was what she needed.

"Ash." James kissed her on the cheek and set the flowers down on a bench. "You look lovely."

"Thank you."

"Are you off somewhere special? I haven't interfered with your plans for the morning?"

"No," Ash said, and a dark shadow crept over her.

James tugged her to sit and kept hold of her hand. He took a deep breath and noisily exhaled. "God, Ash, I owe you so much. If it hadn't been for that bloody stone you couldn't shift." He laughed. "You've given me back my life."

The darkness receded a little and Ash squeezed his fingers. "You only had to reach out and take it. I gave you a push."

He snorted. "You gave me a thump. I needed...normality, and you and this garden offered me that. How crazy that it should be *this* garden that brought me back to life after all that happened."

Give me the flowers and this will be what I want it to be. But the flowers stayed where they were—behind him.

"Lisa will always be part of my life. I think I thought I'd lose her if I found someone else, and you made me see that wasn't the case."

Give me the flowers. Please. Ash pulled back inside herself, hiding in plain sight, sensing what was coming. He let her hand go and his warmth went with it. She flung up shields around her heart. *Ah, not for me.* Not the flowers, not James, not happiness this day at least.

"You don't ever really lose the people you love," Ash whispered. *Nor those you hate, no matter how much you wish you could.* "Lisa would want you to be happy."

"You're right." He took a deep breath. "I've something to tell you."

Black, snaky tendrils wove through Ash's body, clogging her throat. The word was *tell* not *ask*. She'd wanted to see *ask* in his message and made this into something it wasn't, let her housemates think it was something it wasn't. *Oh shit. I'm an idiot.* After twenty-seven years, she'd not learned a thing.

James gave her a shy smile. "I've met someone."

Ash made sure her face showed nothing more than polite encouragement.

"She's someone I've worked with over the last few months."

Ash was scared she'd make some stupid, croaking sound if she spoke, so she clenched her teeth behind her lips and nodded. A flicker of hope still fought against the dark. *It could be me. It could just be his way of—*

"Her name's Sally."

Ash's lungs stopped working. The flame went out and darkness reigned. *No clap of thunder?*

"Say something," he said with a laugh.

"I'm— I'm choked up," Ash blurted. "I'm really pleased for you."

He pulled her into his arms and hugged her. Ash struggled to stay in control. If he didn't want her, then she wasn't right for him. That's what she told herself every time. Disappointment wouldn't kill her. She *was* glad for James. His wife had died in his arms, and they'd only been married for two years. He needed to move on. Ash let him go, and when she saw the happiness in his face, she was able to smile back.

"More than pleased. I'm thrilled for you," she said, and meant it.

"Only, I did wonder if—" His gaze rose over her shoulder. "Sally's here."

Oh fuck, not that thrilled. Ash spun around. A petite blonde in a flowery dress and red high heels sashayed down the path.

"I wanted my two special women to meet," James said.

When James kissed Sally, Ash stood and curled her toes inside her flat shoes. She'd had a lifetime of learning to smile when she wanted to cry, knowing if she didn't smile, she'd be made to cry. She was an expert at hiding her feelings. Absolute expert. She swallowed the lump in her throat and made her lips curl up.

"Sally, this is my angel, Ash."

Ash put out her hand, but Sally hugged her. "Thank you. I wish it had been me who brought James back to life, but I'm happy to reap the rewards. He's a great guy."

Ash didn't miss the look in Sally's eyes. *Hands off. He's mine.*

James pushed the flowers into Sally's arms.

"Oh. They're lovely, sweetheart, but Ash probably thought they were for her."

Bitch. "James knows I prefer to see flowers growing in the ground," Ash said, aware James knew no such thing. "I'll have to run now, I'm afraid. I've a job interview. Hence the dress."

James' face fell. "I thought we could go for a coffee together."

Over Sally's dead body, judging by her tight mouth.

Ash kissed James on the cheek and whispered in his ear, "You don't need me anymore. Be happy."

She gathered up her bits and pieces and waved goodbye. Only when Ash was out of the garden did the smile slip and she allowed herself a gasp of pain.

Stupid, stupid, stupid.

* * * * *

Stupid, stupid, stupid.

Noah didn't do weddings, fashion or babies—ever—which had to mean he was officially an idiot. In front of him stood a beaming bride in a dress that probably cost thousands. She held a wriggling two-year-old stuffed into a tux, for fuck's sake. A couple of hours ago, the little devil in her arms had carried the rings down the church aisle on a red, velvet cushion and dropped it. Actually, he'd hurled it. Only the fast reaction of a guest had stopped one of the rings from rolling through the grating that ran down the sides of the pews.

The kid had wailed when the best man took the cushion from him and only shut up when he gave it back. He'd wailed again when his parents stopped him from running up and down the aisle using the cushion as a football, and finally the little ball of fury had been carried outside, kicking and screaming. Noah had wanted to join him. Instead, he lifted his camera and carried on snapping.

When Dina had called last night and begged him to take her place at a wedding, he'd said no. She'd broken her leg. Still no. She'd asked everyone else she knew and they were all committed elsewhere. *So, I was last choice?* Hell no. She'd called him a selfish bastard and a few other choice names, and Noah had been going to say "fuck you" until she told him how much she'd pay and then promptly burst into tears. "All right" had slipped out before he could stop it. Noah preferred to think it was her tears that had swung it.

Then she told him where the reception was being held, and Noah had been stunned into silence long enough for her to blurt her thanks and put down the phone before he could retract his offer. But having thought about it, the chances of bumping into his

father were remote. He kept to his side of Floriton Hall when any events were being held. Noah could do the job and leave without him even knowing he'd been there.

I hope.

So, here he was, his body screaming at him, muscles aching, back killing him while he did everything he hated. He photographed shoes, bouquets, beaming guests and caterwauling kids, and took endless shots of the happy couple in every conceivable position. Noah couldn't remember the name of the bride or groom, and frankly, he didn't give a fuck. He'd do the job he was being paid for, make sure he covered the list Dina had given him and then go home, soak his body in a bath and pretend none of it had ever happened. He took the list from his pocket. Rings, cake, gardens, shoes, confetti—shit, the thing went on forever. He screwed up the piece of paper and shoved it back into his jacket.

Dina had sent her assistant to work with him, but after he'd snapped at the wafer-thin twig for getting in his way in the church, the woman appeared to be terrified of him. Dressed head to toe in black, she flitted around like an anorexic bat, shoulders and head down, determined to avoid him.

Noah circulated in the courtyard, taking pictures as guests ate canapés and drank champagne. As he straightened to get the kink out of his neck, a hand slapped his back, and Noah's shoulder blades slammed together. He didn't like to be touched, especially after he'd been to Jenson Street.

"Can't tell you how grateful we are you stepped in at the last minute like this," said a middle-aged guy with gray hair—the bride's father. Noah didn't remember *his* name either. "My daughter thought the world had ended when Dina called to say she couldn't come."

Noah nodded.

"Dina said you're an award-winning photographer."

Noah's jaw tightened. "I don't do weddings."

"You do now." The guy laughed, another slap looked likely, and Noah lurched away only to collide with something. He spun round and watched a black-haired waitress try in vain to stop an avalanche of canapés from sliding off her tray.

"Shiiiiit," he heard her hiss. She then said, "Sorry," in a louder voice.

Noah kicked a prawn off his shoe.

An older woman rushed up. "Ash, not again. Look at the mess."

"Sorry, Ms. Wood," the waitress said.

"Clean it up." She turned to the bride's father. "Mr. Kent, I apologize. She's a last-minute replacement for one of my employees who's taken sick."

Noah glanced at the waitress crouching at his feet. A substitute like him.

"Dinner's ready to be served," said the other woman. "Would you like to ring the gong?"

The pair walked away, and Noah took a picture of Ash squatting on the flagstone drive, scooping the food back onto the tray. She was cute. He took another shot of her slipping a smoked salmon pinwheel between her lips and then another as she licked her fingers. His cock twitched. *Fuck.*

She looked up at him. "What do you think you're doing?"

"Having an inappropriate erection" didn't seem the sensible thing to say.

"Did you just take my picture?" she asked.

"Why would I do that?" *Why had he done that?*

"Don't. I don't like my photograph being taken." She stood up. "Anyway, it's the guests you should be snapping, not the waiting staff." She offered him the tray. "Would you like a canapé, sir?"

Noah blinked. "They're covered in dirt."

"Pretend it's pepper. Try that one." She pointed to the dirtiest, and Noah surprised himself when a snort of laughter escaped his lips.

"I'll pass," he said.

"Go on, be a devil."

Noah selected a clean-looking tiger prawn and ate it as he watched her head back into the house. Tight white blouse, tight black skirt, nice backside, legs to her armpits, hair shorter than his and an attitude. Her hair was darker than it had any right to be, her eyes were greener than grass and she had a face he wanted to eat.

Once upon a time...

Noah lifted his camera and carried on doing what he was being paid for.

Chapter Three

Ash got lost on the way back to the kitchen. The country house was so huge she'd need to leave a trail of breadcrumbs to find her way around. She opened door after door, saw nobody and nothing seemed familiar. Oil paintings of grim men, uptight women and insipid dogs lined the walls. The chairs looked likely to collapse if anyone sat on them, but since they were roped off, she wasn't about to try.

It was only when Ash carried her tray into a billiards room and saw the flat screen TV on the wall that she accepted she was way off course. She turned to exit the way she'd come and heard men's voices in the corridor behind her. Ash looked for another door, but when she tried it, found it locked. Sighing, she turned around, put her shoulders back and braced herself.

"He could have spoken to you," said one man.

"He will when he's ready," said another who sounded older. "Give him time."

Two men came in, one middle-aged and distinguished with gray hair, the other a few years older than Ash. He was tall, dark, and if he hadn't been scowling ferociously at her, Ash might have found him attractive. The men had stopped short when they saw her.

"What the hell are you doing in here?" the younger one snapped.

The older man frowned. "You're not allowed in this part of the house."

"I'm very sorry. I got lost."

The younger one gave her a scornful look. "You managed to get through a locked door. Looking for something to steal?"

Ash glowered. "Of course not."

"Show her the way back, Ilya." The older man picked a cue from the rack and chalked the tip.

"I'm sorry to have intruded," Ash said to his back, and followed Ilya out of the room.

"I'm not fooled," he barked as Ash hurried after him.

"And I'm not a thief. I was lost."

As they turned a corner into another corridor, he spun around and pinned her shoulder to the wall. He was a big, strong guy, and Ash felt a moment of panic. She gripped the tray more firmly. Maybe she could hit him with it. Ash gasped when his other hand ran up her hip and over her belly.

"Get your damn hands off me," she shouted. "What's your problem?"

"I'm searching you."

Ash was going to protest and decided not to. She had to admit it looked suspicious. Found in a part of the house that was out of bounds, she *might* have been trying to steal the family silver. Letting him check her pockets wouldn't kill her just embarrass her. But when his hand slipped to her breast and squeezed, Ash brought her knee up hard between his legs and managed not to drop the tray. *Wow!*

Ilya bent double, gasping.

"That's not appropriate," she said. "Would you like a canapé?" Ash offered him the tray.

His glare could have frozen water.

"No? Okay." She turned and walked off.

"Other bloody way," he grunted.

Ash turned around and ignored him as she passed.

She finally stepped into the bustling kitchen to find the waiting staff lining up to collect the starters. Kay beckoned her. Ash pointed at the tray and went to tip the food in the trash. She saved a honey-roasted sausage from sliding in with the rest and as she popped it in her mouth she spotted Christine Wood glaring at her. *Bugger.*

"What did I say about eating the food?" her temporary boss snapped.

Ash chewed and swallowed. "It was only going in the —"

"I said don't."

Ash slunk over to Kay and rolled her eyes.

"She's stressed," Kay said. "Hey, have you seen the gorgeous photographer?"

"He's the reason the canapés went in the bin. I walked into him and the tray tipped up. Christine's not impressed. I've already broken three champagne flutes."

Kay winced. Ash was clumsy, no point denying it. She would have liked to run with Mike's explanation and blame the supernatural, but there were no such things as witches and evil fairy godmothers, only a cack-handed twenty-seven-year-old who'd never shake off her past no matter how hard she tried. It sat on her shoulder like an evil monkey, ready to remind her of what she came from, how useless she was, how clumsy, how naughty, not a good girl at all.

"Dazzled by his good looks?" Kay asked.

"No, his lovely butt," Ash said, and laughed.

"His name's Noah Golitsin," said a dreamy voice behind them.

"He's not married," said someone else. "I asked him."

A collective sigh rose above the clattering of the chefs plating up the food.

"He lives in Chelsea," said the girl in front of Ash.

The girl behind huffed. "He told me Knightsbridge."

"He said Islington," wailed someone else.

Ash sniggered.

"I'm thinking of asking him to do some new shots of me for my portfolio," Kay said, and then lowered her voice, "plus a few personal ones."

Ash knew what *that* meant. "I thought you didn't want to compromise your artistic integrity?"

Kay rolled her eyes. "Only so he can see me naked and I can persuade him to get naked. God, I really fancy him. We've voted him the best-looking guy here. Messy, black hair, the hint of stubble on his cheeks and dark eyes that look like pools of ink—what's not to love?"

A pang of jealousy pierced Ash's heart. She wished it were just her who thought he was good-looking. Though to be fair, she hadn't noticed him until she'd walked into his back. She'd been thinking of what happened earlier that day, how she'd had to tell Kay and Mike that James hadn't wanted to ask her out after all, how she'd brushed off their sympathy because she knew it would make her cry, and instead she'd made a joke of it all. Then the photographer had banged into her. Ash's mind had gone blank, her breath had caught in her throat and the contents of the tray had slid south.

"He even makes a crumpled linen suit look sexy," Kay said. "I wonder if he has considered standing in front of the camera instead of behind it."

"He should," said someone.

"I'd pay to see him naked," said someone else.

Kay smiled. "No need to pay if you can entice him out of his pants. Shouldn't be too hard."

"Thought you wanted it hard," quipped the girl next to her.

They all laughed. Kay's confidence knocked out Ash's in the first round. No point in trying to compete with Miss Beautiful.

"Maybe I should give his name to my agency," Kay smirked. "There's a finder's fee if they end up signing a suggestion."

Ash knew Kay wouldn't have thought of doing that if Noah had been a beautiful woman. He might be handsome, but hadn't Kay noticed the man's unhappiness—the shadows under his eyes and the scowl on his face? He looked as though he'd rather be anywhere in the world but here. He was angry about something. More than angry. Furious.

Don't interfere, Ash told herself. Her life was already full of wounded souls, herself included. Kay, who called herself a model and actress but rarely got work that involved modeling something she liked, and had never acted in anything so far as Ash knew, constantly needed reassurance that her beauty remained intact, that the spot on her chin wasn't visible and that her big break lurked around the corner. Kay's mantra was that she just needed a bit of luck to come her way, preferably in the form of a besotted movie director.

Ash's next wounded soul was Mike who never seemed to have enough money to pay for his share of the bills, so Ash constantly bailed him out. She couldn't understand why he was always broke.

Ronan had moved up from wounded soul status now that he was speaking to his parents, though Ash couldn't help but wonder what had happened ten years ago.

None of my business.

Nor was whatever was wrong with the photographer, though it was hard to shake off the yearning to make him smile. If she fancied him with his scowl, she'd be a puddle if he smiled. Ash grinned. She should just be her normal clunky self. She was bound to do something stupid sooner or later to make him chuckle.

"Be careful," Christine snapped in her ear as if she'd read her mind. "That tray of canapés and the broken glasses will come out of your wages. No more accidents. No sauce in laps, no tipped up champagne. Stay away from the bride. I don't want red wine all over her dress."

Ash sucked in her cheeks and tightened her trembling fingers into clenched fists. Maybe if people had more faith in her she wouldn't make mistakes. Their distrust made her even more nervous. It had always been the same. Ash felt as though people were just waiting for her to cock up, and because they expected it, she usually obliged.

Single-minded concentration—or possibly a huge amount of luck—enabled Ash to serve four courses to her three tables of eight without incident. The delicious Noah moved around the banquet hall taking pictures, never smiling though all the women, guests and staff, plus a few men, smiled at him. He made Ash's heart beat fast, but he was so far out of her league as to be on another planet. She wasn't even good enough for James. The moment his name came into her head, Ash choked up. She had to forget him.

She stood with her back to the wall of the dining hall, waiting to clear plates and sighed when her mind again slipped back to that morning. At least she'd not embarrassed herself by grabbing the flowers James had bought or kissing him. He was happy and that was all that mattered. If Ash could make people happy, she'd feel her life was worthwhile. The fact that she wasn't heartbroken told her James hadn't been the one. She was just disappointed in herself for not seeing it sooner. But those seven weeks hadn't been wasted because James had found joy again.

Right. Ash sighed. She couldn't even convince herself with that crap.

When it was time for the speeches, a videographer took over from the two photographers. Wine waiters lingered to top up glasses but the rest of the serving staff were allowed a break until the guests left the dining hall. As Ash headed for the room where they were to eat, she saw Noah and his assistant at the end of the corridor. The woman stood hunched, looking like an oversized comma. Noah's mutters sounded angry. A moment later, the woman passed Ash, tears glistening on her cheeks.

"Are you all right?" Ash asked.

"He's sent me home. I'm—useless."

The woman fled. Ash was tempted to go after Noah and tell him he shouldn't call anyone useless because that sort of damage lasted, but the appearance of Christine forced her into the room they were apparently forbidden to leave under pain of disembowelment. Ash picked up a sandwich curling at the edges and a bottle of water and sat with Kay.

"That wedding dress is gorgeous," Kay said. "I'd love to model something like that. Do you think I'm too fat?"

"No way," said Ash. Kay asked the same question a couple of times a week.

"The flowers must have cost a fortune," Kay said, "and that cake. How the hell can you divide a tower of white chocolate curls into neat portions? I think Christine nearly passed out when she saw it."

"That's one thing she won't be asking me to do." Ash smiled. "Good thing the bride and groom make the first cut."

Kay laughed. "It's exactly the sort of wedding I want except I'd put my bridesmaids in much uglier dresses. Can you see Noah in a tux? Yum."

The wedding was exactly what Ash didn't want, even if it had been possible. She had no father to give her away, no mother to fuss over her. Kay would undoubtedly refuse to wear any bridesmaid dress Ash picked out, though the thought of having Kay as a bridesmaid made her feel ill. Her dream was a beach battered by a wild sea, with her and the guy she loved making personal vows to each other, no one else around. No rings. He'd wear a white linen shirt and pants, she'd be in a white cotton dress, holding a bunch of daisies. They'd be barefoot, the foamy surf washing around their ankles.

One thing Ash was very good at was dreaming. She'd retreated to her imagination when she was a young child because it was the only place where she could be safe and happy. Sometimes it still was.

* * * * *

She cleared her tables quickly, collected her purse, and since Kay was still busy, she snuck away to watch the first dance. The top level of the terrace that ran across the back of the house was deserted except for a camera attached to a tripod. Noah nowhere to be seen. The guests had moved to the area below. Ash peered over the balustrade onto a breath-stealing scene.

The trees were full of glittering lights, flares lined the twisting garden paths and the fountain changed color as it spouted. White paper globes, looking like shimmering moons, hung suspended from lines crossing between the trees, the area washed in warmth from a ring of freestanding electric heaters that looked like robot sentries. English summer evenings were rarely reliably warm. A band played in the far corner and a singer's clear voice rang out in the night air. The guests stood in a circle as the married couple danced in the space in the middle. Noah moved around snapping the pair twirling in each other's arms.

They must have practiced, Ash thought. The groom dipped the bride back and his lips moved as if he was counting the steps. Ash liked to dance but didn't get the chance to do it very often. She'd even been for salsa lessons in the hope of finding that special someone, but too many women had the same idea along with the wrong sort of guys.

Luckily the weather was so good. It had been a warm day but was now chilling off. Without those heaters it – A firework exploded overhead with a deafening bang, and Ash jumped. There were loud gasps from the guests as enormous red and white flowers blossomed one after the other in the night sky, shimmering in balls of crackling light before they dissolved. Out of the corner of her eye, Ash saw a man crouching by the fountain, arms over his head, and then he raced toward the trees, stumbling as he went. Noah?

More explosions lit up the sky, silver arrows shooting in all directions, each one shattering the night with a series of staccato detonations. Ash tried to persuade herself he'd moved to a better position to take photos, but how could he do that from inside the wood? Plus he needed a tripod for this sort of shot. Maybe he'd felt sick and rushed away before he threw up. *Oh Christ, that prawn I made him eat?* Ash kept glancing at the camera in front of her. Fireworks weren't easy to capture, but she should at least try. If she waited too long, it would be too late. Ash altered the settings, tilted the lens to the sky and began to shoot.

She told herself she'd stop as soon as she spotted Noah, but he didn't come back. The fireworks went on and on, and Ash worried more and more. She looked toward the trees, and even as she told herself not to, she deserted the camera and made her way down the steps.

The fireworks were still exploding when Ash found him curled up at the foot of an oak, his camera lying by his head. *Oh God, what the hell's the matter with him?* His face was pressed into his arm, his shoulders rising and falling as he took rapid breaths. She hesitated, trying to figure out the best thing to do. His choked inhalations and the way he shuddered told her he was in acute pain or distress. One prawn couldn't do that, could it?

"Fuck. Off," he gasped.

Ash was incapable of walking away, incapable of doing anything but walking the rest of the way toward him. "Are you okay?" hovered on her lips, but wasn't that the most stupid question in the world? The very fact that she needed to ask meant she knew the answer. She knelt beside him and touched his shoulder. He jerked so violently that her hand fell away. He didn't say anything but curled up tighter.

"Er...sorry. I'm Ash," she whispered, "the idiot who tipped up the tray and maybe poisoned you. Are you hurt? Need me to get help?"

It wasn't the prawn. This was some sort of internal battle. He was upset.

"Fuck."

Ash waited for the "off" to follow, but it didn't. Go or stay? Guys didn't usually do public displays of emotion. Not unless something terrible had happened, like their wife

dying. Maybe Noah had seen an ex-girlfriend dancing at the wedding. Maybe some horrible memory had been triggered and snapped him into this state. Maybe he was scared of fireworks. Ash couldn't leave him. She put her arms around him.

He tensed, and for a moment she thought he'd pull away, but he turned his face into her chest and clutched her so tight he hurt her ribs. Ash stroked his back, pressed her face into his hair and held him. The irony was it made *her* feel better.

"Did you know aardvarks, armadillos and anteaters are all solitary animals?" she muttered. "Aardvarks have really soft teeth with no roots. A nine-banded armadillo is the only mammal that gives birth to four identical young. Anteaters don't have jaws and they can only open their mouths about an inch. Though their tongues are two feet long and can flick in and out around a hundred and fifty times a minute."

She envied the female anteater but wouldn't share that. Ash had spent hours with nothing but the first volume of a set of natural history encyclopedias for company. It was surprising how much she could remember from so long ago. Little by little, his shudders grew less violent and his breathing eased. As she registered the fireworks had stopped, he wrenched away from her, knocking her onto her butt.

"I told you to fuck off," he snapped, his eyes wild.

Ash swallowed hard and moved toward him.

"Okay, if you're so damn bent on helping, then fuck me," he said, and yanked her into his arms.

Ash tensed. Fingers that had gripped tight now caressed and he rubbed his cheek against her breast. She mentally groaned.

"No," Ash whispered.

His fingers paused on their way up her leg. "Why not?"

"Because I'm not a substitute for whatever's wrong with you."

He let her go, glared as he held up his hands and then shuffled away from her to lean back against a tree. He stared at her sulkily, and Ash sighed, pushed herself to her feet and smoothed down her skirt. It would have been easy to say yes, but it wasn't the right thing for him. *She* wasn't right for him. Not tonight.

She left him in the woods and went back to the terrace. *He* should have been taking pictures of the guests dancing, and Ash knew she'd get no thanks for interfering, but she switched on the flash and took more shots. When the bride threw her bouquet, Ash snapped pictures of that too, and the scuffle to catch it.

"I've been looking for you everywhere," Kay said behind her. "What are you doing?"

Ash stood up. "Nothing."

"Were you using Noah's camera? Where is he?"

"Well..."

"Did he give it to you? Why would he do that?" Kay frowned and then grabbed her arm. "Oh God, you didn't steal it, did you?"

"No, Kay. I don't steal." Accused of being a thief for the second time in a few hours? It wasn't her night.

Kay stared at her. "Hmm. Well, anyway, could you get a lift to the station with Mary. I'm going to a party."

"Yep, no problem." Ash made sure she sounded sincere.

"I was going to ask Noah if he wanted to come. Sure you haven't seen him?" Kay narrowed her eyes.

"Not for a while."

"Damn." Kay's shoulders dropped. "I'll see you tomorrow."

"Have a good time."

Ash smiled against the disappointment of not being invited too.

Chapter Four

Noah grabbed the camera and tripod off the terrace and stumbled back to his car. He burned with humiliation. How the hell had he let that happen? Any of it. He'd known there'd be fireworks. He'd seen it on Dina's fucking list. Not only had he failed to photograph them, he'd freaked out in the most embarrassing way and hadn't found a place to hide where no one would spot him. If his father or, even worse, Ilya, had seen him... *Christ.*

Not that he'd actually been thinking straight as he ran. Then the waitress – Ash – who'd found him, had babbled about anteaters and how they didn't have teeth, and Noah had wondered what the hell she was doing until he realized she'd understood he needed distracting. And he turned from thinking about – *that* – and instead his brain tried to take in what she was saying. Edentate meant no teeth. He wished that was true of his memories, but their fangs were fucking sharp and they wouldn't let go.

He didn't understand why he'd let her hold him, why he'd held her. He'd told her to fuck off the moment she touched him. Then he'd clung to her like a baby. To make matters worse, as he began to come out of it and realized where he had his face pressed, his fucking cock swelled. Then he'd done something stupid and started to make a move on her, and she'd said no. Noah couldn't remember the last time a woman had turned him down. It didn't happen. Never. Ever. *Fuck. Fuck. Fuck.*

After he piled his equipment in his car, he couldn't drive. His hands shook and his heart pounded fast enough to make his head spin. Though killing *himself* had some appeal, he couldn't risk having an accident and injuring someone else. He had enough in his life to deal with without adding more problems. Noah reclined his seat and lay back. That fucking waitress had said no and he still wanted her. Was that *because* she'd said no? Probably. He never took the easy way in anything.

His cell phone rang. He ignored it, but it didn't stop, and Noah struggled to get it from his pocket, fought to hold it, battled to steady his finger over the green button and then to make some sort of coherent sound so his housemate didn't think he'd been beaten up and stuffed in the boot of his car.

"Have you finished yet?" Dalton asked. "Any chance of a lift back? My father was going to drive me to the station, but I thought I might as well see if you were still there."

"Mmm," was the best Noah could manage.

"Are you okay?"

No. I'm not fucking okay. I'll never be okay. Never. Never. Never.

"Noah, I'm going to find you. Sit tight."

The phone went dead, and Noah wondered if Dalton had some inner sense that something was wrong. A stroke of luck that Dalton had gone to see his parents who lived near Floriton Hall, otherwise Noah would have had to sit here until he'd pulled himself together.

Sometimes that didn't happen for days.

* * * * *

Noah had no idea whether five minutes or an hour passed before he registered the car door opening. He didn't move. He wasn't sure he *could* more. His limbs were leaden, his head buzzing. What if this was his father or his brother? He'd pretend to be drunk, he couldn't —

"Noah, wake up."

He turned to see Dalton's concerned eyes staring at him.

"You okay?"

Noah nodded.

Dalton reached out and then drew back his hand before he touched him. "Get on the other side. I'll drive."

By the time Noah forced his body to obey his brain and he'd staggered around the front of the car to the passenger side, Dalton had put the driver's seat upright and turned on the engine.

"How'd it go?" Dalton asked.

Noah clicked his seat belt into place. "I fucked up."

"In what way?"

"Forgot there were fireworks. They...took me by surprise. I didn't take any more photos after that."

Dalton turned onto the main road and headed toward the motorway.

"I didn't want to do this," Noah said. "I wasn't ready." *Christ, am I whining?*

"You need to get your life back on track." Dalton glanced at him. "Shit happens — shit happened, but you have to move on."

Blah, blah, blah. "I need a drink."

"You've not had one?"

Noah glared. "No need to sound so surprised. I did remember I'm driving. *Was driving.*"

"Yeah, well, it's usually the first thing you turn to when..."

When I freak out.

"There was a woman," Noah blurted. "I ran and she followed me. She...held me."

The car swerved and Noah grabbed the dashboard.

"Bloody rabbit," Dalton said.

Or shock that Noah had let someone hold him when he'd been having one of his *fucktard* moments?

"What was she like?" Dalton asked.

Noah closed his eyes. "Tall, slim, eyes like a cat, spiky, dark hair cut really short." He exhaled. "Funny. She walked into me, dropped a tray of food and then tried to get me to eat it. Christ, I almost laughed." He swallowed hard. "Instead I took a fucking picture."

"What's her name?"

"Ash." Bit like his crappy life, a pile of ashes. "Did you know aardvarks can eat fifty thousand termites in one sitting? Or that a spiny anteater has a four-headed penis?"

Dalton laughed.

"She talked about aardvarks, anteaters and armadillos, and I got a fucking hard-on."

Another laugh. "Going to see her again?"

"No."

"Why not? You're obviously interested."

"No, I'm not." Though he could see why Dalton thought that. What would be the point? She'd said no, and in the long run, he'd fuck things up like he always did. "Drive past Dina's place in Caterham. I'll post the memory sticks through her letter box."

Noah opened the glove box to look for something to write on and saw the envelope he'd stuffed in there a week ago. His jaw ticked as he yanked out the letter, screwed it up and pushed it back into the glove box. He struggled to write on the envelope, and he blamed it on the moving car but knew it was more than that. So much for thinking he was getting better.

* * * * *

By the time Dalton pulled into the parking space behind the building where they lived, Noah was exhausted. He could hardly keep his eyes open and yet knew the moment his head kissed the pillow he'd be incapable of falling asleep.

"Thanks for coming to get me," Noah said as he headed for his room.

He closed the door and stripped as he stumbled to the bathroom, leaving his clothes where they lay. When he caught sight of his face in the mirror, Noah recoiled. His eyes were sunken into his head, he needed a shave and his hair was all over the place. He looked like he'd staggered out of a seventies Western having been attacked by Indians and left to walk through a blistering desert for several days with no water, no food and vultures circling overhead. His imagination ran out there. He tried to smile and failed. No wonder she'd said no.

Noah really wanted to laugh about it, but instead his jaw ticked. He'd wanted her and she'd said no, and he should be pissed off except she was right. He *had* been trying

to substitute her for what was wrong with him. Sex with a stranger wasn't the answer, though it might make him forget for a while. Noah shuffled into the shower, cranked it on and stood with his face upturned to the flow. No one ever said no to him. Half his friends pussyfooted around him as if he were a bomb ready to detonate—the others ignored his problems, pretending he was fine when he fucking wasn't.

He braced his hands on the tiles and let the water play on his back. Noah wondered when this would end, if it would ever end. He'd thought three months and then amended it to six. Now it was seven. He told himself he wouldn't go back to Jenson Street, but he suspected he would. The pain made him feel less guilty, though it didn't last. All he wanted was to forget, and all he did was remember. Would he spend the rest of his life cowering in case his fucking shadow jumped out and shouted *boo*?

Gradually he'd dropped those friends who hadn't dropped him, though Dalton was proving harder to get rid of. Probably just as well since Noah needed the cash Dalton paid for his room. Noah's money was going to run out sooner or later, and no matter how desperate he became, he wouldn't ask his family for a handout. *I need money to pay a guy to whip me*. Yeah, he could see his father reaching for his checkbook.

Noah switched on the bedside light before he turned off the main light. He crawled naked into bed and pulled up the duvet. If he woke and it was dark in the room, he knew he'd lose it. When the Dom had blindfolded him yesterday, Noah had almost pissed himself. He was such a fucking mess. He closed his eyes and tried to shut down.

This time, the images that boiled and writhed in his mind weren't the usual ones of blood and gore and accusing faces. Instead, he remembered the way the waitress had slid her pink tongue over her lips, the way her soft breasts had strained under a tight blouse. She'd held him and he'd allowed her to. She talked—crap—and he'd listened. Something about her voice had calmed him.

Noah's hand slid to his semi-hard cock and squeezed. He imagined her hand on him and shuddered, sweeping his thumb over the nerve-rich head. How wet would she be? Noah told himself to stop right there, but he dragged his fist down his length to caress his swollen balls and then slid up, squeezing harder at the tip of his cock. How tight would she grip him? He felt the tingle of desire, the ache, need on the rise all over his body. These days Noah never bothered to draw out the pleasure. Why should he give himself something he didn't deserve?

He kicked back the duvet and jerked his closed fist faster. His cock was hard and hot in his hand, and he gripped it tighter. One last squeeze and orgasm hit like a lightning bolt. Fireworks went off his head—the irony didn't escape him—and his cum spurted over the tensed muscles of his abdomen.

* * * * *

Noah woke with his hand wrapped around his cock. His comfort blanket. He wondered if his fingers had been there all night. He glanced at the clock and frowned.

Nine thirty. He usually tossed and turned, fell into an exhausted sleep just before dawn and came 'round in time for lunch. So what had woken him?

He heard his phone start up somewhere in the room and he rolled over to face the wall. There was no one he wanted to speak to, no one who needed to speak to him. Especially Sophia. Noah mentally groaned when he thought of the conversation he'd had with her before he'd left for Afghanistan. Excited and afraid of what lay ahead, and fueled by too much alcohol, he'd kissed her, and now he worried he'd made her think she meant more to him than she did.

The phone stopped and then started again.

Dalton banged on the wall. "Fucking answer that or change your ring tone."

Noah swung his legs out of bed and stood. By the time he retrieved his mobile from his pants pocket, the noise had stopped. The missed calls were from Dina. He winced. Had he fucked up the bride's day because he'd not taken pictures for the last thirty or so minutes? Probably. *Shit*. The phone went again before he could switch it off and Noah lifted it to his ear.

"Sorry," he muttered.

"I'm just calling to say thank you," Dina blurted. "Oh my God, Noah, the pictures are fantastic. I know you knew the venue but you took from angles I'd never have even considered. The bride is going to *luurve* them. Sure you don't want to do this for a living?"

He'd sooner take his eyes out with a corkscrew.

"The fireworks," he said tentatively, thinking he'd just tell her he'd eaten something dodgy and –

"Stunning. I know they're a nightmare to take, but these are really good. And the one you have of the bride throwing her bouquet with a dark sky behind and her and the flowers illuminated, I honestly think it's the best shot of the lot."

Noah opened his mouth and closed it again. The assistant must have stayed after he'd told her to go and used the camera he'd set up on the terrace.

"As for Maria," Dina said. "She came 'round here last night full of apologies. She said you'd sent her home for getting in your way. I think the poor kid was in awe of you."

Noah was frantically trying to put two and two together.

"I really am grateful, Noah. If you hadn't said yes, I'd have had to struggle on my crutches. No way would I have managed to get the number and quality of shots that you did."

"Would you do me a favor, Dina? Email the photos back to me. I'd like to take another look at a few of them."

Maybe he'd manage the math if he could see the problem.

* * * * *

Dalton nearly choked on his coffee when Noah walked into the kitchen, dressed and shaved. His flat mate looked better than he had for ages. "It's not noon," Dalton blurted.

Noah clicked on the kettle. "No getting anything past you."

Sarcasm? "Breakfast?" Dalton asked. "I could do you bacon and eggs."

"Maybe...toast."

"With a poached egg?"

Noah spun around. "You're not my fuck—" He took a deep breath. "That would be great, thanks."

Christ Almighty. Polite too?

Dalton dropped the Sunday paper and leapt to his feet before Noah changed his mind. For the last three months he'd rarely emerged from his room before noon. He didn't eat properly, drank too much, danced on the edge of disaster, and Dalton had been able to do little more than make sure nothing bad happened to him. Well, something bad had already happened to him. Dalton's job was damage limitation.

By the time the egg was ready, Noah sat hunched over his laptop at the kitchen table. Dalton put the plate at his side and the knife and fork near his hand.

"Want me to cut it up for you?" Dalton waited to see if he got a snarl or a laugh.

Neither.

But at least Noah grabbed the cutlery and ate as he messed around with the computer.

Dalton stared at the screen over Noah's shoulder. "I thought you didn't take shots of the fireworks?"

"I didn't."

Dalton swallowed hard. Was this something else to worry about? A dissociative fugue? Memory loss? How could he suggest Noah mention it to his psychiatrist? He wasn't due to go again until Friday.

Noah exhaled. "Someone must have used the camera I set up on the terrace."

"They touched your camera?"

Noah not only had a hands-off approach as far as his body was concerned, touching his photographic equipment was like playing with unstable dynamite. Dalton had been careful not to make either mistake, though he'd often wanted to smack Noah around the head for reasons he'd lost count of.

"You want to strangle them, right?" Dalton asked.

Noah looked up at him. "Bit of a problem there. If they hadn't taken the shots, I'd be up shit creek with Dina, and the happy couple would be baying for my blood."

"Any idea who did it?"

Noah pushed an empty plate aside. "Could have been anyone."

"Your brother?"

Noah snorted. "Neither my brother nor my father knows anything about taking photographs, nor did they know I was there. Unless you told them?"

Dalton shook his head. Noah could take that how he liked. "How about the woman who followed you?"

There was a pause. Dalton saw Noah swallow before he spoke. "Maybe, but I don't know that she'd have had the time or the skill."

When Noah was in the midst of one of his episodes, Dalton doubted he had any idea of how much time was passing.

"Got a shot of her?" he asked.

Noah clicked on the keyboard and brought up an image of a smiling waitress offering a tray of canapés to a woman in a pink hat. He pulled up several images of the same waitress. She was lovely with huge green eyes and very short, dark hair. Dalton could go for her.

"Christ," Noah mumbled.

"What?"

"Notice anything about her?"

Dalton trod carefully. "What sort of thing?"

"She's always fucking smiling."

"So she is." *While you, Noah, most definitely are not*, Dalton thought. "Pretty woman. Sure you're not interested?"

"No."

Dalton heard the warning in Noah's tone and changed tack. "Any plans for today?"

Noah shrugged.

"Pub lunch?" Dalton suggested.

"Okay."

Christ. No argument? It was a minor miracle.

* * * * *

While Noah was buried in the newspaper, Dalton went out on the pretext of buying milk. Standing on London Bridge, well away from the flat in Borough, he called Ilya Golitsin, Noah's brother.

"How is he?" Ilya asked.

"Dressed before noon for the first time in months. Ate breakfast. We had an *almost* normal conversation. Did you catch sight of him yesterday at the hall?"

"We felt it best not to try. If he'd wanted to speak to us, he could have. What else do you have to tell me?"

Dalton recounted everything that had happened since he'd found Noah in the car and he repeated what Noah had said to him, pushing aside his guilt at betraying

Noah's confidence. Noah needed someone looking out for him, and since he wouldn't let his family do it directly, Dalton was their surrogate.

"I think my father and I met this woman," Ilya said. "She wandered into the private area. She's...interesting. A waitress seems a suitable diversion. He's at no risk of falling in love with her. Perhaps you could maneuver them into another meeting. Can you trace her?"

"Yes."

"Pay her. A thousand pounds. I'll put it in your account. Tell her playing hard to get will work. Noah will want her even more. He's always been perverse."

"Right."

"He has to be well by our father's birthday," Ilya said.

Dalton didn't have a magic wand. Nor did he have a degree in psychiatry.

"Keep me informed." Ilya broke the connection.

It went against the grain for Dalton to work for Ilya. He hadn't liked him when they'd been at the same school and he didn't much like him now, and if it hadn't been for the fact that he was concerned about Noah, Dalton would have had nothing to do with him. Mr. Perfect Elder Brother had been destined to be head boy from the moment he walked into that morning assembly with his father and Noah. The family looked regal, and the whole school had fallen silent. Ilya never put a foot wrong, sailed through all his exams and was captain of every sports team he chose to join. Noah was the same age as Dalton and had been assigned to his class. He'd taken Noah under his wing and the pair of them had become friends.

When Dalton saw the pictures and article in the paper seven months ago, he'd tried to get in touch with Noah and couldn't. His phone was no longer connected. He didn't answer emails. Dalton had been on the point of going to Floriton Hall when Ilya called.

Dalton immediately agreed to help. It had sounded easy. He'd give up work for a while to write the "Great English Novel", live with Noah in his flat and pay rent to Noah using money Ilya gave him, and at the same time keep an eye on Ilya's younger brother.

Noah had problems to sort out, and his family had deferred to his request for space and time – up to a point. At least Noah was keeping the weekly appointments with his psychiatrist. Though every Friday, when he came back from seeing him, Noah looked like death warmed up. He always went straight to his room and stayed there for hours.

This birthday was something important, and Ilya wanted Noah back to his normal self. Dalton knew roughly what had happened during Noah's assignment in Afghanistan – he'd read what the paper had printed, and though it was bad enough, he guessed it wasn't the whole story. But he'd failed to get him to talk about it. Until Noah opened up, Dalton suspected the past would fester inside him like a cancer.

But things were looking up. Noah had taken photographs again for money and he'd let a woman hold him. He'd eaten a poached egg, for fuck's sake. Dalton sighed.

He wasn't sure how much Ilya really cared or whether he was some sort of control freak. Nor had Dalton realized how this job would have such an effect on his sex life. While he was Noah's minder, he didn't feel right getting laid unless Noah was getting some action himself. Otherwise, he'd just be making his lonely friend even more unstable. Maybe Ash had a friend.

Dalton went back to the flat without the milk to find no trace of Noah. *Shit*. So much for keeping an eye on him. He'd left no note, and Dalton had no idea where he might have gone. Maybe he'd decided to look for Ash himself. No point sitting worrying. Dalton might as well trace her, but contrary to what Ilya thought, Dalton didn't think paying her was a good idea. At least not until they needed to get rid of her.

Chapter Five

Several phone calls and a few lies provided Dalton with the caterer's number and then Kay Mortimer's along with the useful information that Ash lived with Kay. A quick search of internet sites he shouldn't have been able to access—those journalism skills were useful for something—and he had the address. Dalton gambled he'd find someone home on a Sunday and caught the train from London Bridge to Maze Hill in Greenwich.

He'd tried three times now to get a hold of Noah and decided to stop calling. One thing he couldn't afford to do was let Noah suspect their relationship was anything other than simple friendship. One thing he *could* do was find a party for them to go to and persuade Ash to be there as well. He called Ilya, and when Ilya called back fifteen minutes later, Dalton and guests were on the list for a private party at Ice and Fire, a DJ bar in Covent Garden.

Dalton had a story all ready for Ash, but it was a cute blonde who answered the door, and for the first time in his life, words failed him.

"Yes?" she asked.

This had to be Kay. *Christ, she's gorgeous.*

She frowned. "This is where you ask if I'd like you to leave me with a copy of your uplifting magazine. Why aren't you wearing a suit? Shouldn't there be two of you?"

Dalton's head was spinning. "Kay?" he managed.

"Do I know you?"

"No. Is Ash in?"

She glared. "I think you've done enough damage, James."

The door slammed in his face. That had to be the weirdest conversation he'd ever had. He knocked again, and once the door opened, blurted "My name's Dalton" before she could slam it again.

"You lied about your name?" she snapped. "How could you?"

His initial attraction was fading fast.

"I have no idea who James is. My name's Dalton Kennedy and I'm a friend of the guy who took the photographs at the wedding yesterday."

"Noah." Kay beamed at him.

Finally they were on the same page. Dalton risked a little smile.

Kay twirled a curl of her hair around her finger. "I'm with the D'Angelo Agency at the moment but I'd consider moving. They've gotten me hardly any work." She winced. "I don't think that's my fault. You want to see my portfolio?"

Dalton was lost again, but he nodded because this was an invitation to go inside.

Kay paused in the hall. "Why did you ask for Ash? You want *her* to model for you?" An incredulous look changed swiftly to a smirk. "She won't. She hates having her photo taken. She's not in anyway."

"I don't want her to model for me."

Kay grinned. "You want me?"

Oh Christ. "Listen. I have nothing to do with modeling agencies."

"Acting? I'd love to make a move into films."

"I'm sure you'd be great, but that's not why I'm here. Noah took a shine to your friend Ash but he's...shy." *For want of a better word.*

The smile fell off her face so swiftly Dalton expected to hear it hit the floor. He shouldn't be surprised. Women always preferred Noah to him. Just once it would be nice for that not to be the case.

"You better come in." Kay led him into the kitchen.

She pointed to a chair and Dalton sat.

"You sure it's Ash he fancies?" Kay asked, her disappointment clear.

Dalton nodded. Kay wasn't Noah's type. Too self-absorbed and not that bright. Dalton wasn't so picky and he quite liked that combination. Easy to talk them into a fuck.

"Does Noah know Ash used his camera?" She gave him a sly look.

"His camera?" This could be even easier than he thought.

"It was on the terrace. Ash didn't admit it, but I thought she was taking photos. I bet he doesn't like people using his equipment. Maybe he won't like her anymore."

Manipulative little cow. Dalton smiled. She had a lot in common with him. "So when will Ash be in?"

Kay shrugged. "Dunno. I haven't seen her today. She was out when I got up."

Damn.

"If Noah likes her, why are you here and not him, and how did you know where we live?"

"A few phone calls. Wasn't difficult. Noah mentioned Ash to me, but he needs a push. Is she going out with anyone?"

"No but she's...shy."

Why did he get the feeling that was a lie? "Then she'd be perfect for Noah. What can we do?" If he could make it seem as if this were all Kay's idea to get the pair together, so much the better.

Kay shrugged. "Nothing, I guess. Two ships that passed in the night."

Dalton mentally groaned. Was she really that thick? "Would money persuade her to at least go on a few dates with him?"

Kay sucked her lip. "I doubt it."

"Would it help persuade you to persuade her?"

Kay's shoulders slumped. "I am a rotten friend, but yes."

Join the club. And guess what? I'm a worse friend.

Dalton handed her a hundred pounds. "It's only like paying you for an acting job."

Kay smiled. "Yeah, it is."

"How about we make sure they meet up by all of us turning up at the same place?" he suggested. "I've got passes for a private party tomorrow night at Ice and Fire."

Kay's eyes widened. "The place in Covent Garden?"

Dalton nodded.

"Ash doesn't go to clubs."

"Neither does Noah." Not recently anyway.

Kay clapped her hands. "Then that's perfect. We each drag them there. They don't want to be there and they'll leave with each other."

Dalton smiled. It couldn't possibly be that easy. He could see in Kay's eyes she intended it to be her who left with Noah. Dalton didn't care either way, so long as it got Noah out of his downward spiral.

"Tell them at the door you're with the Dalton party but do it quietly. Don't forget, you don't know me."

"Hey, I'm an actress."

Shit, this is doomed.

* * * * *

Ash stepped off the bus and walked the last couple of hundred yards to the storage facility. She had her hand in her pocket, playing with the key, turning it over and over in her fingers. Once her identification had been checked, she was allowed through into the storage area and walked down aisle G.

Unit seventeen was the size of a small shed, about seven feet tall and four feet wide. Ash unfastened the padlock. She was the only one with a key, the only one who could get inside. Once the light was on, she closed herself in. If anyone had seen her and peeked into the unit, they'd wonder why she needed this amount of space to store so little, but Ash liked the privacy, the way she could sit and be alone with her things.

The first thing she always did was to take Teddy Robinson from his box and sit him on her knee. A lady at school had given him to her when she'd seen Ash staring at bric-a-brac brought in for a sale. Teddy had been tatty even then, but years of hugging him, years of hiding him had taken their toll. His ear was hardly attached, the stuffing was coming out of his back. Next time, she'd bring a needle and sew him up. He hid a treasure too, something Ash had found. A butterfly necklace. She'd never been able to wear it. It would have been taken off her, but she liked to play with and run her fingers

over the shiny stones. Ash hadn't looked at the necklace in years. She liked that Teddy had a secret too.

She lifted the photograph album down from the box and opened it on the first page.

"Look, Teddy. There I am. That's me."

A baby in a hospital crib, fingers curled to her mouth, fine, dark hair covering her scalp. Not a beautiful baby. Ugly, in fact, which might have been why there were no photos of anyone holding her. If she'd been pretty, would her life have turned out differently? Ash trailed her fingers around the edges of the pictures and then turned the page to see her parents pushing her in a buggy along a seaside promenade.

"I wanted to go on the sand, but they didn't let me."

They were feeding each other ice-cream and laughing. Ash wasn't smiling. There were a few photos where she had a smile on her face, but not many.

Ash looked more closely at her father, Tim. Tall with dark hair, his equally dark eyes seemed to stare straight back at her. There was *something* in them, a secret, some arrogant superiority perhaps, but Ash couldn't see evil, though her father had been undoubtedly bad to the bone and beyond. Her mother, Denise, small with dark hair, was a woman in love. Besotted, bedazzled, bewitched by the man at her side, she had no time for a baby, no patience for a toddler, even less interest in an older child except as a means to an end. And evil was infectious.

The photos stopped when Ash was nine, the pages blank beyond that point. There had been pictures taken later, but they hadn't survived Ash's years in care. She put the album back and picked up a book. *Volume One of A Natural History of the World*. Locked in her room for hour after hour, she'd taught herself to read and write using this book, and she refused to leave it behind when the police finally came many years too late.

Ash turned to a random page. "Listen to this, Teddy. Duck quacks don't echo. Ohh, I'd forgotten this one. The Argentine lake duck has the longest penis of any bird species in the world." She smiled. "The bird is seventeen inches and so is its penis."

She put the book back and lifted out a gray, metal box.

"All my letters, Teddy. Shall we read one?"

In it were twenty-two letters all to the same person. One a year from the time she learned to write and none delivered. At the age of five, Ash had slaved over that first letter and slid it behind the gas fire, figuring it was the nearest place to the chimney. When Christmas day came and the present she asked for wasn't there, she knew she must have been too bad for Santa to visit. When no one watched, she took the letter back.

By age seven, she'd stopped believing but she still wrote to Santa, and a couple of years later her Christmas wish was finally granted. She asked not to be Jane North anymore. She wanted to be another little girl with a different home and different parents. Except, Ash came to realize, wishes might be granted in ways neither expected nor wanted.

Ash opened the letters one by one and read aloud her childhood dreams. She hadn't been a greedy child. One toy per letter, even if there had been more she'd wanted. Roller skates, paint-by-numbers, a kite. She never told any of those who cared for her what she wanted for Christmas. She just wrote her letter and kept it safe. She smiled on Christmas day and politely said thank you for her gift, courtesy of the authorities, but she never played or used what she was given because she didn't deserve it. Ash angrily rubbed a tear from her cheek. She'd been cheated out of her childhood, cheated of a normal life by shitty parents and a shitty care system.

This was the only place she allowed herself to cry and wallow in self-pity, where no one could see or hear her. Only Teddy because he was the best friend she'd ever had.

* * * * *

Noah headed south until he couldn't go any farther without driving into the sea. He parked the car in a windswept lot and walked out onto the cliffs at Beachy Head. Following a worn track in the grass, he made his way along the clifftop, hands in his pockets, head down. He just wanted a place to think. His head swam with noise and pictures.

He'd tried his hardest not to think about what had happened seven months ago that had turned his life to shit. Maybe it was time he *did* think about it. Noah found a hollow in the grass at the edge of the cliff and settled into it, out of the wind with his legs outstretched and crossed at the ankle. Ahead of him, the English Channel glittered under the afternoon sun. To the east stretched the beaches and town of Eastbourne, and beyond lay Pevensey Bay and Hastings. Looking west over the undulating chalk downs he could see the outline of the Isle of Wight. On a clear day like this, the view was astonishing.

Noah reclined in comfort on springy turf in the middle of the Seven Sisters, the peaks of the brilliantly white chalk cliffs. They all had names as did the dips between each brow. He vaguely remembered they weren't very inspiring—Brass Point and Flagstaff Bottom. He'd have preferred to be slouching on Bella's Backside or contemplating Chloe's Cleft. A few crumbling feet away was a more or less sheer drop of five hundred and thirty feet.

The view was fabulous, but it wasn't the only reason Beachy Head was famous. People came here to step off the earth—the most popular place to commit suicide in the UK. Noah looked out to the horizon. Did they choose this spot because a place of such monumental beauty was the last thing they wanted to see? Was a failure to be stirred by such a view the final proof that life was not worth living? Or simply that a single step could have only one conclusion? If anyone fell from that height, it was irrelevant whether the tide was in or out.

Noah remembered his excitement when he'd landed the commission as a war photographer for the charity All Our Heroes. Now he felt guilty for that joy, for the champagne he'd opened, for that moment when he'd punched the air and yelled,

"Yesssss." Noah had told himself he wasn't an adrenaline junkie. He wouldn't be the sort of guy who'd race around looking for trouble just so he could be the first to shove his camera in the face of traumatized people. He'd have respect for the tragedy of their lives, and he'd record their suffering purely to make others appreciate the truth about war. And he'd done that.

Hadn't he?

He'd taken pictures he knew would never be published. Some he couldn't even show his editor, but he'd still taken them because he'd felt if he didn't immortalize the moment, it was denying the truth that such things happen, denying a voice to those who had no other way to call out. Only Noah hadn't realized how they'd linger in his mind, how a single image could morph into a looping mental video clip where he'd stood and watched people dying, where he'd been made to stand and made to— *Oh God*. His throat was so tight, he could hardly breathe.

That fucking job. To think he'd courted it, wooed it, loved it. Now he wanted a divorce, only the other side wouldn't agree. Those images were imprinted in his brain forever, 'til he slid the rest of the way into madness or tipped himself over the edge of this cliff. His heart hammered in his chest. Eleven months in a war zone had changed his view of humanity and of himself. He hadn't truly known what fear was, nor anger. He did now. The bottom line was that he was a coward. He hadn't been able to hack it and he was angry with himself, with everyone. No matter what the fucking newspaper said, he'd come home a failure.

So why was he here today? To think? To put an end to thinking? *Did I make the right choice?* That was the question that needed an answer, and Noah was no nearer to it now than he had been seven months ago. Psychiatry was a waste of time. Despite the pleas of the doctor, Noah had stopped going and tried a different treatment, but visits to the Jensen Street Dom didn't make him feel better.

Maybe there *was* no answer. Maybe it was easier to tackle a different question. *Is there more pain in my life than pleasure?* Because once that was the case, what was the point continuing? The waitress with the big eyes and easy smile came into his mind. Ash. An ordinary girl with a simple life. She could have taken away his hurt for a while but she'd said, "No."

Noah exhaled. Hardly fair to make this about her when it was all about him. He heard the sound of laughter and saw a little kid running along the clifftop, well ahead of his parents. They were chasing him, yelling for him to stop, but the boy was laughing, thought it was a game. Noah pushed himself upright. The kid wasn't looking down and hadn't seen the dip in the grass, the edge of the cliff. Sensing what was about to happen, Noah leapt forward, threw himself out of the hollow, and as he grabbed the boy's shirt, they both fell over the edge.

Everything happened so fast, Noah had no time to think about what he was doing. Instinct had taken over. He clutched the kid tighter, tried to grab something with his other hand as they slithered over the rock, and jammed his fist in a crack. They were jerked to a halt and Noah's head collided with the cliff face. *Fuck it, that hurt*. He could

hear screaming. *Oh Christ, that's not me, is it?* Something wet trickled from his forehead and he guessed it was blood.

"Alex, don't let go, don't let go," shouted a woman. "Keep still."

The wriggling kid froze, and Noah tightened his grip, managing to wrap his fingers more securely around the boy's arm. He could feel the kid shaking, or maybe that was him. Noah had his feet resting on something but it didn't feel like much. He lifted his head from the chalk and looked up. Two terrified faces stared down. Too far away to reach the kid.

"We're calling for help," a guy said. "Just hang on. Please."

Noah wasn't sure that was an option. The rock he clung to didn't feel secure and his arm ached from supporting the boy's weight. On his own, he might have managed to scramble up. He looked down, trying not to focus past the small face staring up at him. *Shit, the sea is a long way down.* Tide was in. As if that made a difference.

"Okay, Alex?" he asked.

"Yes."

Noah wanted to laugh. Not appropriate.

"You think you could find somewhere to hold on or somewhere to put your feet. Once you have your footing, don't let go of me, right? I don't want to fall."

Forget that it was Noah holding on to him, the kid didn't need to know Noah was equally petrified, his heart racing fast enough to burst. The sound of rock crumbling had him firm his hold. There were panicked whispers from overhead, whimpers from below, but the pressure on his shoulder eased as the kid let the rock take some of his weight. Noah looked down. Little feet were pressed into a small crack.

"Good boy. Now don't move until I've thought what to do." *Fuck, fuck, fuck. What the fuck am I going to do?*

"Don't do anything," the guy shouted. "The coastguard's on the way."

Noah looked down at Alex. "You think you can scramble up to me? There's a ridge here you can stand on. I won't let you go. I promise."

He could hear the muffled discussion above his head, more voices had joined those of the parents, and he knew they wanted him to keep still, but the rock that kept him and the kid from falling could crumble any moment. Noah pulled on the kid's arm as the boy climbed until they were face-to-face.

"Good job, kid. What's your dad's name?"

"Will. My mum's Jen."

"Will?" Noah called. "How about you lean over? If there are a couple of strong guys who can hold your ankles, you could reach down for Alex. I'll put him on my shoulders. Think you can get him?"

"Yes, but —"

"Time's important here," Noah said, and hoped the man got the message. "I'll keep a good hold on his foot, I swear."

Alex's father leaned over the cliff edge.

"Dad," Alex gulped.

"You're going to be fine," his father said. "You can climb this easily, but take care, do it slowly. Make sure the rock's not going to shift before you trust it, okay?"

Noah moved his grip to the back of Alex's pants and as he climbed, Noah shifted his hold south.

"Feet on my shoulders," Noah said, and held one ankle as the boy did as he was told. "Now grab your dad."

"I can't..." Will gasped.

"Wait." Noah pushed himself up, straining against the weight on his shoulders and jammed his foot into another crack.

"Got him," Will yelled, and Noah released the boy's ankle.

When he heard the cheers on the clifftop, Noah sighed with relief.

Will's face appeared again overhead. "You need to wait."

Fuck that. Noah found a new place for his foot and tested the ledge. When he pressed all his weight onto it and it held, he groaned and shifted his hand from the place it was wedged. Inch by inch, with a dry mouth and churning stomach, Noah crawled up the crumbling chalk. Strong arms reached to haul him over the grassy lip onto the clifftop, and he let them take his weight. Noah rolled onto his back, closed his eyes and exhaled.

When he opened his eyes again, there was quite a crowd gathered. They applauded and Noah bristled.

He stood and brushed himself down. Alex was in his mother's arms and she was sobbing. When Will stepped forward and hugged Noah, he fought not to pull away.

"When I saw you both go over the edge, I thought..." Will shuddered. "Alex, come here." The boy walked over, head down. "What do you have to say?"

"Please. Sorry. Thank you," Alex mumbled.

Noah stuck his hands in his pockets. "Nothing to be sorry for. You tripped. It was an accident." He didn't want the kid haunted by what might have happened.

"Thank you," Will said, and his wife came up behind him.

Noah nodded. He turned and made his way back to the car park.

"You're bleeding. You ought to get that seen to," Will shouted.

"I'm fine," Noah called, and speeded up.

One thing this brush with death had made him realize. He didn't want to die.

Chapter Six

Noah woke when the door of the flat slammed. He lifted his head to glance at the clock. Ten thirty. All his good intentions to make a fresh start by getting up early, to look for a job and go to the gym had, as usual, faded to mist during the night. It was easier to stay in bed and wank himself to oblivion. The bedroom door flew open and Noah dragged his hand off his cock.

"You could have fucking told me," Dalton barked.

Noah flinched when a newspaper landed next to his head. "Careful."

Dalton glared. "Careful? You're talking to me about being careful? On my way to get milk I picked up *The Metro* and who do I see on the front page?"

Oh shit. "I thought you went for milk yesterday."

"Don't change the subject. Look at the fucking paper."

Noah pushed himself upright, grabbed *The Metro* and groaned. *Fuck.* He and the boy were pictured clinging to the cliff, blood trickling down Noah's face. *Fucking mobile phones.* Who'd recognized him? Probably some hack at the paper.

"You told me you'd tripped and hit your head on a chunk of rock," Dalton said.

"I did." He tossed the paper on the floor and lay down again.

"Falling off Beachy Head? What the fuck were you doing there?" Dalton dragged his fingers through his hair as he paced. "Christ, Noah. Don't you think this has gone on long enough? What are you punishing yourself for? Because you didn't fucking die in Afghanistan? You think dying now will make things right? You have to talk to someone. You need to get your head sorted out." He stopped walking and stared at him. "If the psychiatrist isn't helping, talk to me. Tell *me* what happened. I can handle it. I'm your friend."

Noah felt himself closing down, shrinking away from his skin. He looked the same on the outside, but inside, he was a mess. His problem, no one else's. He rolled onto his side.

"You know what happened," Noah said in a cold voice. "It was in all the papers. We were ambushed. Not all of us walked away. Now fuck off and leave me alone."

Dalton sat on the edge of the bed. "I can't."

Noah's jaw twitched. "Yeah, you can."

"All right. Then I won't."

"Don't you have better things to do? Like finish your novel? You're not earning any money hanging around here staring at your laptop or pestering me. If you can't afford the rent, I'll throw you out." Noah half meant it.

"Don't worry. You'll get your money. I busted a gut for a year so I could take this time out to write, but you're bloody distracting."

"That's your problem not mine," Noah snapped.

"I'm worried about you." Dalton lowered his voice. "I want you back, Noah. I want the guy I knew, the friend I had."

Noah ground his teeth together. This wasn't Dalton's fault. Noah knew he was impossible to live with, and though he sometimes wanted Dalton gone, he suspected he wouldn't have survived this long without Dalton pushing and cajoling him toward life.

"Sorry," Noah mumbled.

"How sorry?"

Noah lifted his head and exhaled. "What do you want me to do? Going to cook bacon and eggs and make me eat them?"

That had been the tradeoff for their arguments, Dalton getting him to shove food in his mouth.

"Come out tonight. I know where there's a party. We'll get drunk, look for a couple of women to rub up against. I'm falling out with my hand."

Only one word would get rid of him. "Fine." Noah threw the duvet over his head, and a moment later he heard the door close.

It wasn't fine. Nothing was fine.

* * * * *

Ash arrived home physically and emotionally exhausted. First thing that morning, she'd picked up a copy of *The Metro* and stopped so abruptly she almost caused a pileup of pedestrians behind her. The story about Noah appeared to be one of heroic rescue.

But...oh God...why had he been there in the first place?

The article said seven months ago Noah had come back from Afghanistan a hero after saving the life of a soldier who'd been bleeding to death. He'd been working as a war photographer and been ambushed. It sort of made Ash wonder—those loud fireworks, the way he'd trembled in her arms, his inability to speak. Post-traumatic stress disorder? Had Noah gone to Beachy Head to kill himself?

The thought had preoccupied her the entire day as she'd tramped all over London, giving tourists glimpses into the world of Charles Dickens. Dickens had been accustomed to walking the city streets, twenty miles at a time, in order to experience the sights, smells and sounds. London Then And Now, the company Ash worked for, thought it fitting their guides did something similar, though the sights, smells and sounds had to be quite different now. Twice a week, armed with a portfolio of photographs, Ash led up to fifteen avid visitors on a rambling walk covering Dickens or the Ripper.

It was bloody exhausting, particularly when worry about Noah kept threatening to choke her. But then everything she did was exhausting. Urban garden work two days a week, tourist guide two days a week and one day at the CAB. Plus worrying about Kay not getting any modeling work, concern that Mike never had any money despite a fulltime job, and until a couple of days ago, anxiety over Ronan, though that hadn't entirely gone now that she knew his mum was terminally ill.

Kay pounced the moment Ash walked in. "There's a bath ready for you. Mike has cooked. We're going out."

Ash groaned. "Nooooo."

Kay pushed her toward the stairs. "Yes. We have to celebrate. I've got a contract for a job."

"Oh, that's great, but —"

"No buts."

Kay guided her into the main bathroom and closed the door. The tub was a treat. Ash only had a shower on her floor. The other three had to share this bathroom. She stripped off, checked the water and climbed in. The moment she slid into the warmth, she relaxed. *Bliss*.

"Fifteen minutes and dinner's ready," Kay called through the door. "Just put your dressing gown on in case you spill...well, I've hung it on the hook."

"Where are we going?" Ash got no answer.

She asked again when they were sitting around the table eating the only dish Mike made that was edible—spaghetti bolognaise. Ash couldn't help but notice he'd managed to use every pan and utensil in the kitchen.

"Where are we going?"

"It's a surprise," Mike said.

"Tell me," Ash said.

"Wouldn't be a surprise if we told you, would it?" Ronan pointed out.

"What do I need to wear?" Ash asked. "Camouflage gear? Flippers and a snorkel?"

"That little red dress," Ronan said.

Ash tensed. "The one I've never worn? The one that has no back in it? The one that practically shows my —"

"Yes," all three of them chorused.

Ash had a bad feeling. They were planning something and she didn't like surprises. They never turned out well. But she did what she always did and smiled good-naturedly, determined to be cheerful because that was the most effective way to protect herself and keep people happy. She wouldn't be the one who'd spoil the fun. The last thing she needed was for her friends to pity her, which was why Ash had never told them who she really was.

* * * * *

Noah tilted his chair until the back hit the wall, and then he stared at the group of women standing a few yards away by the bar. Voices too shrill, makeup too thick and their ogling glances far too obvious. He could probably have had any of them. He wanted none of them.

Dalton leaned to put his mouth by Noah's ear. "You could at least try to look as though you're enjoying yourself."

Why should he? He hadn't wanted to come and he wouldn't have if Dalton hadn't resorted to threats. This might be a private party, but most of the people here were after the same as those in every other bar. To find someone. The guys were thinking of a quick fuck while the women looked for something a little more long term. Noah couldn't get his head around long term. Not anymore.

"Seen anyone you fancy?" Noah asked Dalton. "You've spent long enough with your head swiveling around."

Dalton spun back to face him. "Not yet."

Noah frowned at the guarded look on Dalton's face. What was he up to? Ah shit. Noah felt too jaded to care. The group at the bar all looked their way now. Noah wondered if they'd come up with some bet on which one of them he'd go for. He knocked back his ice-cold vodka – Christ, the drinks here practically stuck to his hand – and pinned his gaze on the largest woman. She wore huge earrings that drooped to her shoulders and a white dress she looked ready to fall out of. Noah turned on his empty, megawatt smile. Her gaze flicked from side to side as if she couldn't believe he was staring at her and then she gave a tentative smile in return. Bingo.

"Don't," Dalton snapped at his side.

"Don't what?" Noah kept staring, kept smiling.

"You fucking well know what. Leave her alone."

"You brought me here to have a good time. It's only a game."

Dalton slammed his pint on the table and liquid sloshed out. "Not to her."

Noah sighed, let the chair legs fall to the floor and dropped his gaze. "You can't have it both ways. You want me to have a good time? This is me having a good time." He stood up, walked to the bar and grabbed the hand of the woman in the white dress. "Dance, sweetheart?"

The incredulous faces of her friends almost made Noah smile for real. Contrary to what Dalton thought, Noah wasn't being mean. Not entirely. Why not dance with her? Unlikely anyone else would ask.

Once they began to move, Noah regretted his impulsiveness. She had as much rhythm as a walrus. Her breasts swayed one way, her head the other, and it was making him seasick.

"What's your name?" she shouted above the music.

"Noah."

"I'm Tracey."

He really didn't want to know. One dance finished, another began and Noah should have thanked her and walked away, but that's what she expected and what her friends expected, so he didn't. It was himself he was trying to hurt, not her, but that wasn't what would happen.

"Do you work for Credit Suisse?" she shouted.

"No." How the hell had Dalton got them in here? "Client."

"Your face is familiar."

She jiggled and jiggled, and Noah dragged his gaze from her breasts, annoyed he was beginning to find them fascinating if only as a place to suffocate himself. He looked over her shoulder and his gaze got stuck. *Fuck, someone who can dance.* A tall, slender woman in a short, tight, red dress with a scoop back danced with an equally talented guy in a black t-shirt. When she spun and Noah saw her face, he blinked in astonishment. She looked straight at him and looked just as stunned.

The waitress.

Telltale tremors of desire trickled into his groin. His cock twitched. He thought about an opening line until he reminded himself she'd said no. A woman who'd actually said no to him. *Fuck.*

And she was with a good-looking guy.

Which pissed him off for no accountable reason. And the guy looked vaguely familiar.

Noah pulled his partner close and plastered his lips to her mouth, mentally begging her not to open. As he sensed her trying to, he pressed his lips harder to hers, and while he kissed her, he stared at Ash—who fucking smiled at him as if she knew exactly what he was up to, which was more than he did.

What the hell was she doing here? It *had* to be a coincidence, didn't it? The music changed again, and this time, Noah jerked his lips away from whatever her name was, said, "Thank you," and turned his back.

He'd only taken three strides toward Ash before a pretty blonde stepped in front of him.

"Hi, remember me?" she asked.

"No."

Noah tried to move past her, but she stepped the same way.

"My name's Kay. I was at the wedding on Saturday."

"Good for you."

She put her palm on his chest and Noah froze.

"Want to dance?"

"No thanks."

Noah turned and saw Ash on the other side of the dance floor — with the same guy.

Leave her alone.

"I only want a dance," the blonde snapped.

"Excuse me." Noah pushed past her through the mass of bodies.

Leave her the fuck alone. She said no. She thinks you're a wimp.

He tapped Ash on the shoulder.

"You were supposed to flounce off in a huff when you saw me kiss that girl," Noah said in her ear. "Do I have to kiss everyone except you to make you annoyed?"

"Just the guys." She laughed.

Noah looked at the man she was with. The good-looking bastard really did look familiar. He glared at Noah.

"Am I interrupting?" Noah asked him.

"We live together."

Fuck. Noah had caught what the guy said above the pounding music. But when the man reached for Ash, she elbowed him in the chest. "Back off, Ronan."

The guy laughed, kissed her on the cheek and walked away. What the hell did that mean?

"So you and he...?" Noah asked.

Her shoulders slumped and she pouted. "Not now. I'll have to dance with you instead."

It took a moment to register she was teasing. No one did that anymore.

When she headed back into the middle of the dance floor, Noah followed. She looked as though she'd been poured into that dress. It clung in all the right places and showed her beautiful ass off to perfection. She turned, smiled, started to dance and Noah's pulse raced as if he'd sucked up pure oxygen. Fluid and graceful, she flowed like a curling ribbon that wrapped and tightened and came undone in front of him.

Every turn brought them nearer, and in the end, they danced so close, they were breathing each other's air. He couldn't take his gaze from her face. They moved in such perfect harmony, Noah felt as though invisible threads were strung between them. Their mirrored movements slid from fast and frantic to slow and sinuous and back again through song after song. Wet through with perspiration, they danced back to back, chest to chest, chest to back with an arrogant sexiness that emptied the floor around them. They swayed, twisted and turned until they were no longer two people but one entity.

Noah became consumed by the thought of fucking her. Drunk on the thought of what she'd feel like as he slid into her, how she'd clasp him, fuck him with her cunt. He wanted his naked body pressed against the length of hers, front to back, back to front, every fucking position there was. He'd yanked out a corner of his shirt in the hopes of hiding his erection, but she had to have felt it. Noah could almost taste the hormones as

lust circled them, tied them in knots and roped them together. The wonder was he *wanted* her to touch him.

"You're the sexiest thing I've ever seen," he whispered in her ear.

Her wide smile of sweet pleasure made his heart pound. The honest delight in her eyes had his cock throbbing in time with his heart. Noah slid his hands from her waist onto her thighs and let them drift backward to clutch her under the crease of her butt. He swallowed his shudder. When Ash put her hands on his backside, his cock swelled and launched an all-out assault on his zipper.

When she tried to pull back, he clung tighter. "If you move, I'll get arrested."

She laughed and spun so her back was to his chest. *That's not going to help.* Noah groaned and pressed his face into the nape of her neck, unable to stop his tongue from drifting onto her skin. He gripped her hips and leaned into her so she could feel the heat and hardness of his cock. The return pressure on his groin from her backside made the breath catch in his throat. The middle of a dance floor and he wanted to fuck her where they stood. He slid his hands up the front of her body, barely managed to avoid grasping her breasts, and crossed his arms to rest his palms on her shoulders while he kept licking and kissing her neck. Ash trembled against him. He could feel the fast rise and fall of her chest. She wasn't going to say no this time.

"Come home with me. I want to fuck you," Noah muttered in her ear.

Ash's knees wobbled. This was not her. She wasn't a siren. She didn't dance like this, lead a guy on like this, want a guy as much as this.

Maybe it *should* be her.

Though Ash hadn't forgotten what she'd read in the newspaper. What if Noah was too damaged for her to help? What if he pulled her down too? Ash had spent too long climbing out of the pit to fall back now.

He spun her in his arms so they were face-to-face, hip to hip and slung his arms over her shoulders.

"Don't say no," he whispered. "Please."

The depth of her attraction to him, coupled with Noah's hypnotic intensity scared Ash. She liked blandness, she lived for ordinary because that way she knew what to expect and she could stay in control. Passion was dangerous.

But it felt good. Ash felt...just *felt* for the first time in a long while.

"Ah, Christ, are you having to think about it? You don't feel what I do?" he asked.

"I'm scared." *Petrified.*

"Not as scared as me." He closed his eyes and pressed his damp forehead to hers. "Please come home with me."

Something in his tone pushed her to voice a decision already made. Ash swallowed hard. "Okay, but I have to tell my friends I'm leaving."

He exhaled and nodded. "I have someone to tell too."

"I'll meet you outside in a couple of minutes."

He lifted his head, ran his fingers over her mouth and walked away.

As he left her, the breath caught in Ash's throat. The need to stay near him almost felled her. She turned to scan the dance floor, saw Kay with Mike and wriggled through the mass of bodies to their sides.

"I'm leaving with Noah," Ash told them. "Tell Ronan."

"Great." Mike beamed at her but Kay pouted. Ash felt a frisson of delight that Noah wanted her and not Kay.

She retrieved her coat from the cloakroom and checked her mobile and wallet were still zipped in the inside compartment. She stepped outside to find Noah waiting, his hands in the pockets of his chinos. He wasn't wearing a jacket, just a creased, untucked white shirt and a half-smile on his lips. Ash's mouth watered.

Noah snagged her hand and pulled her away from the club and around a corner onto a darker road. When he stopped walking and tugged her into his arms, a little whimper slipped from Ash's mouth.

"You are so cute," he whispered.

He trailed his finger down her forehead, over her nose to her lips. He traced the shape of her mouth and then the line of her lower teeth. Ash caught his finger in her mouth and bit down before she sucked.

"Oh God," Noah groaned. "We're at least twenty-five minutes from my bed and I'm not sure I can wait to kiss you. Can I kiss you?"

He surprised her by asking.

He surprised her again by taking his time. As Ash leaned into him, he wrapped his hands around her butt under her coat and brushed his lips against hers. When she let her tongue touch his, he pulled back and pretended to glower. "I'm trying so hard to be good and you're making me bad."

Ash laughed. He moved in to kiss her again, and soft turned hard in a moment. Noah's tongue teased, invaded, possessed. They shook in each other's arms as control slipped on both sides. All Ash could think was *deeper, harder*. The kiss zinged through her body and set her ablaze. Heat rushed down her throat to her breasts, hardening her nipples, surging to dampen her panties and liquefy her legs. She ground herself against him, knowing she shouldn't but unable to stop.

There was kissing and then there was *kissing*. Ash had never been kissed like this, never been made to feel as though she'd die if they stopped. Noah slid his hands up her neck, his thumbs pressing into the soft skin of her throat as he cradled her head. His tongue swept the underside of her upper lip, ran along the ridge of her teeth until she caught it and nipped gently.

My turn. She kissed and licked her way over his face, tasting him, exploring the different textures of his skin—the slight bristle of his jaw, the softness at his temples, the

hard lines of his cheekbones. His choppy breathing washed her face until she reached his lips and they kissed again.

Ash couldn't think beyond the kiss. Her world slid away. She didn't want this to stop, wanted more, wanted him. All of him. She vibrated with need and could barely breathe. Her hand slid down to the bulge at his groin, squeezed, and he let out such a sexy moan, Ash almost came.

"Angel, angel, hold it," he panted. "Not my cock. Just hang on. But not to that, otherwise I'm going to disgrace myself. Oh Christ. We have to calm down. I was relying on you to keep me sane, and you're as bad as me. I'm on the verge of yanking up your dress and doing it right where we stand."

He held her by the shoulders and pressed his mouth to her hair as he panted. The drumming pulse between Ash's legs intensified. She fizzed like a firework about to explode. Her chest tightened and she gripped him harder. She needed to come. She couldn't wait.

"Please," she gasped.

Noah yanked her close and pushed his thigh between her legs. The pressure against her sex was all Ash needed. She unraveled, hiding her face in his shoulder to muffle her breathy gasps. As she sagged against him, she felt the heat of mortification sweep over her.

"Sorry," she blurted.

He let out a muffled groan and stood upright. "A minor miracle I made you do that without me doing it as well."

Ash let out a choked laugh.

"You don't know how lucky you are." He licked his upper lip. "Your wet patches aren't visible."

They looked directly into each other's eyes, and for Ash it was as though they'd stepped into a bubble. The noise of traffic and chattering people faded away. The smells of the city dissipated. All she could see and hear and scent was Noah. Time stopped while raging hormones whirled around their heads, binding them together. This wasn't ordinary. This was something special.

Ash felt her heart lighten.

He snagged one of her hands and threaded his fingers between hers. "Please tell me you live around the corner."

"Greenwich."

Noah groaned. "Then my place is nearer. I have a flat in Borough."

"Can we walk?" Ash asked.

He gave her a pained look. "Walk?"

"I need to...calm down," she said. He needed to calm down too.

Noah gave her a crooked grin. "Can I wind you up again on the way?"

Ash laughed. "It won't take much."

He slid his hand over hers and tightened his clasp as they set off. Desire zipped around her body like a wayward pinball, lighting up every erogenous zone.

"By any chance, was it you who took the pictures with my camera?" he asked.

"That depends."

"On what?"

"Whether you're pissed off."

He squeezed her fingers. "When I was congratulated on the shots I'd taken of the fireworks, I thought I'd lost my mind."

"You were congratulated?" Ash gulped.

"You don't care I thought I was going crazy?"

His tone told her he was teasing, but Ash sensed more beneath the words. "Sorry."

"No, you did me a favor. Thank you," he said. "Though I have to admit I was aggravated the one you took of the bride throwing her bouquet was judged the best picture out of the millions I took."

Ash stumbled. "Really?"

"Really. You're not a professional photographer by any chance?"

She shook her head.

"Keen amateur?" he asked.

"I don't even have a camera. My friend showed me how to use one once when we were watching fireworks at Blackheath. That's how I knew what to do."

"Damn. Now I feel like a complete fraud."

A group of rowdy drunks staggered toward them, and Noah tugged her closer. She felt him tense as one of the men leered at her. Noah shifted her to his other side, and that gesture of protectiveness thrilled her more than he could know.

"What do you do?" he asked. "I know you're not usually a waitress. You were a substitute like me."

"I work two days a week for a company that converts derelict brown space into green. One day a week for the Citizens Advice Bureau and I also work as a guide for London Then And Now. I do Dickens and Ripper tours among others."

"An ordinary girl."

Ash stiffened.

"Christ, I'm sorry. That didn't come out right. I just mean you're...real. There's nothing artificial about you. I bet you like your jobs, are part of a loving family and enjoy your life."

Not quite. "And you don't." It wasn't a question.

Noah tried to release her hand, but she didn't let him.

"Why would you say that?" he snapped. "Why wouldn't I have a job I love, a family who loves me and a life I enjoy?"

"Because you never smile."

He tugged her a little faster. "Maybe I don't have much to smile about."

"There's always something to smile about. If you're not looking forward to getting me into your bed, then maybe I should catch the train at London Bridge instead."

"Maybe you should."

His eyes looked so bleak, Ash faltered. She pulled him into her arms and kissed him. She could almost taste his misery. He was so mixed up, in pain and yet aroused. She knew he wanted sex to make himself forget. The upside—he wanted it with her, and there was plenty Ash needed to forget. The downside—he probably wasn't thinking further than a night.

He cupped her face in his hands and threaded his fingers in her hair. The taste of him made Ash's head spin. His tongue swirled around hers and she felt as if she were sinking into hot water, tension leaching from her body. All the problems of her life receded until her brain emptied of everything but *this*. Each stroke of his tongue was slower and more purposeful than the last until the kiss was so heavy and desperate Ash couldn't breathe, yet she'd have collapsed rather than pulled back.

Noah dragged his mouth from hers and they both gasped. "Oh God. Don't leave me. Stay the night. Please, Ash."

When she heard her name on his lips, she'd have agreed to anything.

I'm a fool.

Chapter Seven

Noah almost dragged her onto London Bridge. He wanted her safe in his flat, in his room, in his bed with his cock buried inside her. He wanted to make her happy – he just hoped he hadn't forgotten how. He didn't want to let go of her hand and ignored the fact he didn't like to be touched. He hadn't held hands with a woman since he was a teenager. That he wanted to hold her hand was a good sign, wasn't it?

A mobile rang, and Ash put her hand inside her coat and pulled out a phone. "Hi... I'm fine... Yes... Not yet... No machete, just an axe." She ended the call. "Ronan was just checking I was still alive. He's very protective." Ash grinned. "He's also more interested in guys than women."

"Good. I'm ugly when I'm jealous." Noah's fingers settled around his mobile. He'd switched it off that morning after he'd seen the newspaper because he guessed who'd call. Maybe Sophia would too. He really didn't want to speak to her. He powered it up.

"Want to...give me your number?" Noah asked.

Her face lit in a smile. "Call me and I'll store yours."

He stood with his back to the bridge wall and pulled Ash to stand between his legs. Before he could ask for her number, his damn mobile began to ring. Noah groaned when he looked at the display. "My brother." He'd probably had his phone set up to call the moment Noah switched his on.

"Better answer it," Ash said.

Noah didn't want to, but neither did he want Ilya turning up at the flat. His monster, older brother wouldn't leave him in peace. No way would he have missed the fact that Noah had been to Beachy Head. He couldn't *know* why, but he might have guessed. Ash rocked her hips into his and kissed Noah's neck. With that type of distraction, surely he could cope with exchanging a couple of sentences.

"What?" Noah said into the phone.

Ash slid her hands under his shirt then onto his back and tickled him. Noah squirmed.

"Is it too much to expect you to answer your phone or respond to a message?" Ilya asked in his usual curt tone.

Ash licked up the side of Noah's neck. "I've been busy. I'm still busy." He tweaked Ash's nipple.

"Beachy Head?" Ilya asked. "Trying to kill yourself?"

Noah lurched away from Ash. He turned his back and held the phone closer to his mouth. "If th-that were true, I wouldn't b-be here." His heart thumped so loud he could hear it.

"Maybe you were distracted. You know how easily that happens. You rarely finish anything you start. You have the attention span of a goldfish."

"I w-wasn't..." Noah clamped his lips together. He only stuttered when he was around his family and stressed, so pretty much always with Ilya.

"What the hell do you think Father thought? It's a coward's way out. I didn't think you were a coward."

"I'm n-not." Noah's voice dropped to a whisper.

"You need help. See Dr. Jackson tomorrow. You're not well."

"I'm f-fine."

"You owe Father —"

Noah pulled his arm back and threw the phone high into the sky out over the river. There was a faint splash as it hit the water. Ash stood a few feet away, her arms wrapped around herself, staring at him.

"I'm not a f-fucking coward," Noah said through clenched teeth.

"What was all that about?" she asked.

His jaw ticked and he kept his mouth closed.

Ash moved toward him. "Talk to me. I can help."

"My brother's a controlling bastard, and I don't need any more do-goody advice," he snapped. "You think because you spend a day a week working for the Citizens Advice Bureau that you can sort me out? I don't need to be fucking sorted out."

"I offered to talk, that's all," she said quietly.

"I wanted a fuck, that's all." He mimicked her tone.

Ash stuffed her hands in her pockets. "That wasn't very nice."

"You're with the wrong person if you want to hear nice things." He walked in a circle around her.

"Why are you pretending to be horrible?"

Noah stamped 'round to face her. "I'm not fucking pretending. I *am* horrible. I don't need rescuing."

"I think you do," she whispered.

He stared at her moment and then said, "Fine. Help me then."

He put a hand on the protective concrete edge of the bridge and climbed onto the flat metal handrail that ran along the top.

"Noah, don't," Ash called.

He almost toppled before he managed to stand upright on it.

"Don't what?" He walked carefully along the bar. On one side, a short fall to paving slabs and a pissed-off woman. On the other side, a long drop to the Thames and oblivion.

"You idiot. What are you trying to prove?" Ash caught up with him and walked alongside. "Your brother's not here. Get down before you fall in the water and I have to dive in after you."

"Why would you dive in after me?"

"Because I'm an idiot too."

He laughed, slipped, and adrenaline surged as he wobbled.

Ash yelled. "Get down. You're the bigger idiot. Life is short enough."

Noah moved faster, more recklessly. "What would you fucking know?"

"About you being a bigger idiot or about life being short enough?"

"Both."

"I know you're hurting. I saw your reaction to the fireworks. I read *The Metro* this morning. When I look at you now, flirting with disaster, it's not hard to guess what you were doing at Beachy Head."

"What was I doing?" he spat.

"Emptying your head, wondering if you ought to make it permanently empty."

"Should I?" he asked.

"You want me to tell you not to kill yourself? Fine, don't kill yourself."

Noah almost laughed. "You could sound as though you mean it."

"It's not my decision which way you should jump, but if you land in the water, I will be really pissed off. You want me to spend the rest of my life eaten up with guilt over whether I said the wrong thing, didn't do the right thing? Please come down and talk about it because I meant what I said." Ash held out her hand. "I don't want to get wet. I'll ruin my dress and this is the first time I've worn it."

"I want to walk to the end." About fifty more yards. If he was meant to fall, then he'd fall. Perversely, he liked the idea of her feeling guilty about his death. *I am a sick fucker.*

She sighed. "Okay."

Noah took several careful steps before he registered that had been too easy. He glanced over his shoulder and saw Ash, shoes clutched in one hand, making her way along the rail behind him.

"Fucking hell," he snapped. "Get down."

"You first."

Noah jumped off and she did the same. When he tried to pull her into his arms, Ash thumped him in the stomach.

"Ouch." *That hurt.* He glared at her. "What was that for?"

"If you want to hurt yourself, do it when I'm not around."

She slipped on her shoes and stamped off. Noah's jaw dropped. He let her get a few yards ahead and then went after her.

"You made your point," he said to her back. "Sorry."

He suspected she'd keep going, but she stopped and waited for him to catch up. Noah walked round to stand in front of her.

She stared at him. "I don't like you."

"I don't like you either."

He linked his fingers around the nape of her neck and lifted her into the kiss. She tasted so sweet, felt so soft, Noah's cock reinflated in his pants. Kissing didn't usually have quite this effect, so it had to be something about her. One brush of her tongue against his and Noah bypassed simmer and moved straight to boiling. He hadn't meant to but he found himself fucking her mouth with his tongue, surging in and out, the movements fast and hard. The sexy little sounds she made wound him tighter, and Noah began to rock against her, his hands clutching her back.

"Get a fucking room," a passing guy shouted, and Noah froze.

Ash lifted her mouth from his and called, "This *is* our room. What are you doing in it?"

Noah gaped at her. Ash laughed, took his hand and tugged him to the end of the bridge. The underground and mainline stations were across the road. He ought to take her over there, put her on the train to Greenwich and go home alone. But he didn't want to be alone. He wanted to be with someone happy because maybe just a little of that would rub off on him. But he didn't want to hurt her. He wasn't fit for more than a one-night stand.

"This way." Ash pulled him across the road in the other direction, down toward the market.

How did she know where he lived? Noah swallowed against the lump in his throat and let her lead. Only when she turned the wrong way did he relax. He smiled when he saw where they were headed—a fish and chip shop. It was about to close for the night. A guy stacked chairs outside.

"Not too late, are we?" she asked him.

"You are for fish."

Ash tugged Noah inside. "Two bags of chips, please," she said to the woman behind the counter.

When Noah took out his wallet, Ash pushed it aside. "You can pay when we go to the Ritz." She froze and then gulped. "That was a joke. I didn't mean it."

"Okay, I will," Noah said, and did mean it.

Noah didn't usually like pushy women, but those moments of vulnerability suggested she wasn't quite what she seemed. He watched her lick her lips as she drenched her food in salt and vinegar. She picked the fattest chip to eat.

"So good," she mumbled.

Oh God. My poor cock. His pants grew increasingly uncomfortable. Noah shook far less salt and vinegar over his chips and followed her outside.

"Which way?" she asked.

Noah nodded right. They ate as they walked.

"It's ages since I've eaten chips. Look at the length of this one." Ash held up a long fry. "It's enormous. I bet you don't have one as long as that."

"Yeah, I do."

"Let me see."

"Not here."

She gave him a cheeky grin. "Bigger than four inches?"

He nodded.

"Are you sure? Have you measured it?"

Noah almost spat out the chip he'd started to chew. "Be careful. You're in dangerous territory."

Except he was the one in danger because he almost came in his pants when she tipped back her head and slowly lowered a long, thick chip all the way into her mouth.

"So tasty," Ash said. "I never cook them at home. Not after I almost set fire to the kitchen. Oh yum."

Ash chattered as they walked, and although Noah hadn't wanted anything to eat, he was amazed when he found all his chips gone.

"Have one of mine." Ash held one near his lips.

When he opened his mouth to take it, she whipped it away. Noah narrowed his eyes. Ash held it close again and as he snapped at it, she took it back. It was a game Ilya had played with his toy cars when they were kids. *Yes, you can have it. No, you can't.* Noah never won, but he wasn't going to lose to Ash. When she held it up again, he grabbed her wrist and held it steady while he took the chip then he licked her fingers one by one before he let her go.

"Last one," Ash said. She threw the papers in the trash and put a chip between her lips.

Noah moved in for the other half and kissed her as he took it. She tasted and smelled of salt and vinegar, and the ache in his balls intensified. All that money women spent on perfume and he got turned-on by condiments.

He couldn't quite understand why stopping kissing her was so difficult. When her tongue slid along his, Noah groaned.

Ash pulled away and laughed. "It's probably more romantic with spaghetti."

Noah had never been more turned on in his life. "Down this road," he said. "I live at the end."

"On your own?" Ash asked.

"No, with a friend. Dalton. We were at school together." He nodded to a set of steps. "This is it."

This is it. Ash's heart was in the middle of a complex gymnastic routine, using her stomach as a springboard. The chips weren't sitting well.

"Have you changed your mind?" Noah asked quietly.

Ash realized he'd moved up the steps while she'd stayed at the bottom.

She lifted her head to look at him. "No."

He stared straight at her. "You should."

She couldn't. He was lost, stuck in some place he couldn't get back from without help. Ash knew exactly how that felt. One night wouldn't make things right in his world, but it might make things better. One night with him wouldn't make her life right either, but Ash would take what she could get. She'd learned that lesson early on. Seize those moments of happiness when they presented themselves.

"I can't offer you anything," he whispered. "You understand?"

Ash nodded.

Noah held out his hand and she stepped up to put hers in his. He unlocked the door, tugged her forward to the stairs and they ran up three flights. Another door to unlock and then they were inside the apartment, door kicked shut and Noah was all over her.

He fumbled with the buttons on her coat, dragged it from her arms and threw it to the floor. Pressed back against the wall, Ash saw the wild look in his eyes and recognized desperation. For a moment she thought he'd rip her dress, but he took a deep breath and swallowed hard as he looked straight at her. Ash felt his fingers stroke her wrists, his thumbs tracing circles against her racing pulse. As he trailed his warm hands up her arms, he left goose bumps in his wake. When he reached her shoulders, he pushed the material of the dress down and bent to kiss along her collarbone.

Ash tilted her head back and moaned as Noah nuzzled and nipped his way from the hollow of her neck up to her mouth. He angled his head and then gently bit her upper lip. Every cell in Ash's body reacted to his touch, bursts of heat zipped like bullets along her veins until she was on fire from head to toe. Noah gripped the back of her neck to keep her mouth against his and snaked his tongue between her lips. She slid her hands under his shirt onto his back and sighed into him as his muscles tensed and flexed under her palms. Ash could feel the bony lengths of his ribs. He was too thin. When she ran her fingers down his spine, he pressed his long, lean body harder against hers and his tongue deeper as if he wanted to crawl inside her and hide. It was the way she felt too.

Noah's mouth broke from hers and Ash gulped air into starved lungs.

"You're scaring me," he whispered. "I'm bewitched."

Ash was scared too. She was drowning in him. This was too fast, too soon. Yet she knew there might not be anything more than this night, and in any case, she had no choice.

He spun her around and pressed her face to the wall. "This dress," he muttered, and played on her bare back with his tongue, lips and fingers while Ash's toes curled, her fists clenched and her breathing faltered. Noah knelt on the floor and reached to peel the dress down her body. The loud groan he made as he pulled it over her backside vibrated through her, made her wet between her legs. The dress slithered to her ankles, leaving her standing facing the wall in a tiny thong and roman sandals.

"Jesus Christ," he whispered into her butt, and Ash laughed.

Noah unzipped the backs of her sandals, eased them off her feet and slowly rose. She could feel the wash of his breath against her skin all the way up until his mouth reached the back of her neck. He planted his palms on the wall either side of her head.

"Not sure I can cope with you turning around," he said in a choked voice.

Ash spun round.

He blinked. "Oh fuck. I'm hanging on by a whisper. Maybe I should nip to the bathroom and have a...cold shower."

"Don't you dare."

Her nipples were already hard, but when he bent his head and licked them, they went even harder. Ash unbuttoned his shirt and pushed it off his shoulders. There was pink scar below his ribs, another jagged one diving into his pants near his left hip. They didn't make him any less beautiful. His dark-copper nipples were as hard as hers, his skin smooth and lightly tanned. He was slender, but the muscles were there in all their contoured beauty.

The trail of dark hair disappearing into his chinos was too tempting. Ash reached for the button on his pants but the hard bulge of his cock made it hard to push the metal through the hole and Noah had to take over. He blew out a long sigh when the waistband fell open.

"Maybe you need to buy a bigger size," Ash said.

He made a sound that might have been a laugh and then gave her a gentle push. "Second door on the right."

Once Ash stood in front of it, she pulled down her thong and bent over with her butt facing him to slip the panties over her feet. She looked at him through her legs and he growled. Noah yanked down his zipper, jerked boxers and pants down together, and almost fell headlong when he tried to grab her. Ash leaned against the wall and watched him trying to untangle his clothes from his shoes. His cock was dark with blood, the foreskin pulled back from the head, pre-cum weeping from the slit.

"Well, that was elegant," he said, and stood naked in front of her.

Ash gulped. "You were right. It's longer than four inches."

He smiled. A proper smile, and Ash grinned back. "Five inches I'd say."

Noah growled, jumped at her and she slipped into the room. The bedside light was on, the bed not made, and she was glad about that because it meant he hadn't planned

to bring anyone back. Then she found herself propelled face forward onto the bed with Noah riding her back, pressing her into the crumpled duvet.

"Five inches?" he hissed in her ear.

"Six then."

He nipped her ear and made her squeal.

"Want me to get a tape measure?" she gasped.

He laughed.

Ash squirmed until she was lying on top of him, his cock sandwiched between them. Noah had his hands plastered on her butt, squeezing and kneading.

"Condom?" she asked.

"In the drawer."

Ash leaned over and pulled it open. She caught a glimpse of some interesting-looking strips of leather and a black — *oh fancy that* — but wrapped her hand around a foil packet and pulled back to drop it on his chest. She lay on her side as he rolled the condom on, noted the tension etched on his face and thought she knew why.

"I need to apologize," she said.

His head shot up. "What for?"

"I'm going to come the moment you get inside me." *Probably*. "So maybe we can go fast this first time and slow the next fourteen."

Noah laughed. He positioned himself over her body and supporting his weight on his arms he kissed her, playing chase in her mouth until Ash thought she'd pass out from not breathing. When he pulled back and looked at her, her heart leapt into her throat. *Oh God*. She didn't love him. She couldn't. Not this fast. Not any way, but the connection between them electrified her.

He dropped his head to her breast, licked it while he stared up at her, and Ash's breathing quickened. She threaded her fingers in his hair. She was probably going to come *without* him inside her. A heaviness crept over her that had nothing to do with Noah's weight. The pressure in her chest intensified, spread to her breasts, trickled down between her legs and then rose to wrap around her heart until her lungs ached. She could hear herself gasping and moaning as her body moved out of her control.

Noah slid down to kiss around her bellybutton. The brush of his silky hair against her skin sent goose bumps racing from head to toe. The moment she felt his mouth between her legs, Ash climaxed. Sensation burst over her in a shower of sparks, her back arched and she jerked against Noah's face while her hands grabbed his hair. He licked her through the delicious aftershocks and Ash melted into the bed.

When she mustered enough strength to look down at him, he looked so pleased with himself, she frowned.

"Sorry about that," she said. "I get these twinges in my back sometimes. Makes me jerk."

"I get those too." He smiled and scooted up the bed, pushing up her legs as he went. "Fast the first time, you said?"

Ash felt the broad head of his cock press against the entrance to her body and she widened her legs. Noah chewed his lip as he pushed partway into her. His eyes closed for a moment and he groaned.

"More," Ash whispered. "Please."

A shunt of his hips and he slid all the way home with a shuddering sigh. *That feels so good.* Noah was rigid with tension.

"I can take the rest of you now," she said. "Whenever you're ready. All ten inches."

His eyes flared open and then he laughed. It was a proper roar of laughter that made his cock shake inside her, and Ash felt like she'd swallowed the sun.

The moment he began to move, her head fogged. Her muscles clenched around his shaft, trying to keep him in, and she spread her hands over his backside, feeling his muscles tightening as he thrust faster and faster. Ash brought her arms up to wrap around his back, and she entwined her legs around him, trying to keep up with his rhythm, but in the end, she let him drive them both toward oblivion.

"Fuck, fuck," Noah gasped.

His last, hammering shunt took them over the edge, and as she felt his cock swell and jerk inside her, Ash dissolved beneath him.

Chapter Eight

Noah shuddered in pleasure as he emptied himself into her, the almost pain of release making him feel as though his chest might explode along with his cock. When the long, wrenching spasms slowly faded, he sighed. Ash had clutched him so tightly, each time he'd thrust in and out of her, it was a wonder he'd lasted as long as he had. Which wasn't long, come to think of it, but he had warned her, and at least he hadn't disgraced himself by coming before he'd even pushed into her. Christ, he'd been building to this from the moment he saw her dance.

She had her arms around him, her eyes closed as she panted into his chest, and Noah didn't want her to let him go. Had she cured him of his dislike of being touched? Was it that easy?

When he tried to shift his weight, she wrapped her legs tighter around him.

"Don't move," she whispered. "You feel so good."

Noah only shifted enough to kiss her. Her lips opened to his and he dipped inside, his tongue tracing the faint ridges at the top of her mouth, the little bumps at the back of her teeth. When he felt her fingers drifting down the crease of his backside, he bucked into her.

"Let me go clean up," he whispered.

"No. I'll get a cloth. I don't want you to run away. Fourteen orgasms to go."

He smiled and groaned when he watched her walk across the room. She had the most beautiful backside. Noah liked every part of the female form, the dips, curves and soft mounds, but Ash's backside made his mouth water. He wanted to photograph her, but he knew it was too soon, that she'd say no. If she didn't want her photo taken at the wedding, she'd hardly allow him to snap her butt.

She returned with a cloth, knelt on the bed and pulled off the condom. No one had ever done this for him before. Ash wrapped the latex in tissue, set it aside, and then gently wiped him with the warm cloth. It felt so good, the combination of the material and her fingers that his ever-hopeful cock swelled a little.

When Ash came within reach, he kissed her. Noah started slow, but Ash pushed the pace, and the kiss grew greedier until lust began to overpower them both and their mouths fizzled.

"You're the sexiest woman I've ever met," he gasped against her lips.

"You don't get out much then?" Ash gasped back.

Noah let out a strangled snort.

She groaned and rolled onto her back at his side. "You're stealing all the air out of my lungs. I have to catch my breath."

"Let me catch it for you." Noah grabbed her hand and licked her palm, sucking her fingers one by one into his mouth.

Ash groaned. "Oh God. You think that will help? Find something else to do with your mouth. Just for a while. Talk to me."

"No, I want to fuck," he snapped.

She tensed, dragged her hand away and shifted to sit on the side of the bed, her back to him.

"What's wrong?" he asked.

"If you don't know, I'm not going to tell you."

"You don't like the word fuck?"

She turned to face him. "I don't like your tone." Then turned away again.

Noah took a deep breath and circled a fingernail at the base of her spine. "I'm sorry. What do you want to talk about? I should warn you, there's not a long list of stuff I'm prepared to tolerate."

"Make it sound like a chore, why don't you?"

Noah opened his mouth to bark something back and swallowed instead.

Ash turned. "Can I ask you some questions?"

"As long as they don't have anything to do with dreams, life-changing moments or my family."

Ash lay on her side, leaned up on her elbow and said, "Do you think I'm fat? Did my bum look big in that dress? Was your last girlfriend prettier than me? What are you thinking about? How do you think our relationship is going? What would you do if I died?"

Noah laughed, a proper shoulder-shaking laugh, recognizing she'd given him a reprieve. "You're not fat. Your bum is perfect. My last girlfriend was not prettier than you. I'm thinking about how many ways I can fuck you and wondering if there are any more to invent. I think things are going pretty shit-hot at the moment, and if you died, I'd panic."

Her lips curved in a half-smile.

"Don't die," he whispered. "At least wait until you're out of the flat."

That won him a full smile.

"What don't you want to hear from a woman?" she asked.

He settled on his side facing her and trailed his finger around her jaw. "Do you think I'm fat? Did my —"

Ash bit his finger and he growled.

"What don't I want to hear?" He frowned. "Um... *Is it in yet? That's it?* asked in an incredulous tone. Maybe the worst would be, *Don't worry, it happens to everyone. I really don't mind.*"

Ash raised her eyebrows. "I bet no one has ever said any of those to you."

"You'd be surprised."

She climbed on top of him and stretched her legs along his, rubbing his cock with her belly. "Tell me."

He slid his hands over her buttocks. "Is it in yet? Well, that was a holiday romance. Her first time and mine, and I changed my mind when she said that. Neither of us knew what we were doing. When I was asked, *Is that it?*, God, I wanted to die. I was a bit quick off the mark."

"Thank goodness you got over *that* problem. Three minutes is quite reasonable."

Noah rolled and pinned her under him. "Careful. You're on thin ice. As for the *Don't worry, it happens to everyone*—well, no, it hasn't happened to me." Everything else had, but not that.

He saw something in her eyes then that threw him, an awareness of him, an ability to pierce his shields and see inside him. Despite his warning, despite what he'd told her, she wanted more than he could give, more than he was prepared to give. And it scared him. He should stop this now before she got hurt, but he was too selfish. His cock tried to nod in agreement.

"Am I too heavy?" he asked.

"No."

Ash spread her legs, hooked her heels over his calves and squirmed beneath him. His cock hardened against her belly.

"Your ears aren't pierced," he whispered.

"Despite everyone telling me it doesn't hurt, I'm convinced it does."

He dropped his head and kissed her earlobe, tugging it into his mouth and sucking. Ash shuddered against him. "Oh, that's another reason for not piercing them."

Noah worked his way down her neck. "Do you ever wear jewelry?"

"Offering to buy me some?"

He paused in mid-lick of her collarbone, caught her smirk and played along. "I'm thinking maybe a ring."

"I don't like rings."

"Why not?" He dropped his head to her nipple and teased it with his teeth.

"They make my fingers feel weird."

"I wasn't thinking of a ring for your finger." He sucked her nipple and worried it with his teeth.

"I'm not having that pierced," Ash squeaked.

He looked up at her. "Wimp."

Ash raised her eyebrows. "Okay. If you do it first. I dare you."

"Pity. Nowhere open at the moment."

"I could sterilize a needle."

"Fresh out of needles." Noah held back his smile.

"I bet you've got a corkscrew."

He let the laugh out.

"You're gorgeous when you laugh," she whispered. "It's as if every part of your face joins in."

Noah sighed. "So you fancy me then?"

"A bit. Do you fancy me?"

He smiled. "A bit."

"Which part of me do you fancy the most?"

"Which part of me are you asking?"

Ash giggled.

It was like a game of very slow tennis that no one really wanted to win. Noah was well aware they'd both avoided talking about anything too personal. On his part because he had something to hide. He couldn't help wondering if Ash did too.

"There's not one part of you that doesn't turn me on," she whispered.

She lifted her head to kiss him, and the moment their lips touched, it was as if a firework ignited in his chest, fizzing and sparking as it burned more and more fiercely. His heart rate soared and the kiss shot straight to fast and greedy. Long, deep thrusts of his tongue into her mouth while his hips rocked his cock into her stomach. Ash caught his tongue between her teeth, teased the tip with her tongue, and then sucked so hard, he felt as though she were vacuuming the air from his lungs. When they disengaged, Noah's breathing was all over the place. He'd forgotten how. Every time they kissed, he wanted her more and more.

"I'm going to look for a part of you that doesn't turn me on," he panted. "Could take a long while."

Noah rolled off her, shifted her facedown and then straddled her, his knees on either side of her thighs. Supporting his weight on his elbows, he sank down to bury his face in the back of her neck, rocking his hips to slide his erection down the crease of her bottom. He caught the hair at the nape of her neck with his teeth and tugged, and Ash's fingers curled as she poured her sigh of pleasure into the pillow.

The sight of her lying beneath him, the sound of her breathy cries, the feel of her soft, warm body – they all sent shivers of lust racing up and down his spine.

Noah groaned. "I can't keep my hands off you." *I can't keep my cock out of you.*

He slid a hand beneath her, burrowing under her hip to settle between her legs. *Hot, wet, oh God.* The button of her clit slipped under his fingers as he played with her swollen folds, and Ash groaned. Noah cupped her chin with his other hand, drawing her head back while he continued to nip and lick and kiss her arched neck, still sliding his cock against her. Ash caught two of his fingers in her mouth, sucked hard and then bit him.

"Oh Christ," he gasped. How could biting his finger send his cock into a frenzy?

Noah shifted to one side and fumbled for another condom. More fumbling to slide it on, and then Noah tugged her up by the hips so she knelt on the bed. The sight of her, that beautiful butt in the air, her folds glistening, made Noah's heart pound against his ribs. A list of what he wanted to do to her took form in his head, but his cock was already nuzzling against her, his hips rocking the head deeper and deeper.

He plunged into her as if he'd dived off the top board. Exhilaration and excitement in the pleasure of a perfectly timed thrust that was so hard and deep it sent a jolt of pure pleasure shooting up his spine. It also shoved her out of his grip.

Ash lay sprawled beneath him, laughing. "You're supposed to hold on."

"You could have held on too."

"Not with that battering ram behind me."

Noah wrapped his hands around her waist and thrust his cock back into her, his hips pumping in an accelerating rhythm while Ash keened with pleasure and pushed back against him. Noah slid his hands up her ribs to her nipples and pulled her back hard into him as he drove into her. He rubbed the swollen nubs with his fingers and panted against her shoulder. And all the time he kept up the relentless rhythm with his hips, pounding her sex with his cock.

"Fuck, fuck, fuck," he gasped.

The wave rose inside him, growing in intensity until Noah's world contracted into one of acute contentment where the two of them would do this forever. He wanted and didn't want to come. He mouthed the nape of her neck, gently bit her, and felt Ash tense then unravel beneath him. Her breathy moans and cries wound him tighter, and as her body clenched around his cock, he kept moving, jamming into her in a series of deep, firm thrusts.

She pulled on him with the muscles of her sex and caught the hot spot under his glans. Noah's balls drew up and his breath caught as his chest tightened. The head of his cock swelled and then pulsed. A second later, he erupted inside her, the strong convulsions making his body shake. Noah spread his arms over hers and clutched her hands and they slowly sank onto the bed.

As he started to breathe again, he let out a deep, contented groan.

"Is that it?" she whispered. "Don't worry. It happens to everyone. I really don't mind. Let me know next time when you put it in."

Noah laughed. "You little monkey."

He pulled out of her and took off the condom.

"No loving care with a warm cloth?" he asked.

"Do it yourself. I've got what I wanted."

Noah smacked her on the backside. Not hard, but Ash's contented purr was like a lightning bolt in his gut. He walked into the adjoining bathroom, switched on the light and caught sight of himself laughing. *Fuck it.* She'd made him smile. Noah disposed of

the condom, washed his cock and put his hands on the side of the basin as he looked in the mirror.

You're allowed to be happy. When the psychiatrist said that, Noah had walked out because it wasn't true. Noah didn't feel he could let himself be happy because he damn well didn't deserve it. He knew there was nothing he could do to change the way things had worked out in Afghanistan. Noah, like everyone else involved, had to live with the consequences of that day. Only he couldn't live with them. He was letting himself fall deeper and deeper into the hole he'd dug, and one day, Noah was afraid he'd find there was no way out.

His head dropped and he stared down at nothing. He hadn't even registered Ash had come up behind him until she rested her head on his back. She curled her arms around his chest and spread her palms over his pecs.

"You're sad again," she whispered. "I don't want you to be sad."

Noah stiffened.

"Come back to bed. I can make you smile."

The tight feeling in his chest wasn't a good one.

Ash tugged at him. "Please don't be sad. Let me make you happy again."

Anger bubbled inside him, spurted from his mouth, infecting his words. "Who the fuck do you think you are?"

Now she was the one who stiffened. He pulled out of her arms and turned to face her. Somewhere, in the depths of his brain, Noah knew he was being stupid, trying to mask his fear and guilt under anger, yet he couldn't help himself.

"This was a pity fuck?" He barked out the words. "You thought letting me fuck you would make me all better."

"Yes, but that wasn't—"

"You know nothing about me. Nothing." He gave her a push back into the bedroom.

"You don't think you deserve to be happy," she whispered.

"Going to play shrink with me now too?"

"Noah, don't spoil things."

"There's nothing to spoil."

He slammed the bathroom door, locked it and stared into the mirror at a face he loathed.

This had been a mistake.

Ash stared at Noah's bathroom door and her shoulders slumped. His eyes had looked so dead, she hadn't understood at first what she was seeing and then realized it was pain. He was a jerk, but he was a messed-up jerk. He didn't mean to be cruel. Ash knew the difference.

Decision time.

She could talk to him through the door and try to get him to see sense.

She could get into his bed and wait until he saw sense.

Or *she* could see sense and go home.

There was a connection between them. She knew he'd felt it, but Ash also knew she couldn't make people want her or love her. Not that she expected *love* from him, but still. She left the bedroom and dressed in the hall, hoping he'd emerge, say he was sorry and ask her to stay.

After Ash had fastened every button on her coat, there was no reason to linger. She slipped out of the flat and closed the door quietly behind her.

With trains no longer running, Ash took a taxi from London Bridge station. She flung herself in the back and brooded. Sometimes it seemed as though everyone she met had a problem. She knew she couldn't take all the weight on her shoulders, so why did she always feel she had to try?

She was exhausted from caring so much. Yet what choice did she have? Next time Mike told her he didn't have enough money for his share of the gas bill, should she refuse to help him out? When Kay whined that someone fatter, shorter, less pretty than her had got the modeling job she wanted, should Ash point out that maybe attitude had something to do with her lack of success, and that her chances of "making it" were very small? Or should she sympathize and pour Kay a glass of wine and tell her to keep trying. And now Ronan needed support because of his mum. He'd been the only strong one, now he was just like the rest of them.

The house was dark when she got back. Not a surprise at this time of the morning. Shoes strewn in the hall told her the others were home from the club. As Ash tiptoed toward the stairs, a figure emerged from the living room and she let out a muffled shriek. "Ronan. You half scared me to death."

"Sorry." He scratched his head and yawned.

"Were you asleep down here?"

"I must have dropped off. You okay?"

"Fine." Ash started up the stairs.

"Want a hot drink?"

Not really, but something told her Ronan wanted to talk so Ash came back down. "Sure."

He flicked on the light in the kitchen and filled the kettle.

Ash put her coat over the back of a chair and sat at the table. "Everything okay with your parents now?"

He turned and grinned. "They'd like me to marry you."

Ash gaped at him.

"They were joking. The fact they can joke means a lot. My mother started chemotherapy and she sounds really upbeat. I know it probably won't last, but I'm just grateful they're at least speaking to me now."

Ash swallowed hard.

"So how about you, out until this time in the morning?" Ronan dropped teabags into two mugs. "Kay said he was the guy at the wedding, the one you threw food all over."

"Slight exaggeration but yes, the photographer."

"You do know Kay is miserably jealous?"

Ash felt a ripple of pleasure until it was swamped by a tsunami of guilt. *Damn.*

"She'll get over it," Ronan said. "Did you have fun?"

"Yep, it was great." *Until it wasn't.*

Ronan put the mugs on the table, sat opposite and pinned her with his dark gaze. "Details?"

"He can really dance," Ash said.

"I noticed. Then so can you. It's a wonder the pair of you didn't set the floor on fire. Did you go back to his place?"

Ash was slightly puzzled at Ronan's inquisition. It wasn't like him to push quite so hard. "We stopped for chips near Borough market and eventually made it back to his flat."

"What was it like?"

Ash paused and then groaned. "I didn't notice."

Ronan laughed.

"It had a hall and a bedroom."

Ronan rolled his eyes. "Do you even remember the address?"

"Thirty-five Frenten Street. I wasn't quite lost blind at that point." Though why bother remembering? Ash clenched her fists under the table. And why did Ronan want to know the address?

"When are you seeing him again?"

A shiver ran through her. "He might not call."

He couldn't call. He didn't have her number.

He wouldn't call. He didn't trust her.

Ronan set his mug on the table and frowned. "A one-night stand? That's not like you."

"No." Though that hadn't been the intention.

"You want him to call?" Ronan asked.

"Yes. No. Yes," Ash whispered. "I don't know. I really liked him, but..."

Ronan wrapped one of his hands around hers. "Did he hurt you? Want me to go and drag his intestines out through his mouth?"

Ash snorted.

Ronan squeezed her hand. "What happened?"

"It was great and then it wasn't. He thought I'd only got into bed with him because I felt sorry for him." Ash raised her gaze to Ronan's. "He got angry, but he didn't hurt me. He just didn't want me there anymore."

"He sounds fucked up." Ronan let go of her hand and patted her fingers. "You don't need a guy like that. You deserve someone who treats you like a princess."

"Maybe we *should* get married," Ash said, and Ronan smiled.

"Don't see him again. Whatever his problems are, you don't need them. Put yourself first for a change, Ash. Look for a prince."

Chapter Nine

Dalton sat at his computer. He couldn't hear any sounds coming from Noah's room but that didn't mean Ash hadn't spent the night. Dalton had lingered at the club, hoping to speak to Kay, but she'd ignored him. It served him right. He'd said to pretend they didn't know each other, but he'd wanted to dance with her. When he failed to persuade *any* woman he fancied to dance, he'd consoled himself with alcohol and not been fit to dance with anyone. As soon as he'd mustered sufficient energy, he'd come home and gone straight to bed. He hadn't even felt like wanking. At this rate, he'd soon be as depressed as Noah.

It was a miracle he'd woken with no headache, but it had taken two cups of coffee before he'd settled enough to begin writing. One sentence tweaked and twisted, and Dalton's bedroom door flew open. He flicked the monitor onto a different screen. Noah never fucking knocked. When Noah walked in looking like shit, Dalton guessed Ash had *not* spent the night. Maybe she'd not even made it as far as the flat. *Damn it.*

"What's up?" Dalton asked.

"Nothing." Noah's face was blank, his mouth a narrow line.

Was there ever more meaning in one word? "What happened?"

Noah slumped on the bed, lay back and flung an arm over his eyes. "We fucked. She left."

The fact that they'd fucked was something. As far as he knew, this was the first woman to have sex with Noah in seven months. Probably a lot longer than that since it was doubtful Noah had risked anything in Afghanistan. He shut down the document he was working on and swiveled in his chair. "And was it good?"

"Fantastic."

"But?"

Noah moved his arm and stared at him. "Who says there's a but?"

Dalton shrugged. "You and *but* go together in more ways than one. What did you do?"

Noah's jaw tightened. "Nothing."

"You obviously did something. I assume she was—" *Shit.*

"What?"

"Willing?" Dalton wanted the word back even as it escaped.

Noah glowered at him. "I'm not a fucking rapist. I just said something I shouldn't have."

"Call her and apologize."

"I don't have a phone."

"Use mine — What do you mean you don't have a phone?"

Noah sat up and put his head in his hands. "It fell in the river."

Fucking hell. "Just as well it was insured." Dalton had sorted that out for him after the last "accident". "I'll arrange a replacement. I might as well do it now."

He grabbed his jacket and walked out.

Noah wanted to tell him not to bother, that he had no one he wanted to speak to and that the only people who wanted to speak to him were ones he was trying to avoid, but he heard the door slam and sighed. Should he try to find Ash? Apologize? Ask her on a date that was more than a prelude to getting her into bed? She might be the cure for some of the crap churning in his head, but he had nothing to offer her.

Better to leave things as they were, except it was going to take awhile to convince himself of that. Noah pushed himself upright and headed for the kitchen. He was reaching for the kettle when the doorbell rang.

Had Dalton forgotten his key? Maybe it was Ash. Noah's heart surged into his throat. It was more likely to be Ilya, come to yell at him and ask him questions he couldn't answer about Beachy Head. He opened the door to see the guy Ash had been dancing with last night, the one she lived with and his heart went into freefall.

"Oh God. Is she okay? D-did she get home all right? Fuck it, I should have called her a taxi. I w-wasn't thinking. I —"

A hand wrapped around his throat and pushed him back into the flat. Noah registered the door closing, the strength of the grip, and knew he was in deep shit. And then he looked into the eyes of the man holding him and fell straight into hell. The Dom he paid to hurt him was Ash's housemate, Ronan. *Oh fuck.* No wonder he'd looked familiar.

Ronan released his neck and Noah's knees almost gave way as he staggered against the wall. He straightened and backed away.

"Oh Christ," he blurted.

"Stand still."

Noah stumbled to a halt.

"Finally you recognize me."

"I w-wasn't near enough last night." Noah rubbed his throat. "How do you know where I live?"

"Shut up."

"Please tell me nothing's happened to her. Christ, if —"

"Shut up," Ronan barked.

"We're not in your f-fucking realm now." Noah spat out the words. "Tell me she's okay."

"She's okay."

Noah sagged. He got over the relief of knowing Ash was fine and then faced the fact that he'd just let Trouble with a capital T into his flat.

"What do you want? How do you know where I live? Did she tell you? Ask you to come and beat the crap out of me?"

"I know where you live because I'm careful. I follow all my clients because I need to know who and what I'm dealing with, though I respect their anonymity. Ash *did* tell me where you lived, but only to prove she'd not been completely out of it when she went home with you. She has no idea I've come to see you. No idea I already know you."

Ronan walked toward him. "I'm not here as your Dom—not that I'm under any illusion you consider me as such—I'm here as Ash's friend. She said you didn't hurt her last night, but you did. You hurt her feelings. Why the hell would you fuck her and then accuse her of only getting in your bed because she felt sorry for you? Can't you read people at all? She doesn't have a cruel bone in her body. If she has a fault, it's that she's too kind. You hurt her and I'm pissed off."

Noah's mouth was devoid of moisture. Speaking was impossible.

"If you want to fuck up your life, that's up to you, but don't mess around with my friend. She has her own demons to contend with. Don't give her yours as well. Understand?"

Oh Christ.

"Want me to make you understand?"

"I c-can't..." Noah's heart raced so fast he could see black shapes floating in his vision. "The last thing I want to do is hurt anyone," he blurted. "I know it's not an excuse, but I just couldn't stop myself."

"Try harder," Ronan snapped. "Think of other people instead of yourself."

I was, just not Ash. Someone else.

"You think she'd see me again?"

Ronan laughed. He stood in front of Noah and planted his palms on the wall either side of Noah's head.

"I just read you the riot act, warn you off her, and you want to see her again?"

Noah stood straighter. "Yeah, I do." His heartbeat slowed. "Maybe it's her I need, not you."

Ronan smiled. "Maybe it is, but she's not your crutch. If you hurt her again, I'll hurt you, and no safe word will save you. Understand? Got big enough balls to come back and see me on Friday?"

"I told you—"

"So you did." Ronan turned and headed for the door.

"Where does...where do you live?"

The Dom shook his head. "I'm not going to make it easy for you. If you want her, find her."

* * * * *

Dalton phoned Kay as soon as he left the flat.

"I'll call you back in a couple of minutes," she whispered. "I'm at work."

He headed for the Carphone Warehouse. The third phone Dalton had replaced. He wondered if Noah had lost this one accidentally or on purpose. Outbursts of temper weren't unusual for someone with PTSD, but Noah didn't seem to be getting any better.

Five minutes later, Dalton's phone vibrated in his pocket and he pulled it out.

"I'm on a catering job," Kay said. "Lunch for a load of wanker bankers. What's up?"

"Did you see Ash this morning?"

"Nope. Didn't she spend the night with Noah?"

"No. We need to bring them together again."

He could almost hear the annoyance at the other end of the phone.

"Maybe he doesn't fancy her."

"Didn't you see them dancing? They were glued together."

Kay huffed. "If you want him to get off with someone, how about me?"

Dalton tightened his hold on the phone. He didn't want Noah in the grips of a woman like Kay. "It's her he wants. We need to engineer another meeting."

"I don't want to help you anymore."

"Three hundred quid to get them in the same place at the same time," he blurted.

The pause told Dalton he had her.

"How?" she asked.

"We don't want to be too obvious. How about you ask Ash to meet you somewhere and I make sure Noah walks past."

Kay raised her eyebrows. "And that's not obvious?"

Dalton literally bit his tongue.

"And you'll pay me?" she asked.

"Of course." *Mercenary bitch*. But then he was a mercenary bastard.

* * * * *

Noah remembered Ash telling him she had two jobs. One was some sort of gardening thing and the other was for a tour company. An online search eventually gave him a name that rang a bell—London Then And Now—and a phone number. At which point he came to a grinding halt. They wouldn't confirm Ash worked for them, let alone give him her number. He didn't even know if she was working for them today.

"It's really important that I find Ash," he said.

"I'm sorry I can't help you." The third time the woman had said that.

Noah sighed. "How many tours do you have operating?"

"Ten."

Christ. "I'd like to buy a place on each."

"But half of them have already started."

"I don't mind. If you give me the itineraries, I'll catch up."

"They're full."

He heard the suspicion in her voice and blurted, "I'll pay double."

The woman gave a heavy sigh. "And you're going to spend the day trekking all over London, checking out each tour to find Ash."

Tacit confirmation she *did* work for them and more important, was working for them today. "I really need to speak to her. I lost my phone so I don't have her number." Only half a lie.

"I don't want to send a real life Jack the Ripper after her. She's a lovely girl. How do I know you're someone she wants to see? I'll tell her you called. Give me your name and number and if she wants to see you, I'm sure she'll get in touch."

It had to be face-to-face not on the phone, and now Noah had a clue as to which tour.

"No, it's okay. You're right. Maybe she wouldn't want to see me. Thanks, anyway."

The Ripper had operated in a fairly small area of Whitechapel. Noah downloaded a few pages of information on Ripper tours, grabbed his camera and went hunting.

* * * * *

Ash gathered her group of twenty tourists around her to listen to an actor read out a few Ripper letters. Using actors to reenact the murders put London Then And Now ahead of its competition. Though their tours were more expensive, they'd won several awards. Ash rarely did the night walks which, though more atmospheric, had the problem of the old photographs being more difficult to see. Plus it was scary enough in the daytime.

She discussed the validity of the letters with the group, no one asked a question she couldn't answer and then they moved on to Commercial Street, the site of the last murder.

"At two in the morning, on the ninth of November 1888, twenty-five-year-old Mary Kelly met George Hutchinson," Ash said.

"Only cost you sixpence," said the actress playing Mary, decked out in the thick layers of clothing worn at that time.

"I wish I had it." George gave her a filthy leer that always made Ash want to snigger.

"Mary met another man at the junction with Thrawl Street." Ash walked on and stumbled to a halt as she tripped over her stomach. Noah stood in a doorway with his camera.

"Lift my skirts for sixpence?" Mary asked the actor playing Jack.

"Got a place we can go, sweetheart?" he growled.

Ash tried to get her mind back in gear. "Hmm—Hutchinson saw the pair walk into Dorset Street and enter Mary's room in Miller's Court. He left the area after about forty-five minutes. No one had emerged during that time. At around four in the morning there was a cry of—"

"Murder," Mary shouted from out of sight, and a couple within the group squeaked in surprise.

"Her neighbors ignored her cry," Ash said. Noah continued to stare at her, and she couldn't tear her gaze away from him. "It wasn't until Thomas Boyer came to collect the rent at around ten forty-five that Mary was discovered lying on her bed." Ash passed out the photographs. "Don't look if you're squeamish. Don't listen if you are either." Noah lifted his camera and took a picture. Ash flinched.

"The surface of her stomach and thighs had been removed and the contents of her abdomen extracted. Her breasts had been cut off, her arms and face slashed." She continued giving the gory details as the actor playing Jack quietly got into position.

Ash faced her group. "This was Jack the Ripper's last murder, but the legend was only just beginning."

Jack walked through the group, making a couple of women squeal. He turned and smiled, tipped his hat and then strolled off around the corner.

Ash was plied with questions on the way back to Aldgate East tube station. She glanced back and saw Noah following. As the tourists thanked her and dispersed, he came forward.

For a few moments they stood looking at each other without saying anything. Ash's organs were busy doing some complicated dance routine while her brain fired out thoughts. *He came looking for me. How the hell did he find me? He's still interested. What should I say?*

"Lift my skirts for sixpence?" she blurted.

Noah laughed. "You're wearing pants."

"Nine pence then. Or maybe less because it's harder work."

He reached out and touched her hand. "Sorry." He sighed. "I seem to spend my life saying sorry. I shouldn't have reacted like that. It cheapened what we did and I apologize." He pinned her with his dark, puppy-dog gaze. "I let issues that are fucking me up interfere in something special. I wanted to make you happy. There was nothing wrong in your wanting to make me smile. I really am sorry. Give me another chance?"

Ash curled her fingers around his. "I could have stayed, tried to reason with you."

"Don't try to take a molecule of blame in this. It was all my fault." Noah tugged her closer. "We have something, don't we? Some connection? You make... I want..."

"What?"

"I want to be happy," he whispered. "You've no idea how much I want it."

Ash smiled. "That's the first step on the road to recovery."

"Is the second red-hot sex with a gorgeous woman?"

"No. The second is eating."

"Then red-hot sex?"

She rolled her eyes. "If you're very lucky."

Except Ash thought she was the one who was lucky. Noah made her heart race and her pulse jump. Much as she wanted to help him, this time she'd found someone who could help her. He made her feel wanted, he made her feel beautiful. He made her feel she could do anything. She tried to push back the niggling worry that the higher she soared, the harder she'd fall.

Chapter Ten

They ate in an Italian restaurant in Greenwich, sitting at a table in a cramped, dark corner, their legs entwined, gazes locked on each other. This time he'd made sure she had his mobile number stored in her phone and he'd written hers on a scrap of paper. Noah hardly noticed what he ate or drank. They both knew where the evening would end, with her naked on top of him, under him, next to him. The sexual tension was thick enough to taste. His need for her grew by the moment. Literally.

He adjusted his pants under cover of the table.

"Are you working tomorrow?" he asked. *Please say no.*

"Yes, aren't you?"

"No."

Ash stared at him over her wineglass. "Is that by choice? What do you usually do?"

"Lie in bed half-awake all night." *Have a wank.* "Fall asleep as I should be waking up. Get up at noon." *Have another wank.* "Slump in front of the TV or computer until it's time for bed." *And wank.*

"I meant what work do you do?"

Noah bit back his smile. "That *is* work. You've no idea how hard it is to maintain that energetic schedule." He was surprised he didn't have repetitive strain injury.

"And you want to fit in red-hot sex with a gorgeous woman? It sounds too much for you." She sighed dramatically, and Noah smiled.

His fingers crept across the tablecloth to rest on her hand. "I'm a freelance photographer. I work when I want to. At the moment I don't want to."

"Why not?"

When he tried to draw back his hand, Ash kept hold of his fingers and carried on eating one-handed.

"What do you like to photograph?" she asked.

"Not weddings, fashion or babies." *Or war.*

She frowned. "I asked you what you *like* to photograph. Maybe I should have asked what do you like to be paid to photograph."

"I... I..." He didn't know what to say.

Ash put down her fork. "Unusual-looking vegetables? Porn? Libraries of the United Kingdom? Porn involving unusual-looking vegetables in libraries of the United Kingdom?"

Noah almost choked on his wine. "Not recently."

"Damn." Ash pouted.

"Don't look so disappointed."

"I have this thing about unusual-looking vegetables. Not porn of course."

He laughed. He knew what she was doing, circling the elephant, poking it, trying to get him to open up to her. He didn't have to tell her everything, but he wanted to tell her something.

"Until seven months ago, I was a war photographer. I don't want to do that anymore."

"Why did you want to do it in the first place?" she asked.

"Because I thought I could make a difference. I thought I could make people think about war, show them the cost, the damage to lives, to people's worlds."

And instead, he'd added to the cost, damaged lives and destroyed worlds. The lump in his throat made it impossible to swallow, almost impossible to speak.

Ash gripped his hand tighter. "That sounds very noble. But not easy."

"No, not easy. People don't understand why we're in Afghanistan. The TV reports the death of yet another soldier and people don't even know whether what we're doing is right or wrong, whether we're making any fucking difference. I hoped to put a human face to the abstract and make people aware of what a tough job our soldiers have, what a shit life many of the Afghani people have. I wanted to be their witness."

Noah closed his eyes. And he had been their witness for a while. His photos had been used by *The Times* and *The Independent* among others. They'd bought pictures from the charity Noah worked for. All Our Heroes had used his work to gain support and patronage. His photos were all over their brochures. He'd done the job he'd been paid for. They'd been grateful, and Noah wished he'd never fucking heard of them. He clenched his fists.

"What went wrong?" Ash tugged at his fingers.

His eyes flashed open. *Don't blurt it all out.* "We were ambushed in Helmand province by a radical faction called the Behnam. They're a band of convicts from an Afghan prison, freed after the jail was hit by a bomb. The guys with me were outgunned and we were captured, taken to one of the Behnam camps. There was a...there was a rescue attempt and one guy died, the other was badly injured and I...I wished to fuck I'd never gone." Noah could feel his control slipping. "If I hadn't gone, one man would still be alive, the other wouldn't have been so badly injured. It's my fault and I have to live with that. I have to *live* with that. I have to live —"

"Stop it," Ash said gently, and put her finger on his mouth.

Noah pressed his lips together. *Keep it together. Don't freak her out. Don't fuck this up.* He took a deep breath.

"Yes, you're right," Ash said. "You *do* have to live with that, but don't say it's your fault. If you hadn't gone, someone else would have. Maybe more guys would have died and the photographer too. Shit happens. Some people get all the luck. Others get none."

That's just the way things are. But if you let this ruin your life, that's an insult to the guy who died trying to save you and an insult to the one who was injured."

But you don't know it all and I can't tell you. If I do, you won't sleep with me and I want you to hold me. I want to forget.

"Have you been to see the soldier who was injured?" she asked.

Guilt surged back and the ache in his chest increased. "Once, when Dave was in the Queen Elizabeth Hospital in Birmingham. He...he lost both his legs." He was unconscious. Noah couldn't have faced him otherwise. Dave's family had thanked him, and Noah had rushed out and thrown up in the bathroom.

She paled. "That's very sad."

"And all I have are a couple of scars." Noah signaled for the check.

"And post-traumatic stress disorder." Ash whispered.

He should have known she'd guess. "Maybe I'm just a fucking wimp who's scared of fireworks."

Ash leaned across and kissed him. "I can't believe I found someone who's more fucked up than me."

Noah gaped at her and then laughed.

Ash tried to take the check, but Noah grabbed it and put cash on the table. He shouldered his backpack, waited until Ash picked up her bag and then pulled her outside.

"Explain," he said.

She shook her head. "Not now. One day, but not now."

"I've just opened my heart to you and you won't do the same?" Anger simmered inside his chest.

"But you haven't opened your heart," she whispered.

The gasp burst from his lips. How did she know? Everything Noah had just eaten threatened to make an exit. He could feel the telltale signs of one of his episodes. His heart pounded, his breathing quickened, but when he'd have let her hand go, she held it tighter. When his feet couldn't move, she stepped in front of him and pressed her lips to his. Her hand slid to the back of his head and pulled him close, and Noah felt his body climb down, his anxiety creeping away like a sullen drunk.

By the time Ash lifted her mouth from his, his brain had stopped working. Probably because all the blood in his body had gone looking for fun in his cock. Thank fuck for long jackets. They still held hands, and Noah looked down, watching the way her thumb stroked his wrist, imagining his hands on her breasts.

"We need to move," she whispered.

He let Ash tug him down the road, leading him like a boy who'd gotten lost.

"Did you know the bumblebee bat is the world's smallest mammal?" she asked. "Not much bigger than the insect it's named for and it weighs less than a penny."

Whereas the giant flying fox fruit bat of Indonesia has a wingspan of more than six feet. Wouldn't want to meet one of those on a dark night. Not unless my wings were bigger."

Noah gave a short laugh. Did she have ADD or some innate knowledge of the way to trip his mind back to reason? "Have you memorized an encyclopedia?"

"The first volume, yes."

He gaped at her. "What for?"

"When I was a kid, *Volume One of a Natural History of the World, A to E* was the only book I had for a while."

"And you can still remember it?"

"Some of it. I'll tell you a secret. I stole the book from a box outside a used book store. I pushed it inside my coat and hurried away, thinking someone would grab me any second. When I got to the edge of town and no one had stopped me, I carried on along the beach road and found a place in the dunes to sit and read. When I got home, the police were waiting. God, I nearly wet myself."

"How old were you?"

"Twenty-five."

Noah laughed.

"Seven. The manager of the shop had seen me. I hadn't realized he lived a couple of doors away and knew me. My parents paid for the book and told me off in front of the police. Then the moment the door —"

Ash stumbled, and Noah gripped her hand tighter.

"Sure you want a glimpse of my world?" she whispered.

"What happened?"

"The police left and my father took hold of my arm and broke it." She gave him a little smile.

"Jesus Christ." Noah looked at her in horror.

"My mother threw the book in the dustbin and they didn't take me to the hospital until the next morning. I couldn't sleep because of the pain. I cried but no one came. I was told to say I fell downstairs. When I got home, I snuck out and rescued the book and hid it under a loose board at the bottom of my closet. I was scared shitless they'd find it, but they never did."

"Are your parents still alive?" Noah wanted to break her father's arm.

Ash shook her head. "No siblings, no aunts, uncles, cousins, grandparents. What about you? Just one brother?"

"Yep. My father's alive, my mother's dead. I had a sister who died too. My mother was English, but my father is from Russia."

"So you're half-Russian? Do you speak it?"

Noah nodded.

"Are all your relatives in Russia?"

"And Switzerland, Germany and France. They're coming over soon for my father's birthday. My brother's arranged some sort of extravaganza."

"No fireworks I hope, though you could buy earplugs."

Noah laughed. He found her infinitely fascinating. He couldn't think when he'd been this interested in any woman.

Ash pointed at a right turn coming up. "We can walk through the park. I don't go that way when I'm on my own."

"You think you're safe with me?"

She grinned. "I hope not."

He slung his arm over her shoulder as they went through the park gates.

"You never did say what it was you liked to photograph," she said.

"Anything that catches my eye. Buildings, naked women, unusual-looking vegetables."

She sniggered.

"Why don't you like having your photo taken?" he asked.

"It makes me feel uncomfortable, as though someone's seeing something I can't. A loss of control thing, I guess. I'm very...private."

That was interesting. Most people would have said because they didn't photograph well or because they don't like the way they look. Noah wanted to take a full-on face shot of Ash, but he'd find the right moment to ask her.

"Let's go up the hill." Ash pulled away from him and ran ahead. "There's a great view from up there."

Noah watched her race up the grass. He walked up to join her and every step he took, his desire for her increased. *Oh God, I hope she lets me fuck her.*

As he reached her side, she grabbed his arm. "See the laser showing the meridian line?" she whispered.

"No."

"Canary Wharf's all lit up like a Christmas tree."

"Is it?"

Noah had his back to the river, his gaze fixed on her.

Ash looked at him and gulped. "Oh God."

"We need a —"

"Cold shower?"

He smiled. "A tree."

Ash let him pull her across the grass to a tree at the dark side of the park. "Why do we need a tree?"

"Because we're less likely to be seen."

She didn't want to ask "Doing what?" because she could guess.

As they reached a large horse chestnut, Noah guided her to lean with her back against the trunk and then stood in front of her. He shrugged off his backpack and then took her bag and set the two on the ground. Noah ran his hands down her face as he stared into her eyes and the ache between Ash's thighs forced a groan through her clenched lips. It was dangerous to want anyone as much as this. The higher he drove her, the further she had to fall. And she *would* fall because when it came down to it, he wouldn't want her. No one would.

"What is it about you?" he whispered.

"Coconut shampoo?"

Noah let out a strangled laugh. He unfastened the buttons on her coat and slipped his hands inside to caress her breasts over her shirt. Her nipples hardened as he rubbed his palms over them.

"Cold?" he whispered.

Ash shook her head.

"Good. Take your clothes off."

Her jaw dropped. "What?"

"Keep your coat on. Take off your shirt and pants."

Not out here screamed her common sense.

Shut up.

Who said that?

Ash glanced around but there was no one near. It shocked her that she wanted to do this more than she didn't want to. No one would see if she was careful. She wriggled out of her coat to free her arms, and Noah hooked it back over her shoulders. He stared into her eyes as Ash's trembling fingers worked at the buttons on her shirt then pulled it off. Noah tucked her shirt inside her bag.

Her pants joined her shirt and she stood in her underwear and shoes, her coat draped over her shoulders. Noah's Adam's apple rose and fell. Ash's heart turned cartwheels and her pulse shot up like a rocket.

"I want you naked," Noah said.

Ash wondered if he thought she wouldn't dare. She reached behind to unfasten her bra, pulled it off her arms and held it out to him. His lips quirked in a smile. When she passed him her damp panties, he brought them to his face and inhaled. She should have felt embarrassed, instead she was consumed with lust.

Don't let this go too far yelled her conscience.

Shut up.

Who said that?

Noah put her underwear with her shirt and pants then stood and unbuttoned his coat. The light wasn't too low for her to see the hard bulge at his groin. When he moved toward her, Ash put her hand on his chest.

"Am I the only one who's going to be naked?" she asked.

"For the time being."

"That doesn't seem fair."

"I'll make it fair."

He stared at her mouth as he slowly traced the shape with his finger and Ash was lost. The world shrank to just the two of them. Common sense, conscience and brain surrendered to the other voice. Ah, now she knew what it was.

Lust.

Noah dropped his hands onto her hips, stroked the curving bones with his thumbs and kissed her. As he touched his lips lightly to hers, Ash reached inside his coat and around his back to urge him closer. Noah brushed his lips back and forth over her mouth, his breath washing with hers. He teased with his tongue, rubbing it against hers, trailing it over the ridges of her teeth, fluttering it against the top of her mouth. As he angled his head to kiss her deeper, one of his hands slid down her belly and came to rest between her legs. Ash heard his intake of breath when he realized her thighs were soaked with her cream. He rubbed his fingers over her wet flesh.

"God, you are so cute," he whispered, and landed a flurry of kisses all over her face before returning to spear her mouth with his tongue.

One long finger explored and stroked her folds, moving in rhythm with his tongue, and Ash stopped breathing. When Noah slid the finger inside her and used his thumb to circle her clit, the breath that had locked in her throat escaped into his mouth as a muffled grunt. *OhGodGodGod*. If anyone walked by they'd know exactly what they were doing. This was dangerous, but Ash was too turned-on to care.

Noah's tongue licked from her mouth to her neck, and she gulped air into struggling lungs.

"Hot, hot, hot," he muttered.

Her veins were rivers of fire, racing around her body, igniting every pulse point. All her senses were heightened. She shivered at the rasp of Noah's slightly rough chin, at the soft stroke of his fingers, the warm wash of his breath. Ash tried to keep quiet, but as Noah slid his finger in and out of her body, she had to bite her lip to keep from crying out.

His other hand drew slow circles around her aching nipple while he licked and nuzzled and nipped along her collarbone. Everything he did wound her tighter, dragged her faster along a narrowing path of increasing delight. Ash tried to hold back, but it was like running the wrong way up an accelerating escalator – doomed to failure though fun while it lasted. His finger curled inside her and his thumb rubbed faster over her clit as he pressed his mouth to her ear.

"Yes, yes, yes," he whispered.

Ash shook as pleasure stuttered through her in strengthening bursts until her entire body locked into that breath-stealing moment of exquisite tightness that came before release. Her eyes fluttered closed as she unraveled. She shuddered and gasped and his mouth moved back against hers to swallow her sounds.

"Oh fuck," he muttered.

Ash thought he'd stop, but he didn't. He pinched her clit, massaged it between his finger and thumb, and unbelievably, Ash felt herself lurch back to the starting line.

"And again," Noah whispered.

He thrust two fingers into her hard, and Ash rocked into him. As gentle as he'd been before, now he was forceful. The fading fire inside her reignited, and Ash writhed, fighting for air. She couldn't come again that fast, couldn't, couldn't...could. Ash stiffened and then exhaled as she flew. *Oh God*. Lights flickered behind her eyes and she clung to Noah's shoulders as her world fell away.

Noah kissed her back to reality and held up her limp body until she could stand. Ash blinked to focus her eyes and glanced around over his shoulder. She sighed with relief when she saw they had no audience. Did Noah want someone to watch? Was that his kink? So long as he didn't get off on getting arrested.

She stared into his eyes. "You look smug."

He grinned. "Yeah, well..."

She laid her hand over the bulge in his pants, squeezed and wiped the smile off his face.

"How brave are you?" she whispered.

Ash flipped open the button of his pants, eased down the zipper and pulled his shaft out over the waistband of his boxers. He felt hot and rigid in her hand, and in the dim light, she could see the crest of his cock glistening with pre-cum.

"Fuck," Noah groaned.

He put his palms on the tree and dipped his head to her shoulder. She held his cock out in the open between them, sliding her hand up and down, letting soft skin slide over the steel core. The way his jacket hung hid what she was doing and Ash couldn't resist swiping the crest of his cock with her thumb and then licking it. When she ran her tongue around her lips, Noah's eyes glazed.

Ash put one hand above the other, and wrapping her fingers around his length, she pumped gently, moving both hands in the same direction. Noah's breathing grew alarmingly ragged.

"Shit. That feels...good," he whispered.

But variety was better. Ash used the heel of her palm to press down on his balls and wrapped the other hand around the top of his cock. Using her fingers, she gently pulled the foreskin over the crest before easing it down until her palm pressed on the rounded head. Then did it again.

"Harder," Noah muttered.

Ash obliged and went faster too.

He lifted his head and kissed her, his lips all over her mouth as he tried to gulp air at the same time. He gripped her hips so tightly, it almost hurt. Noah's desperation fueled hers. Hers fueled his. They were mad doing this outside, but Ash wanted him inside her.

Now.

She practically climbed up his body, hooking her legs around his waist under his coat to pull him against her. Noah gripped her buttocks and as her coat began to slip from her shoulders, he pressed her back against the tree, tilting her until his cock nestled against the entrance to her body. When the wet tip of his shaft slipped inside her, they both released a shaky breath.

"Can't wait," Noah gasped, and thrust deep inside her.

The sensation of the velvety head of his cock pressing into her forced her eyes closed. Soft, hard, wet, long, his cock was a perfect fit, a perfect feel. The muscles of her sex tightened around him and she whimpered. Ash clutched his back and he jammed her hips down, his hips up, over and over.

When she forced open her eyes, Ash saw the pleasure on his face in the curve of his mouth and the darkness of his eyes, and she felt something bloom inside her. Noah pressed her harder against the tree, his hips shunting faster, and tipped her over the brink. A moment later, Ash felt the warm spurt of his seed spray inside her as he shuddered in her arms.

"Oh fuck," he mumbled, and looked her in the eyes. "No condom."

Ash hadn't remembered either. She was on the Pill but that didn't mean she shouldn't be careful.

"Oh fuck it," he blurted, and pulled out of her. "I'm sorry. I've never... Christ. I really am sorry."

"It's okay," Ash whispered.

He tucked himself back in his pants. "It's not fucking okay," he snapped. "Christ Almighty."

Ash flinched. The second time they'd done this and the second time he'd lost his temper. Maybe he wasn't a guy she could help. She pulled away from him and wriggled her arms back into her coat. Her fingers fumbled with the buttons.

"How could we have been so stupid?" he ranted. "I mean I've got a fucking condom in my... Oh bloody hell."

The pleasure of the last few minutes began to dissolve.

"I'm not... I don't have any diseases... Ah shit." Noah fastened himself up.

Ash wanted to run away but made herself stand firm. "You've nothing to fear from me. The guys I've been with all used condoms and I'm on the Pill. I don't want children. Ever."

She bent to pick up her bag, turned away from him and walked down the hill. She wanted him to follow but accepted he might not. Maybe it would be better if she went home alone. Nothing new in that.

Chapter Eleven

It took Noah a moment to realize he'd compounded one mistake with another. *Shit*. He grabbed his backpack and ran.

"Ash, stop. I'm sorry."

After he caught up and walked by her side, he mentally crossed his fingers and took her hand. When she didn't pull away or increase her pace, he gave an audible sigh.

"I'm the idiot, not you," he said. "It was my fault. I wanted you so much, and I couldn't think of anything but that. You felt so fantastic, hot and wet and tight, and all I wanted to do was get deeper and deeper inside your body and fuck you as fast and hard as I could. Even if I'd remembered the bloody condom, I don't think I could have stopped. I'm so sorry."

Her fingers tightened around his. "There were two of us who could have remembered." Ash glanced at him. "You felt fantastic as well. I *wanted* you to fuck me hard." She paused. "Not fast though. It was over rather quickly."

Noah caught the glimmer of a smile on her face. "You little monkey."

Ash laughed, tugged her hand free and darted away.

"Three seconds and then I'm coming," Noah called.

"Yep, I don't think it was much longer than that."

He howled, ran after her and caught her before she reached the bottom of the hill. Noah spun her into his arms, pressed his face into her throat and licked his way to her lips.

"You evil creature," he muttered into her mouth.

"You have something to prove now," Ash whispered before his mouth covered hers and shut her up.

By the time Noah lifted his head, his cock was raring to go again. How long would this need for her last? Her hand slipped under his jacket and onto the bulge in his pants.

"How far to your house?" he asked in a choked voice.

"Not far."

Ash pulled her hand free and nudged him toward the path. There were several joggers, guys walking dogs, dogs walking guys, couples strolling. Christ, where had all these people come from? He thought about Ash naked under her coat and groaned.

"You okay?" she asked.

"A bit stiff."

She laughed. God, he loved making her laugh.

"And I'm a bit wet." She lowered her voice. "You're dribbling down my thighs."

Noah groaned. "Stop talking to me."

"I'm thinking – do we need to bother with condoms? If we're both...okay and I'm on the Pill?"

The strangled noise that emerged from his mouth made them both jump. Noah was fairly sure he was incapable of coherent speech. He was barely capable of walking in a straight line.

He grasped her elbow and moved faster, relieved when Ash guided him through the gate of a three-story mid-terrace Georgian house.

"My room's on the top floor," she said, and unlocked the door.

A broad-shouldered guy with untidy brown hair appeared in the hallway. He looked so belligerent, Noah tensed.

"Hi, Mike," Ash said. "This is Noah. Noah meet Mike."

"There's a man bleeding in the living room who claims he's your boyfriend," Mike snapped.

Noah bristled.

"What?" she gasped.

When Noah wrenched his hand free, Ash sagged.

She glanced between Mike and Noah. "I don't know who's in there but whoever it is, it's not my boyfriend."

Mike frowned. "I caught him following me. He said he thought you were two-timing him." He smirked. "He had a bit of an accident."

A guy came into the hall holding a bag of frozen peas against his face. "Hello, Ash."

Noah had been hoping for her not to recognize the man, but she rushed up and hugged him. *Fuck*.

Better if the guy she had her arms around had been short, fat and bald, but he was tall, thin and blond. Noah bristled.

"Oh Fred." Ash said.

"I tried to call but your phone's switched off," the guy mumbled.

Ash put her hand on Fred's shoulder. "Come upstairs."

A cold sweat broke out across Noah's back. What the fuck was she doing? Less than fifteen minutes ago, he'd been inside her, and now –

"You too." Ash wrapped her hand around Noah's clenched fist.

"Can I come as well?" Mike asked.

"No." Ash glared at him.

Mike raised his eyebrows. "It was me he was following."

"He's disturbed," Ash said. "I'll explain later."

The moment the door of her room closed with the three of them inside, she groaned.

"Sorry, sorry, sorry," Fred said. "It was all I could think of to say."

Noah leaned against the door.

"Fred's not my boyfriend," Ash said.

"I was once," Fred said.

"A long while ago and we both know it was a mistake."

"I thought it would divert suspicion," Fred said. "I didn't expect you to turn up with a real boyfriend. Last time I spoke to you, you weren't seeing anyone."

Noah gaped at them. "What the hell's going on?"

Ash started to unbutton her coat and then stopped. The blush sweeping over her face made Noah smile until he remembered he was annoyed.

"Sit down both of you," Ash said. "I need to use the bathroom. Don't say a word until I'm back. Things are complicated enough."

When Fred moved toward the bed, Noah glared, and the guy changed direction to sit on the chair. Noah took off his jacket and settled on the blue duvet. He glanced around a very tidy room. Ash didn't have much. A bed, a chest of drawers, a wardrobe, a blue chair and a bookcase. No fluffy toys or plants or knickknacks. It was a bit—stark. It worried him. Was there something about her he wasn't seeing?

"I didn't think she had a boyfriend, otherwise I wouldn't have said it, sorry," Fred muttered.

Noah kept quiet. Was *he* Ash's boyfriend now? What else could he call himself?

Ash emerged in a floor-length blue dressing gown. She sat next to Noah and pressed her leg against his. "Spill it, Fred."

Noah felt a measure of ease at her action. He'd been upset for nothing.

"Mike left work at five. Took money from a bank nearby and I followed him to an address in Tower Hamlets. Sixty-two Hedon Mount. It's where his brother lives. Mike didn't go into the house. His brother came to the door and handed him some cash. Couldn't see how much. Mike caught a bus to Deptford. He went round the back of a car body repair shop on Woolwich Street into a men's club. Ten minutes there and an expensive drink later for me, he caught a bus back to Greenwich. I got off after him. I thought I might as well come and see if you were in, but Mike knew I was following him and he slammed me up against a wall."

"At which point you came up with your terrible excuse," Ash said. "You're really crap at this."

Fred sagged and took the bag of peas from his face. "Yeah, well, I was in pain and remember I usually deal with insurance fraud."

Ash sagged. "Sorry, Fred. I shouldn't have gotten you involved."

Noah still had no idea what was going on. Ash had persuaded this man to follow a guy she lived with? What the hell for?

"I did find out something though," Fred said. "At this place in Deptford, The Club it's called—how original is that?—Mike asked to speak to a man called Robbo. He's a loan shark." Fred stood and put his hand in his pocket. He pulled out a business card and gave it to Ash. "Not that it says that of course. Loan-sharking's illegal and dangerous. Talk to Mike, okay?"

Ash sighed. "Thanks, Fred."

"We're done now, right? Can I bank the check?"

She nodded.

Christ. She'd *paid* this guy to follow a friend? That was wrong on so many levels.

Fred nodded to Noah. "'Night."

After the door closed behind Fred, Noah took hold of Ash's chin and turned her to face him. "What the fuck is going on?"

"I was worried about Mike. He's constantly short of money for the bills we share. He has a good job working in IT for a law firm. It didn't make sense."

"So you paid a guy to follow him?"

"I couldn't think of any other way to find out what was wrong. I asked Mike and he said he'd lost it gambling. He's crap at cards, has no interest in horse racing. It just didn't sound right."

"But what does it have to do with you? Mike's just a mate, right?"

"He's always stressed about money. He buys the reduced stuff in the supermarket, he always makes up an excuse if we want to go out for a meal. We talked about the four of us going to Paris, but when chatting turned serious, Mike suddenly reversed on the idea. He pretends to be happy, but he's not."

This bloody happy business again. "That doesn't justify spying on a friend," Noah snapped. "He's unhappy and you feel you have the right to know why? It's his business not yours. If he'd wanted to share it with you, then he would have. Are you on a mission to help the fucking world? Still trying to *fix* me?"

Ash wrapped her arms around herself. "I know spying's not nice, but I thought—"

Noah stood. "No, you didn't think. If he owes money to a loan shark, that's his business. What the hell can *you* do about it? He got into the mess himself and it's up to him to get out of it."

"I can help you both if you'd just—"

"Maybe he doesn't want your fucking help. I fucking don't." Noah stormed out of the room.

He hated do-gooders. Stupid people who thought they could make everything right when they had no fucking idea what they were doing. He loathed and liked Ash in equal measure. He wanted to fuck some sense into her head, make her see she couldn't

fix everything, but the best thing to do was walk away. He didn't need this sort of stress.

Noah knocked Ash's housemate Kay over at the bottom of the stairs, though he did wonder if she'd taken a dive.

"Is there a fire?" Kay asked, holding out her hand to be helped up.

"Sorry," he muttered.

She didn't let go of his hand. "Ash does seem to send guys packing very quickly." She smiled at him. "Have you ever considered modeling? The agency I'm with is fantastic."

"Not interested."

"You're so gorgeous. They'd snap you up, I'm sure."

Noah wrenched his hand free.

"Want to go and have a drink then?"

"No." He yanked the door shut behind him.

* * * * *

Ash flinched when the door slammed. It had been a mistake to let Noah be there when she spoke to Fred, but she hadn't wanted him to think Fred was her boyfriend. Didn't matter now. She didn't have one anyway. Although Ash thought Noah's outburst had less to do with Mike than with himself. Ash had gotten the message. *Leave me and my past the fuck alone.*

She couldn't bloody well leave things alone. She'd done that once and the result had been disaster. She retrieved her phone and dialed the number on the business card she'd been twisting in her fingers.

"Mr. Logan?" she asked.

"Yes."

"You don't know me but you know a friend of mine who came to see you tonight—Mike Burroughs."

"Is that right?"

"I'd like to pay off his debt."

"You would, would you?"

"How much does he owe?"

"At this moment, twenty-three thousand two hundred and fifty pounds." No pause before he'd answered.

Ash winced, though it could have been worse. "Do you take checks?"

"No, and tomorrow the debt will be another fifty, plus another fifty the day after that."

It made Ash grateful she'd never been desperate for money.

"If I bring you a check tonight for twenty-four thousand will you accept that in full payment?"

There was a long pause. "What's your name?"

"Ash Elleston."

"Ask for me at the door."

She ended the call, ordered a cab and wrote the check before she dressed.

* * * * *

When Ash gave her name at the club, a bouncer patted her down before he led her along a corridor to a back room. Ash felt nervous but was determined not to show it. The man knocked, opened the door and gestured her in. Two guys sat, both smoking. The air was thick with fumes, and Ash smothered a cough.

"Mr. Logan?" she asked.

"That's me," said a white guy in a dark suit, sitting behind a desk.

"Would you mind showing me some form of identification?" Ash asked.

Logan's eyes looked ready to pop out of his head, but the black man in the chair opposite laughed so hard he almost choked.

"I don't mean to be rude, but you could be anybody," she said.

"She's right," the black guy said.

Logan pulled out his wallet. "Driver's license okay?"

"That would be fine, thank you," Ash said.

She accepted the plastic card, confirmed the image and then took the check from her pocket.

"The amount just went up to twenty-five thousand," Logan said.

Oh fuck, fuck, fuck. "No, it didn't." Ash put the check in front of him. "You're going to give me a receipt, an acknowledgement that Mike's debt no longer exists and that will be it. You'll call and tell him the debt's been cancelled, but not who paid it off."

Logan tipped back his chair so he rested on the back legs. "I will, will I?"

"Please," Ash added.

"Twenty-five thousand," Logan said.

Ash exhaled. "We had a deal. By rights, this debt never has to be paid. What you're doing is illegal. If Mike went to the police, you'd never get the money back."

Logan's chair slammed back onto the floor. "Going to the police is a bad idea." There was a hard edge to his voice. "For you. For Burroughs and most of all for his brother."

That wasn't a surprise. Ash knew Mike had more sense than to use a loan shark. "Take the check, Mr. Logan, and write me a receipt," she said in a steady voice, willing her legs to stop shaking.

The black guy doubled up with laughter.

"Can it, Bruno," Logan snapped.

"You don't need a receipt, sweetheart. I won't let him forget this," Bruno said. "Christ, you've got a pair of balls on you."

Ash's hand settled around the mobile in her pocket. Could she press 9-9-9 by feel?

"Lucky you've caught me in a generous mood." Logan reached for the check. "This better not bounce."

"It won't," Ash said.

He scribbled a few words on a scrap of paper and gave it her.

"Now please call Mike, put your phone on speaker and tell him the debt's paid."

Logan gave her an incredulous stare. "And what am I supposed to say when he asks who paid it? Santa Claus?"

"Tell him...a lottery winner paid off his own debt and paid another's at random. Or say the guy had seen Mike here and fancied him or something."

Logan picked up his phone. "Mikey, Mikey, Mikey."

"Is something wrong?" Mike sounded anxious. "The money was all there. I checked."

"This is your lucky day. The debt's cancelled."

Logan smiled at Ash. He reminded her of a shark. Lots of teeth, shiny black suit and mean.

"Cancelled?" Mike croaked.

"Lottery winner paid off his debt and chose a random punter to help out of trouble."

"You're joking," Mike said.

"No, I'm quite serious. I have the check in my hand at this very moment."

"Who? Can I thank them?"

"They wish to remain anonymous."

"Wow. You're sure the debt's gone. I don't want to get my legs broken for not turning up next week with a payment."

Logan *tsked*. "What do you think we are? That debt is paid, but tell your brother he's welcome to borrow another seventy grand whenever he likes." He laughed and switched off the phone.

Seventy thousand? Good God.

"Did you know it wasn't his debt?" Logan asked.

"I suspected it was his brother's," she said. "Do me a favor and refuse if he asks again."

"That's not the way I do business."

No, she got that. He stood and Ash realized how tall he was, well over six feet. She put out her hand. "Thank you, Mr. Logan. I know you didn't have to do this and I *do* appreciate it."

He shook her hand and held on to it a little too long. "The pleasure was all mine. Mike's a lucky man."

Ash's heart hammered until she was back in the taxi she'd paid to wait for her. Then all the way home, she thought about Noah.

* * * * *

By the time Noah got back to his flat, his self-righteous indignation on behalf of a guy he didn't know had faded under regret that he'd fucked up yet again with a woman he wanted to know better. He still thought she was wrong to have spied on her housemate, even though her motive was borne out of concern. What the hell was she going to do about Mike's debt? However much it was Noah doubted Ash had the money to help him. She worked a couple of ordinary jobs, shared a nice house, but her clothes were...basic. No jewelry, no massive TV and no car equaled no money.

Noah sat on his bed with his back to the wall. He'd made a mistake. He'd made this personal. He hadn't listened to her. He'd asked questions and then interrupted when she'd answered. He sighed. He had no idea what she was going to do with the knowledge about Mike's debt. Then a sudden thought struck him and he groaned. Fred had given her the loan shark's card. Ash wouldn't be stupid enough to go and see him, would she?

* * * * *

Dalton clutched the crumpled letter in his hand and rang the bell of the flat in Belgravia. He looked into the camera, and a moment later the door clicked to allow him in. He took the stairs two at a time to the top floor. There *was* an elevator but it was one of those ancient, rusty, caged things that creaked and groaned, and Dalton didn't trust it.

Ilya waited by the door, looking immaculate in pressed chinos and white shirt. "Come in."

Ilya's flat was a bit like a mini version of Floriton Hall, stuffed with old things that were probably worth a fortune and rugs Dalton tended to walk around rather than over. He followed Ilya through to a living room that looked about as comfortable as a museum. Dalton thought about sitting and didn't.

"This is the letter." Dalton handed it over.

He'd watched Noah crumple it up and use the envelope to give the memory stick to the photographer and not thought any more about it until he'd opened the glove box to find some gum. Not that he was going to reveal that nugget to Ilya. As far as Noah's brother was concerned, Dalton had only just found out about it. Ilya could hardly expect him to steam open Noah's mail.

The letter told Noah he'd been awarded the Queen's Gallantry Medal for outstanding bravery whilst on photographic assignment in Afghanistan. Noah had said virtually nothing to Dalton about what happened over there, but the letter said Noah had saved the life of an injured soldier at great risk to his own safety. He'd used the soldier's weapon to kill four members of the Behnam, saving the life of several soldiers and then kept the wounded man alive until help arrived.

And Noah had screwed the letter into a ball.

And Dalton should have never looked at it.

And he shouldn't have told Ilya. But he had.

What Noah had done astounded him. Dalton would never have guessed he had it in him. He was proud of the stupid bastard.

"Fucking hell," Ilya said. He slumped onto the couch. "He killed four men? Is that what's the matter with him? But what choice did he have? If he hadn't, he'd have been dead. A medal? That's brilliant. Why the fuck did Noah screw up the letter?" He glared at Dalton as if it was his fault.

"Taking a wild guess, I'd say he doesn't want the award."

Ilya frowned. "Why the hell not?" He leaned back into the couch and smiled. "This is perfect. It legitimizes all this time not working. Sophia will understand his silence." Ilya sighed. "He's not a coward."

Dalton's jaw dropped. Is that what Ilya thought?

"We can announce this at our father's birthday party. Noah will have no choice about accepting it then."

Dalton fidgeted. "I don't think that's a good idea." He wished he'd left the letter where he'd found it. Noah was going to know what he'd done. "I better put it back." He held out his hand. There was a chance then that Noah would come to some other conclusion.

"I'll keep it and respond on Noah's behalf. They want him at Buckingham Palace next April to receive the honor. It will give Father something to look — Yep, this will be excellent news to announce at the party."

Dalton should have known Ilya would ignore him. He rubbed the back of his neck, cursing himself for a fool. He didn't like to admit it, but Ilya intimidated him. Not just by his physical presence, but his whole bearing.

"Now we know what Noah's issue is, I wonder if I should tell the psychiatrist," Ilya said.

"No," Dalton snapped, and then gulped when Ilya glared. "The whole point is that Noah has to come to terms with what happened in his own time and in his own way. Better not to interfere."

Actually, telling the psychiatrist had gone through Dalton's mind, but if the doctor confronted Noah with this, Noah would guess the source of his betrayal.

"I'm not going to pay you to babysit forever."

"This isn't about money. It's about what's best for Noah." Dalton kept telling himself that, as if repeating it could make it so.

"Talking of the little pain, what's he been up to today? Has he fucked that waitress?"

"They met at the club and left together. This morning he told me he'd brought her back to the flat last night and fucked things up. She left, but he's still interested. I made a plan to get them together again, but just before I got here, I had a call from Kay, the girl Ash lives with, to say Noah and Ash had been at the house but Noah stormed out and almost knocked Kay down in his haste to leave."

Ilya laughed. "Has he forgotten how to behave with women?"

Dalton thought back to the way Noah and Ash had danced at the club. "I think he really likes her but he's still battling his demons."

"He can use her for exorcism. But I don't want him to get suspicious. No woman would put up with this sort of behavior for long. If he guesses we've paid her to tolerate it, he'll be furious."

"Actually, I—"

"This was a good idea, Dalton. His interest in Ash won't last, which suits me fine. He'll have dumped her before he suspects anything. If he's fool enough to be taken in, we'll pay *her* to dump *him*."

"But—"

Ilya grunted. "Father's party is the following Saturday. I want him there even if you have to drag him. And I want him behaving himself."

Chapter Twelve

Ash had barely set foot in the house before Mike burst into the hall with a broad smile on his face. "Drink. Kitchen. Now."

"Bed. Tired. Now." Ash's heart leapt at the look of delight on Mike's face.

Kay appeared at Mike's side and tucked her arm through his. "He's been to the off-license and bought champagne. Proper bubbles, not the cheap stuff."

Mike slung his arm over Ash's shoulder. "Hey, where's my happy-faced housemate?"

"She got dumped," Kay said.

Thanks, Kay.

"Noah? God, that didn't last long," Mike said. "It wasn't my fault was it, over that guy?"

"No, he —"

"Noah rushed out of here so fast." Kay spoke over her. "He knocked me over on the stairs."

Well, that said it all, Ash thought.

"Is that where you've been, Ash?" Mike asked. "You went after him? What happened?"

"Nothing happened." Not a bad thing for them to think she'd followed Noah.

Ash ducked out from under Mike's arm and went ahead into the kitchen. Ronan sat at the table, eating beans on toast and drinking champagne.

She mustered a smile. "Gourmet dinner again?"

"I've run out of caviar. Did I hear Noah's name mentioned?" Ronan asked.

Mike handed Ash a glass of champagne.

"He's dumped her," Kay said.

Oh Christ. Kay *was* pleased. Ash could hear it in her voice. It hurt to hear her say it, but it was the truth.

"He walked out on you?" Ronan narrowed his eyes.

"No, he raced out of here and Ash went after him, but looks like it's still off," said Kay.

"You don't need to sound so gleeful," Mike said. "Are you okay, Ash?"

"Fine. What are we celebrating?" she asked, desperate to deflect the attention from her and Noah before she burst into tears.

"Freedom and happiness," Mike said. "Here's to fucking miracles." He tapped his glass against each of theirs. "To Santa, the tooth fairy, the Easter bunny and the innate goodness of man."

Mike grabbed Kay and danced her around the kitchen. Ash smiled and sipped the champagne.

"What's up with him?" she asked Ronan.

"Apart from the fact that he's already drunk most of that?" Ronan nodded toward the empty bottle on the counter.

"My brother's having a baby," Mike blurted.

"That *is* a fucking miracle." Kay laughed. "You could sell his story for a fortune."

"Way to go, Uncle Mike." Ash raised her glass to him.

"He and Sadie have been trying for years. They had IVF treatment. Cost them a fortune, but the last time it worked. She's three-months pregnant."

Another piece slipped into the jigsaw and Ash was more sure than ever she'd done the right thing. Mike wouldn't find out, no one would as long as Logan kept quiet. But the price she'd paid had been high. Not the money. She didn't care about that. She *did* care what Noah thought of her.

Her mobile vibrated in her pocket, and when she saw who was calling, her pulse jumped.

"Hi." Ash moved toward the door with the mobile pressed to her ear.

"You at home?" Noah asked.

Oh God, he wants to come back. "Yes." She ran upstairs. "Where—"

"Just wanted to be sure you hadn't done anything stupid, like gone to see that loan shark."

Anger swamped her disappointment, and Ash slumped on her bed. "It has nothing to do with you, does it? You made it quite clear what you thought about interfering in other people's affairs. You were the one who stormed out of here in a strop. Why should you care if that's what I chose to do? You can't have it both ways."

She switched off the phone and threw it on the floor.

She'd done the right thing, hadn't she? No way would Mike have taken the money from her, even as a loan. Except Ash couldn't silence the niggling voice in her head reminding her she didn't want anyone to know about her money and that was the reason she'd done it secretly.

Thank God she hadn't completed the rest of her question to Noah—*Where are you and how soon can you be here?*

Forget him.

Forget him.

Forget him.

* * * * *

She lay in bed, reading, not taking in a word, when someone knocked. *Please don't be Kay.* "Come in."

Ronan popped his head around the door. "Can I have a word?"

Ash put her book aside, sat up and hugged her knees.

Ronan closed the door and perched at the bottom of the bed. "What happened with Noah?"

Shit. "I guess...we weren't compatible. Different views on what's right and wrong."

"You okay?"

Ash smiled. "Yep. I'll just have to keep kissing those frogs." *God, don't let me cry.* Alarmed how close she felt to breaking down, Ash chewed the inside of her cheeks.

Ronan shuffled closer, took her hand and fixed her with his dark gaze. "You almost make me wish I was...different."

Her throat began to close and her eyes prickled. Ash forced a smile to her face.

"You deserve to be happy, Ash."

"*I am happy.*" She smiled even more broadly. *Shit, not too much or I'll look like the Cheshire Cat.*

"You think you can fool me? You're always smiling, but half the time, it doesn't reach your eyes. I'm an expert on reading people and I know you're not happy."

Ash opened her mouth and then closed it without saying anything.

"You spend your life doing things for others. The Citizens Advice Bureau, the garden work, looking after us in this house. You pick up our crap, organize us and do more than your share of everything."

She shook her head.

"We know nothing about you," Ronan whispered. "You never mention your past, which makes me think something bad happened, but you don't want us to pity you. Nor do you want to feel like a victim, so you cheerfully carry on making the best of your life or at least pretending to. You're all service to others but you're not thinking of making your own life better."

"I like to help people," she muttered, floundering under his words.

"Because that makes you feel better. But you're hiding behind your smile. Taking care of others is your way to avoid brooding on your own life."

Was she so transparent? Ash struggled to steady her breathing. Had all this been for nothing? All the barriers she'd erected, fantasies she'd created – everything useless?

"I'm not asking you to tell me what happened to make you like this, but don't let it blight the life you have. You deserve to be loved, Ash."

The pain in her heart radiated all over her chest and spread through her body.

Ronan stroked her cheek. "I want you to have someone special."

"Mike doesn't have anyone. Neither does Kay," she blurted.

"I'm talking about you."

Ash gulped.

"Mike changed tonight. It was as if a weight had lifted from his shoulders. I suspect that had nothing to do with his brother's baby. Maybe you know more?" He raised his eyebrows.

Oh God.

"As for Kay," Ronan scowled, "she doesn't yet deserve someone special because she's not learned how to be special *to* someone."

"You don't have anyone," she said.

"No, no, no." He shook his head. "We're not talking about me. So, Noah's not the one?"

She tried to say "no" but the word log-jammed in her throat, restrained by her heart.

"You went after him?" Ronan asked.

Ash squirmed. She didn't like lying to Ronan. She had the distinct impression he'd know.

"So you do feel something for him."

"He's mixed up," Ash said. "It's too tempting to help him, to try to sort him out, but he doesn't want that."

"I wouldn't be too sure. Sometimes people don't know what they want. *The Metro* said he was a hero and saved a soldier's life."

"I don't think it was straightforward," Ash muttered.

"When is anything straightforward? Excuse the cliché, but maybe he needs to come to terms with what happened out there before he can move on with his life here."

"I don't think he'd talk to me about Afghanistan."

"Have you asked him what happened? Pressed him?"

"He told me some of it, but I didn't press him, no." How could she when she dreaded someone doing the same to her? Ash looked straight at Ronan. "Maybe he never will come to terms with it. Maybe it was so bad he can never face it. But that doesn't mean he can't live a normal life, does it? He has to put it behind him. Terrible things happen in the world and life goes on, the world keeps turning. I— He can be happy." *Shit, shit.* Ash hoped Ronan hadn't noticed that slip.

She saw his lip twitch. *Oh damn.*

"Want to give him another chance?" he asked.

"It's me he doesn't want. Not the other way round."

* * * * *

Kay didn't dare to linger. She didn't want Ronan to open the door and find her listening. She slipped back into her room and flopped on her bed, her fists clenched in anger. So she didn't yet deserve someone special because she hadn't learned how to be special to someone. *Fucking bastard*. She screwed up the duvet in her fists, twisting the material. Kay *did* deserve someone special. She was as nice a person as Ash.

Nicer.

She cooked for everyone sometimes. She gave Ash fashion advice. She always paid her way in the pub. Just because Kay didn't devote her life to being a do-gooder, didn't mean she was selfish. Though Kay had changed her mind about Noah. Ash was right about him. He was fucked up. Kay needed someone to take care of her, not the other way round. But Ash didn't deserve someone as good-looking as him. They looked cool together and that annoyed Kay. *She* was the model. *She* was the one everyone was supposed to want.

Ash aggravated Kay more and more.

"Do you mind if I take your washing out of the machine?"

"Is it okay if I cook first tonight?"

"I saw the shampoo you use on sale so I bought you some."

She was too bloody...good. Except Kay hadn't missed that slip Ash had made. Something bad had happened to her. Like Ronan, Kay had noticed that Ash never talked about her parents or her past. She'd told them she'd been in care, but that was all. Maybe she was abused or something. Kay shuddered. *Weirdo*. She tried to muster sympathy and came up with nothing.

* * * * *

When the horn tooted outside at ten the next morning, Ash grabbed her work jacket, flicked on the burglar alarm and locked the front door. A white van idled outside, *Green Piece* written on the side in flowery, emerald lettering. Ash pulled on her jacket as she hurried down the path. Martin waved from the driver's seat.

Ash climbed in and put on her safety belt. "'Morning."

"'Morning, Ash."

"How's Cindy?"

Martin's wife had multiple sclerosis but was currently in remission.

"Pretty good. She might come and see how we're getting on later."

"Great."

Martin turned the van onto the main road and almost instantly became snarled in traffic. "I swear it gets worse every day."

Which was why Ash didn't bother buying a car, but the van was needed to take all the gardening equipment to and from the site currently under conversion. Nothing could be left there overnight, not unless it was chained to an object the size of the

Titanic. So far, the completed gardens had not been subject to theft or vandalism. It gave Ash hope.

"Pete, Jan and Valerie are already there," Martin said. "Stuart's on the way. Jack and Bob sent their apologies but they've been offered paid work this week. I told Pete to carry on clearing the area adjoining the school. Another skip's due this morning. Any news from our mysterious employer about the next project? If he can't find one, I could look again. He went with Leopold Road after I suggested it. I'm sure I could locate another where a crime's—"

"Trevor's looking at one in Hither Green," Ash said. "He told me we'd definitely have work for another twelve months."

Martin sighed in relief. Ash knew he worried about working for a company that dished money out, but never took money back into the coffers. Martin was the only paid employee of *Green Piece*. Everyone else was a volunteer, though they did receive travel expenses.

"Thought any more about the Chelsea Flower Show?" Martin asked.

God no. "I don't—"

"I think we stand a really good chance of being accepted in the small garden category. What we're doing is great for the environment and for local people. We use volunteers and must tick loads of boxes for eligibility. I'm still a member of the Royal Horticultural Society. I think it's worth a shot."

"Trevor doesn't want that sort of publicity."

"Why the hell not? We might get more funds, someone else to sponsor us so we could take on more employees, more projects."

Oh Christ. "He likes to do things quietly."

Martin sighed. "We can keep his name out of it. Chelsea would be such a coup. It's something I've always dreamed about, but as an individual, I'd never get the chance to enter. We could do this as a team. Everyone would love it."

Pile on the pressure, why don't you? "Well, how about you do a written proposal and I'll show it to him."

"I've already done a plan. Could we both go and see him? See if I can persuade him?"

No. "I'll ask. You know how weird he is about meeting people."

"I've been thinking..."

She wished he wouldn't.

"About Leopold Road," Martin said.

Ash particularly wished he wouldn't think about that.

"We need to find someone to do an article about it. It's a local interest story, bad place turned good. I even wondered if we could get a TV company interested."

Oh fuck. Ash could feel time running out on the fantasy she'd created. She didn't think of it as lying, though she supposed it was. Trying not to shoot yet another idea down in flames, Ash perched on a metaphorical fence and skillfully changed the subject onto the day's work. Once Martin ran with that, she breathed a silent sigh of relief.

It had all seemed so simple when she'd set this up. Easier to invent a boss no one saw than explain how she could afford to fund the whole shebang. In retrospect, employing someone as creative and talented as Martin had been a mistake, but once she'd read his resume, heard his wife had MS and that he needed a job where he could dash home when needed, Ash had no choice.

Martin was the design expert and a large percent of the brawn of *Green Piece*. Without him and his boundless enthusiasm, Ash couldn't have made it work. He'd accepted the story of Trevor, her philanthropic uncle, who pretty soon was going to go on an extended trip around the world. Or maybe Ash could kill him off, only she doubted that would solve much.

Once they arrived at the site, Ash stopped worrying. There was too much to do to spend time fretting about stuff that hadn't happened yet. She greeted all the volunteers, sorted out a few minor issues and made a list of what she needed to do that day.

The neglected patch of ground next to the primary school had already been transformed merely by clearing away the rubbish that had been thrown there. It was a sad truth that one discarded item acted like a magnet for all the crap in the neighborhood. Washing machines had given birth to fridges and broken bikes. The council had provided free skips for the rubbish, offered plants from their parks and gardens department and Ash had persuaded three local building supply merchants to donate gravel for the pathways. It wasn't that she couldn't afford to buy the stuff, but she wanted people to have an investment in the transformations.

Ash had a meeting later that morning with the local community leaders who had their own ideas about what they wanted to see on the small plot of land. Whatever they came up with, it had to be low-maintenance and safe. Once the work was finished, the upkeep was the responsibility of the neighborhood.

She picked up a spade and started digging.

* * * * *

Ronan was ticked off. He had two canvases in his studio he needed to finish for a commission and instead he was back at Noah's flat. No point waiting until Friday to see the idiot, Ronan doubted he'd turn up for their session. Pity. Noah needed to be taught a lesson. Ronan pressed his finger on the buzzer and kept it there.

"What?" snapped a guy. Not the one he wanted.

"I want to speak to Noah."

"He's asleep."

"I need him to wake up. This is important."

"What's it about?"

"Our meeting on Friday."

Ronan hoped that would be enough to get Noah to see him. The entrance clicked open sooner than he'd expected and he made his way to the top floor. Noah's flatmate stood by the door, rubbing his palms on his pants. Ronan recognized him from the Covent Garden club though the man showed no sign of that recognition being reciprocated.

"I'm Dalton." He put out his hand. "I suppose Noah's told you about me. All lies. Mostly." He laughed. Ronan didn't.

Dalton let him into the apartment and closed the door. "I haven't woken him yet. I wanted a word with you first."

Who does he think I am? Ronan followed him to the kitchen, wondering what the hell Noah had told this guy.

"Has he opened up to you?" Dalton asked.

"I can't tell you that."

Dalton flushed. "No, sorry. Of course you can't. Confidentiality and all that. It's just that I'm worried about him. I thought by now he'd have improved. His brother wants... Noah still doesn't talk about what happened though..." Dalton glanced toward the door and then said in whisper, "I learned he killed four men. He doesn't know that I know. Yes, I shouldn't have told you, but I figure the more you know the better. You can pretend to be surprised, can't you?"

What the fuck is he talking about? "I'm not prepared to discuss Noah with you. Show me his room."

Dalton straightened up. "Yes, Doctor."

Doctor? Ronan had to stifle his laugh. Dalton thought he was Noah's shrink? Well, he supposed he was in a way. Amazing how pain could clear the head.

"This is it." Dalton pointed at a door.

"Thank you." Ronan stared until Dalton walked away.

When Ronan went inside the room, the curtains were closed, but a bedside light blazed. He shut the door behind him and crept over to the bed. Noah was a huddled heap under the covers. Ronan eased the sheet back until Noah's face was exposed, and then in one, smooth movement he slapped his hand over Noah's mouth and pinned him with his body weight.

Noah's eyes flashed open and he struggled to get free.

"Calm down. I'm not here to hurt you, tempting as it is."

When the body beneath him relaxed, Ronan moved his hand. He rolled off Noah and lay on his side, looking at him.

"You fucking bastard," Noah croaked. "You almost gave me a heart attack. What the fuck are you doing here? How did you get in?"

"Dalton thinks I'm your doctor. Is that where you're supposed to be on Fridays?"

The look in Noah's eyes gave him away.

Ronan laughed. "I should charge more." Then he scowled. "Can you guess why I'm here?"

Noah swallowed. "Ash?"

"What did you do?"

"Nothing. I didn't do anything."

Ronan sighed. "Why even try to lie to me? You came to the house with her last night. There was some discussion with an old friend of hers, you left in a temper and she came after you. I wouldn't call that nothing."

Noah sat up. "She didn't come after me. Well, if she did, she didn't catch me." He sagged against the bed head. "She came after me?"

"What did you do to upset her?"

"I didn't do anything. She —"

Ronan caught hold of his wrist and gave it a sharp twist.

"Fuuuuck." Noah grimaced. "I'm not going to tell you. It's her secret, not mine."

"You know I could make you tell me."

"I'd prefer you didn't."

Ronan let him go. "For some unaccountable reason, utter dickhead that you are, she still wants you. I, on the other hand, would like to stamp you into the ground until you're little more than a puddle and flush you down a sewer drain."

He smiled when Noah gulped.

"If you don't want Ash, tell her properly. Don't leave her wanting you to come back, wondering if you might come back and waiting for you to phone." Ronan stood. "Don't come and see me anymore. I'm not what you need."

"I wasn't —"

"Yes, I know. You weren't going to come anyway. But now I won't see you if you do turn up. No one can make you forget what happened to you. I don't like you using me as a way to punish yourself for something you don't even need to be punished for. You killed guys who would most likely have killed you. That's what war's like. You don't need to be hurt anymore, Noah. Now it's time to heal. You had the cure in your hands and you're throwing it away. Ash needs you as much as you need her, but you both have to accept what's done is done and there's no need to pay for it forever."

He'd reached the door before Noah spoke. "Where is she?"

"Garden work today. Next to St. Joseph's primary school in Peckham. Wear old clothes."

Chapter Thirteen

It took a couple of minutes before Noah pulled himself together enough to get out of bed. How the fuck did Ronan know he'd killed four guys? That hadn't been in any newspaper. Noah gulped. What if the whole thing with Ronan was a setup? He didn't know who to trust anymore. But he did trust Ash.

Noah shuddered as he stepped under a hot shower. Did Ronan know Dave? Had Dave talked? Considering the way everything bubbled in his *own* head, he shouldn't be surprised. He could drive himself crazy trying to figure everything out. He grimaced. That was exactly what he was doing.

When he came out of the bathroom, he found Dalton sitting on his bed.

"What's with the home visit? Are you okay?"

"He doesn't think I need to see him anymore." Noah dragged open his drawer and pulled out boxers and a t-shirt.

"Well, that's...great. You're going out?"

Noah tugged on pants, zipped himself up and pulled a sweater over his head. "Yep. I'm going to see Ash."

"That's great."

Noah glared at him. "You're beginning to sound like a disk that's jammed."

Dalton rose to his feet. "I thought you'd fucked things up with her."

Noah put on socks and grabbed his shoes. "I'm going to un-fuck them." He picked up his backpack on the way out of the room and then turned at the door. "I'm taking the car, okay?"

"It's your car."

"You don't want to know exactly where I'm going, what time I'll get back and if I've taken my pills?"

Rewarded by the sight of Dalton looking uncomfortable, Noah left the flat.

* * * * *

When Noah reached the site, he found it bustling. A broad-shouldered guy in a black t-shirt was sawing at the roots of a tree. A middle-aged woman tossed rubble into a skip and a couple of men were breaking up concrete with sledgehammers. No sign of Ash. The plot was surrounded by large shrubs and trees, but at the far end stood one of the tallest trees Noah had ever seen in the UK. It looked like a giant redwood and had to be at least a hundred feet high.

He took out his camera and started snapping, changing position and lenses several times. There was something fascinating in the juxtaposition of this majestic sentinel with the dwarflike workers toiling in its shadow. Noah wished he'd had pictures to show what the site looked like before they started work. He also wished he could see it from the air.

A guy coughed at his side. "Are you from the local newspaper?"

It was the man in the black t-shirt.

"No, I'm freelance."

"You like the tree?"

"I love it," Noah said. "Is it okay if I take photos?"

"No problem. Funnily enough, I was only saying this morning we could do with some publicity. If we get local people to volunteer, it gives them more of an investment in what we're doing."

"And what are you doing?"

The guy grinned. "We're called Green Piece. We're creating a little bit of heaven in a dingy suburb. The company looks for derelict sites or places where houses have been demolished, and for one reason or another no one wants to build another, and we convert them into gardens for the local community."

"I know Ash," Noah blurted.

"Oh right. She's not here at the moment. She'll be back later."

"How many of these have you done?"

"Seven."

Noah's mind branched into thoughts of producing a book, a photographic record of the transformations—a history of these small plots of land maybe going back centuries. *Christ, where did all that come from?* He was thinking further than the next hour?

"You have any contacts in TV?" the guy asked.

Noah saw the possibilities. There had been a glut of garden transformation programs several years ago but this was different.

"Yeah, I do actually," Noah said.

The guy beamed. "That's great. I'm Martin Jones."

"Noah."

"I won't shake. Don't want to get you dirty. Here, take one of my cards."

Noah tucked it in his camera bag. "I'll lock this in my car and give you a hand with that dead tree you're trying to uproot."

"I never turn down help."

As Noah hefted a shovel beside Martin, he told himself not to ask questions, particularly not about Ash, but Martin said plenty without Noah opening his mouth.

"Did Ash tell you about this then?" Martin asked.

"She mentioned it."

"It's her uncle's brainchild, but we've never seen him. Ash and I are the only two paid employees. Everyone else is a volunteer."

Then how did the company finance itself?

Martin answered Noah's unasked question. "Ash says we've funding for another year, but I worry her uncle could pull the plug at any moment. If we had more corporate sponsorship, it would give us stability. At the moment, Trevor pays for the lot—tools, permits, plants. If we got a TV deal, well, that would change everything."

Martin put his weight against the trunk and rocked it back and forth to break the roots. Noah added his weight to the human lever.

"Ever found anything interesting?" Noah asked.

"Like a Roman villa or a hoard of treasure? Sadly no. We did dig up a family pet and had to rebury it. I must admit I was a bit nervous when we tackled Leopold Road." He glanced at Noah.

"Is that supposed to mean something?"

They kept working at the loosening tree. It creaked and groaned as they bent it closer to the ground.

"Maybe you're not from the area," Martin said. "The site we had there was one where several murders happened. The police had thoroughly searched the garden of course, but you never know. They could have missed something. No one wanted to live in the house. The neighbors hated it and it fell into disrepair. Once the place was demolished, we converted the plot into a garden. You could tell your TV guy I think there's an idea for a series there. We could look for places where something bad happened and transform them. Put a smile on the viewers' faces."

Christ. Was Ash on a mission to make the whole country smile?

"Are you and Ash *friends* then?" Martin asked.

Noah didn't miss the emphasis.

"Yes." God, he hoped so.

"She's the nicest person I've ever met," Martin said. "Not a cruel bone in her body."

The tree gave way, and both Noah and Martin fell onto the ground under a shower of soil.

Noah wandered around the site, giving help where it was needed and trying as surreptitiously as he could to find out things about Ash. All he managed to uncover was that everyone loved her, she could smile for England and her surname was Elleston.

* * * * *

Ash balanced a cardboard box holding cream cakes and coffees on the hood while she locked the van. She picked the box up, turned and almost dropped it when she saw Noah throwing chunks of concrete into the skip. He smiled at her, and even with a dirt-smudged face he looked gorgeous. What the hell was he doing here? How did he find her? *Oh God, he's helping.* Ash melted.

He headed over and peered into the box. "Enough for me?"

"If you've been good."

Ash walked onto the site and caught Martin's eye. He shouted for the others to down tools and they all crowded around.

"How long has Noah been here?" she whispered.

"He appeared not long after you left," Martin said. "He's worked hard."

The gannets descended on Ash's box, and Noah hovered.

"Help yourself," Ash said. "Martin can do without second and third helpings."

She found a log to sit on and her heart jumped when Noah came to join her.

"Sorry," he said quietly. "Sorry, sorry, sorry. I should just have the word tattooed on my forehead. I had no right to judge you. Forgive me?"

Ash bit into her chocolate éclair, a long cream-filled French pastry, and watched Noah's gaze home in on her lips. She chewed slowly.

"Nothing to forgive," she said when her mouth was empty. "I know it was underhanded. I just thought the end justified the means."

"At least you were smart enough not to pay a visit to that loan shark. I'm sure your housemate will sort everything out."

Distract him! Ash nibbled at the chocolate coating on the éclair and Noah dropped the last bit of his cake into his coffee.

"Shit," he hissed, and tried to hook it out with his finger. "Ouch. Hot." But then his gaze drifted back to Ash's mouth and he stared without blinking.

Ash couldn't help herself. She swirled her tongue around the top of the éclair and scooped up a little of the cream.

"I thought you were a good girl," Noah whispered. "But you are so bad. How the hell am I supposed to stand up and everyone not think I'm a pervert?"

"Whatever's the matter?" Ash sucked at the pastry and heard Noah mutter under his breath.

She stuffed in the last couple of inches, licked her fingers and smacked her lips. "Yum."

"Fucking hell," he said.

Ash grinned.

He bent his mouth to her ear. "Would it appear suspicious if we went to look for something in the back of the van? I think you'd find it fairly quickly. It's in an obvious

place. You'd need to check it was in working order. Wouldn't take long. A couple of minutes, tops."

She laughed.

Noah sighed. "I'll take that as a no. How long do I have to keep working?"

"Til the light goes or it starts to rain."

Noah looked up at the cloudless sky and exhaled.

"Come home with me when we've done?" he asked. "I have a big tub. I'll wash your back if you wash mine."

When Ash hesitated, he blurted, "I'll cook. Well, no, I'll order in. I won't watch football even though my favorite team is on TV tonight. You can choose a film." He sighed. "Even one with Johnny Depp. And I'll take you home afterward unless you happen to like croissants and orange juice served in bed." He stared into her eyes.

He'd changed. Not pushing her away but pulling her closer. Had any of that been down to her? Maybe they'd needed that row for him to see things more clearly. Ash slipped her hand into his. "I'll cook. I like football. I don't like Johnny Depp. I love croissants and orange juice. One of those was a lie. See if you can work out which and I'll show you what else I can do with my tongue."

She stood up and turned away so Noah couldn't see her blush, and after tossing her empty cup into the box, she went over to Martin.

"How did you get on at the meeting?" he asked.

"Fine after I'd talked them down from wanting a dinosaur theme park."

Martin laughed.

"I'm not kidding. Obviously their kids had been making their views clear. I settled on dinosaur footprints in the concrete path and lots of things to attract birds so the dinosaurs have something to eat. The committee wants to help, so we need to find something for them to do. The school wants an input as well. They're running a competition to give the place a name. Apparently they had a pupil die of leukemia so they'd like to have a bench with her name on it."

"They'll want the press involved."

Ash hadn't tried to talk them out of that. "You'll do it, won't you?" It was impossible to do this sort of work and not garner attention, but Martin had always been the spokesperson.

He rolled his eyes, but said, "Yes," then nodded toward Noah. "Your fellow's worked hard. He looks bushed now though. Has he been ill?"

Ash turned to check on Noah. He did appear exhausted and it worried her.

"Yes, he has."

"Why don't the two of you take off? We can manage here. Saves me having to drive you back anyway."

"Sure?"

"I won't tell your uncle. You cut me enough slack."

"Thanks, Martin."

Ash picked her way through the churned-up ground to Noah's side.

"You like Johnny Depp?" he asked.

Ash smiled. "Come on then. We can go now."

She was quietly pleased when Noah went round and said goodbye to everyone. Martin gave her a thumbs-up when Noah cleaned his spade before he propped it against a wheelbarrow. Ash retrieved her bag from the van and took the keys back to Martin.

"He looks familiar," Martin said.

"He was in the paper. He rescued a little boy at Beachy Head."

"Don't let this one go." He winked at her.

Ash smiled.

Noah leaned from the driver's seat to push open the passenger door. Ash got in and dropped her bag at her feet.

"Did I get it right?" Noah asked as she clicked her belt into place.

"Yes."

He laughed. "Why do I get the feeling you'd have said yes no matter what I came up with?"

"Maybe I want to show you what I can do with my tongue."

"Oh God," Noah muttered. "I'm going to have to buy looser-fitting pants."

"Call in at the first supermarket you see and we can buy something to cook."

"Wouldn't it be easier to get takeout?"

"Not as much fun. And don't you need to get croissants and orange juice?"

He grinned at her.

* * * * *

Dalton had been relieved when Ilya hadn't answered his phone. He'd left a voicemail reporting the visit of Noah's doctor and the news that Noah wouldn't be seeing him anymore. In Dalton's opinion, the weekly visits to a shrink had been a waste of time and money. They'd made no difference to Noah, apart from tire him out.

Ilya didn't call until later that afternoon. Dalton reluctantly turned from his computer screen and braced himself. He could almost feel Ilya yelling before he spoke. "Hi."

"What the fuck have I been paying you for?" Ilya barked.

Now what have I done? "What's wrong?"

"I contacted Noah's doctor and finally got out of him that Noah hasn't seen him for months. Not weeks. Fucking months."

Dalton sat up straighter. "But he came here this morning."

"Whoever came to see Noah was not his doctor. What's he been doing when you thought he was seeing his shrink? He's supposed to trust you. You're his friend. He obviously doesn't tell you jack shit."

Dalton heard the door of the flat bang and the sound of laughter. "Hold on," he said to Ilya and got to his feet.

A glance into the hall showed him Noah kissing Ash amidst a sea of supermarket bags. He backed away and closed the door. "Noah's just come home with Ash."

"What are they doing?"

Dalton sighed. "Noah's currently trying to shove his tongue down her throat."

"Well, at least you're getting something right." Ilya broke the connection.

When Dalton went into the kitchen, they were busy putting away the food.

"Christ, have you two been rolling in mud?" Dalton asked. Their clothes and faces were filthy.

"I've been digging for gold," Noah said.

About to ask if he'd found it, Dalton took in the way Noah looked at Ash. *Ah. This isn't supposed to get serious.* Well, maybe it was just lust. All relationships started out this way, didn't they? Though it was a long while since Dalton had been on the receiving end of any passion. Not that his memories of his relationships were fond ones. He'd realized he had more fun watching TV, that Tina's habit of sucking her hair was no longer endearing but revolting, and when Beth stood in front of the mirror and said she was losing weight, she hadn't found it funny when he'd said turn round and she'd find it. All that was pre-Noah.

"We're going to cook pasta with ginger and asparagus and mushrooms. Do you want some?" Ash asked.

"You told me you were going out, didn't you?" Noah stared hard at him.

Dalton stared back. "Change of plan. It's started to rain." He beamed at Ash. "I'd love some pasta."

"We're going to take a bath first. Like to join us?" Noah glared.

Yeah, I would actually. "Not enough room for three. But if you leave your toy in the tub, I'll play with it after you." Dalton winked at Ash as she laughed.

Before Dalton could take another breath, Noah growled and whisked her out of the room. He knew Noah wanted him out of the flat, but Dalton could play awkward too.

Noah was happy—for the moment—which was what Ilya wanted, but what if this was more than a fling? What if Ash actually cared for the fucked-up idiot and Noah really liked her? No way would Ash be considered a suitable match. Hard to imagine anyone coming out of that scenario without getting hurt.

* * * * *

The moment the bedroom door closed behind them, Noah pinned her to the wall with the length of his body. Ash's panties dampened and her mouth went dry.

"Bloody Dalton's wrecked a couple of my plans," Noah said. He dragged her sweater over her head and tossed it away.

"What plans were they?" Ash pulled up his sweater and tugged it off.

"You know that program, *The Naked Chef*? I was thinking we could have our own version." His fingers fumbled with the button on her jeans. "And then there's the screaming."

Ash pulled his t-shirt over his head. "Screaming?"

"I don't want you to be embarrassed because Dalton's in the next room."

She tweaked his nipple with her fingers. "Try not to scream then."

He laughed and peeled her jeans down her legs, taking her socks off at the same time. When he stood, and Ash looked at the hard ridge in his jeans, moisture flooded back to her dry mouth and she swallowed hard. *Please don't let things go wrong this time.*

"You look good enough to eat," she whispered.

"I'm all sweaty."

"Hard work's sexy."

She put her hands on his shoulders and licked across his pecs, pausing to circle his tight, copper nipples, and all the time staring up into his face. His eyes sparkled and his hungry grin sent her arousal zipping off the scale.

"How come you can stand there with a dirty face, wearing boy shorts and a t-shirt that says *I Play in the Dirt* and look like the sexiest thing I've ever seen?" Noah threaded his fingers in her hair.

Ash's heart hummed at the compliment. "You must've led a sheltered life."

He growled and reached for his socks. When his fingers settled on his pants' button, Ash caught hold of his hand. "Let me."

She pulled down the zipper and his cock tented his black, knit boxers.

"Have you any idea how hard it is to disguise the fact that your cock's trying to find a way out of your pants?" he asked.

Ash laid her hand over his boxers, loving how hard and hot he was. She could feel a wet spot where the head of his shaft pressed against the material, and she rubbed it with her thumb. Noah shuddered. He pushed down his pants and stepped out of them but left his boxers on.

"How long does it take to run a bath?" she asked.

"As long as we like."

"Go start it."

The moment his back was turned, Ash wriggled out of her bra but left on the white t-shirt. No way was she letting him see her grubby gardening bra. She kicked it under her jeans and followed him into the bathroom.

One step inside and Noah scooped her up and sat her on the counter between the washbasin and the toilet. He stepped between her legs, and Ash hooked her ankles around his thighs, her arms over his shoulders.

"Fast enough?" he asked, and nodded toward the tub.

The water trickled in at a snail's pace. Ash chuckled and twisted her fingers in his hair.

Noah put the plug in the sink, turned on the tap and dropped a washcloth into the water. "I need to play cleanup," he whispered.

He lifted the dripping cloth to her cheek and water dribbled down, soaking her t-shirt. Noah pulled back and studied her chest with a gaze that wouldn't have been out of place on a velociraptor. Ash glanced down. Her nipples were sharp peaks beneath the material.

"You just won the wet t-shirt contest," he said, and lowered his mouth to suck her breast through the material.

The pull between her legs was instant. Her already soaked panties were further dampened by the water dripping down her body. She felt hot enough to steam. "What's my prize?"

"Me." Noah levered the t-shirt over her head, tossed it into the sink and began to lick and suck at her nipples. He started soft, making swirling passes with his tongue, before changing to gentle scrapes with his chin and his teeth. While she moaned and clutched his head, he changed to long, hard, drawing pulls that left her squirming.

One finger brushed along the waistband of her panties and slipped inside to touch her clit. Ash quivered, tightened her fingers in his hair as her muscles clenched and released, and her body slid into bliss. She'd never come so easily with anyone before. This sort of pleasure was like a drug. She wanted more, had to have more. Ash hooked her toes into the back of his shorts and pulled them down over his backside.

Noah lifted his head and laughed. He freed his cock from the material and yanked the garment down. A kick sent the boxers flying to land on a plant in the far corner.

"Now yours," he said, and hooked his thumbs into the sides of her panties.

Ash lifted her hips so he could pull them off. As he drew them down her legs, he kissed the flesh he passed. One toss and they landed on top of his boxers.

"Oh God," he mumbled. "I really can go slow, I promise. I wouldn't want you to think I only had one speed, but there's no way I'm not going to explode the moment I get inside you. There's only one thing to do."

"What's that?"

"I'll have to make you explode a few times first and then you might not notice."

He tugged her forward, slipped a hand behind her neck and leaned in to kiss her. As his tongue danced into her mouth, he began a leisurely exploration of her sex with his other hand.

"Sweet, sweet," he whispered against her lips.

His fingers teased her wet folds while his thumb circled her clit. Ash's head buzzed as if she'd been drinking. Coherent thought fell out of reach. She didn't care about anything other than Noah not stopping what he was doing. His lips were everywhere: against hers, on her breasts or around her nipples. He gently bit her shoulder then nuzzled her neck, panting into her while his fingers played. He stroked, rubbed, thrust inside her, and Ash gulped and moaned.

Using her legs to pull him closer, she trapped his hand and his cock between their bodies. "I want you inside me."

"You come first," he gasped.

She forced her eyes open. "I already did."

Noah smothered a laugh. "Shit."

He wrapped his hands around her backside and lifted her onto his cock. Ash supported her weight on the counter as he rolled his hips up and slowly impaled her, inch by hot, thick inch. Watching his cock disappear into her body was so overwhelmingly erotic, the muscles of Ash's sex contracted hard around him. She gasped, but Noah gasped louder.

"Oh fuck, that feels good," he groaned.

"Going to move anytime soon?"

"I'm thinking about it." He exhaled. "Okay I thought about. It's going to make no difference whether I wait or not. My balls are aching. Trying to hold back my cock is like having a doberman on a leash with a cat in the vicinity."

He pulled back and rammed his full length into her. Her toes curled, and rippling tingles spread through her body. When he began to thrust into her in long, driving strokes, Ash clenched around his cock, and Noah hissed. He pumped faster, his belly slapping against hers, his hips clashing with hers, his face contorted with effort.

Ash dropped straight over the edge of nothing, the muscles of her sex contracting around his cock as she stiffened against him. Switches tripped in her head turning off everything but her reaction to Noah's body. Swamped by pleasure, she felt as though she were drowning. His cock swelled and jerked, bathing her in the warm wash of his cum, and for the first time ever during sex, her eyes flooded with tears.

Shit.

Chapter Fourteen

Noah struggled to bring his breathing under control. Bloody hell, that had been sensational. The feeling of driving so deep into Ash and watching her watch him had sent his heart rate soaring into orbit. He wanted – *Christ, is she crying?* Noah's stomach lurched and he wrapped his arms around her. He hadn't hurt her, had he? He pulled back and held her head to kiss her face, her cheeks, her lips, her chin, her eyes. *Damn, salt.*

"Did I hurt you?" he whispered.

Ash shook her head. *Why is she crying?* He slid out of her and lifted her down to stand in front of him. Noah brushed her hair away from her brimming eyes and gulped. *Fuck it.* His chest ached. He wanted... He wanted... He wanted – not to be in the room with her – just for a moment.

Noah spun to turn both taps on the tub full-on. "I'll go and find us something to drink." He grabbed a towel, wrapped it around his waist and fled.

Dalton sat in the kitchen, nursing a beer.

"Can't you go out?" Noah walked over to the narrow, glass-fronted wine cooler.

"Sure you don't fancy a threesome?"

Noah sighed. They'd done it once. Never again, and never with Ash. "Want to do me a favor?"

"I'm not going out. It's chucking it down with rain."

"Not that. The company Ash works for – Green Piece – they develop areas of derelict land and convert them to gardens. I'd like a list of the sites they've worked on. Should be seven. I know about the one next to St. Joseph's primary school in Peckham. There's another on Leopold Road in Lewisham. Her uncle runs the company. Trevor – ah, I don't know if he has her name or not – Elleston. See what you can find out about him."

"You could just ask her."

"I'd rather not. I'm thinking of doing a piece on the gardens as a surprise. It might make a Sunday supplement or maybe a book. Even a TV series. A mixed bunch of volunteers turning an ugly piece of land into something for the community to enjoy. Sounds made for TV, don't you think?"

"You're right. I'll see what I can find. Only, is it worth speaking to one of your contacts before you get all fired up? Make sure there *is* a market?"

Noah put the champagne on the table and took three glasses from the cupboard. "I think I'd do it anyway without backing, just for Ash, but I will ring Wolfe and see if he's interested in commissioning it."

Noah opened the champagne, poured Dalton a glass and chinked the bottle against it. "Cheers."

"Welcome back," Dalton said. "It's good to see you enthusiastic about something. Amazing what a fuck can do."

Noah stiffened and saw Dalton flinch.

"Don't go there," Noah said. "She's different."

"Sorry." Just before Noah reached the door, Dalton called, "Hey, that guy who came to see you this morning, he *was* your doctor?"

"Yes."

"What did he want?"

Noah turned. "Something happened at my last appointment and he was worried."

"Good of him to make a house call."

"Yeah, wasn't it?" Noah headed for the bathroom with the distinct impression that Dalton knew he'd lied.

He almost dropped everything when he opened the door. Ash was bent over the tub, lovely butt in the air, agitating the water with both hands to make it bubble. The foam was almost up to the top.

"Where did the bubble stuff come from?" he asked.

"Shampoo. It won't last."

She slid into the tub face-first and came up covered with foam, grinning like a little kid. Thank God the tears had gone. Noah put the bottle and glasses on the floor, dropped his towel and climbed in behind her. Foam flopped over the edge as he pulled her back to his chest. He rested his hands on her breasts, squeezed gently and his cock hardened.

"Bliss," Ash said with a drawn-out sigh.

Noah teased her nipples until they were rosy peaks. "Bliss."

"Did I see champagne?" she asked. "I wondered why you rushed out of the bathroom."

Noah pushed back the guilt, dropped one foamy hand over the side, grasped the bottle and poured. He handed Ash a glass and then reached for his.

"This is lovely," she said. "Warm water, cold champagne and something hard and uncomfortable poking me in the back."

Noah laughed.

"Martin said you worked hard today," Ash said. "He's not easy to impress."

"I enjoyed it. Wouldn't want to do it every day though."

"I know I asked before, but what *do* you do all day?"

There was no malice in the question. She wasn't trying to provoke him like Dalton or Ilya.

"Not much," Noah said.

"Do you have to go out looking for work as a photographer? Or do people contact you?"

"They used to call me, but since I..."

Noah drank his champagne. *I'm not going there.*

Ash sat up to put her glass on the floor and rolled so she lay on his chest, facing him, knees bent, legs in the air. "That's better. Warm water and something hard and uncomfortable poking me in the stomach."

Noah smiled and trailed his fingers over her back down to the crease of her butt. He spread out his hand and squeezed. *God, I love her ass.* Ash groaned into his chest.

"Why can't you start work again?" she asked, spitting foam from her lips.

Noah wiped her face with his fingers. "Afghanistan fucked up my life. I don't sleep well, I have nightmares, I lose my temper, I can't concentrate and I freak out at loud noises." He took a deep breath. There was a lot more he could add to that list but it sounded bad enough. "According to my shrink, what I remember and how I feel about it are disconnected. Until I confront my memories and emotions, I never *will* get past it."

"You think that's true?"

"Yes. No. Probably."

"If you know what you have to do, why haven't you done it?"

Noah twirled the glass in his fingers. "Yeah, there's the rub. It sounds so simple, doesn't it? Problem is I don't *want* to remember. I don't want to think about how I *feel* about what happened."

"Why not?" Ash asked.

"I just don't," he snapped. Anxiety burst to life in his chest and the flames grew.

"But you must have a reason."

No chance of keeping calm if she was going to fan the flames. "Because it was my fucking fault. I instigated the trip into Helmand. I told you we were ambushed. If I hadn't been there, then—"

Ash put her hand against his mouth. "There's something else."

He dragged her hand away. "No there isn't." She couldn't know. Not unless she was part of some conspiracy to— *Oh fuck, I'm going insane.* Noah swallowed hard. "Talk to me," he whispered. "Tell me anything." *Stop me from going down this fucking path time after time.*

"You're not the only one with demons," she said, and laid her head on his chest. "One of the given things about the world is most parents love their children. No matter how hard I tried, I couldn't even make them pleased with me, let alone love me. I used to think it was my fault, something I'd done, the way I looked, the way I spoke. I knew there had to be something, but I couldn't figure it out."

Noah stroked her cheek. He missed his mother, but at least he'd had a mother who loved him, and he was angry that Ash had been deprived of something that should have come so easily. If her parents hadn't been dead, he'd have fucking-well killed them himself.

"Once, they went to school to meet my teachers and they were the parents I wanted them to be, kind and smiling and interested in what I'd been doing. I thought it was a miracle. They'd changed and now I'd have a family like everyone else's. But when we got home, they ignored me again. I gave up trying to figure out what I'd done. I pretended I was a mouse. I snuck downstairs to feed myself on bread and cheese. I kept as quiet as I could. I went to school on my own, came back on my own and hid in my room. I went days without even seeing them."

She tipped her head to look at him, and Noah stared at her intently. How could anyone do that to a kid?

"One day, it finally dawned on me they didn't care. Whatever I did, good or bad, it made no difference unless it impacted directly on them. Though I did wonder if I'd starved myself to death, would they have noticed?" She smiled. "I think the smell would have got to them."

"Jesus, Ash."

"Maybe I'd been a difficult baby, wouldn't sleep and drove them crazy. Who knows? But it didn't matter anymore once I realized I couldn't change them, I could only change me. At that moment, I stopped wasting my time feeling sorry for myself."

She sighed. "No one knows *everything* that happened. I've kept some secrets locked inside for a long time, but I have come to terms with them. I won't let my past be an albatross around my neck. I can't let it stop me from living my life."

But it wasn't the same, Noah thought. Ash had been an innocent kid with vile, abusive parents. He was guilty as sin.

"What would you do if you were me?" he asked.

"Start work again. Do what you're good at. Take photographs of things and people that make you smile until you feel ready to take more difficult pictures. Find a happy thing to do for yourself or for someone else every day, and pretty soon the world will look different and feel different. Lastly, I'd go and see the soldier who was injured."

"I don't think he'd want to see me." Noah wouldn't if he'd been him.

"Maybe he won't. But *you* need to see *him*. There might be some way you can help. You don't even have to tell him you're behind whatever he needed."

Noah wrapped his arms around her. "How come you're so wise?"

"Because if I hadn't made my world happy, I'd probably be dead."

Oh God. "You make me happy," he whispered.

"You make me happy too." Ash pushed herself up, reached back and yanked out the plug.

The water drained away, and Noah was disappointed the bath was over until she took his hands and put them on the rim of the tub.

"What are you doing?" he asked.

"Hold tight," she said, and lifted his feet over the sides. After a few moments she pushed the plug back into place.

He raised his eyebrows.

Ash smiled. "I don't want to drown."

Oh Jesus Christ and every bloody angel in heaven. Was she going to— Fuck yes, she was. Warm water still lapped around his balls, but Ash had shuffled down between his spread legs so she could lift his cock to her mouth. Noah groaned as she licked him, thrilling at the way she swirled her tongue around the nerve-rich tip of his shaft, the way she swept her tongue from his root to his crest. She licked up a pearl of pre-cum, and he had to fight the urge to buck his hips and shove his entire length into her mouth.

Ash released him with a little pop and grinned. "You taste nice."

"You missed a bit," he whispered.

She reached over for her glass, took a drink and put the glass down. When Noah felt the cold liquid wash around his cock, he hissed and clenched his fingers on the edge of the tub. "Oh fuck, fuck, fuck."

Ash held his cock against her lips and fluttered her tongue over his slit. One of his hands had somehow made it to her head, the other was on the way to his balls, but Ash beat him to it and pressed down at the base of his cock.

"Mine," she growled.

Through hooded eyes he watched her take another mouthful of champagne and then shuddered as she engulfed just his tip and let the liquid run down the length of his cock. She laved him from his crest to his balls, and Noah threaded the fingers of both hands in her wet hair. When she gripped his cock and took his balls in her mouth, he held his breath. She played with them gently, separating them, pushing them together with her tongue and he struggled to keep his eyes open to watch.

"Oh God," he moaned.

His heart pumped like a jackhammer. It wasn't just the feel of her hands and mouth but the sight of her doing this that sent his balls into a frenzy. Noah could sense his little swimmers battling for position, readying for the off. *Shit, I'm close.*

Don't you dare fucking come yet.

His body was totally in her thrall. His hands might be in her hair, but she was in control. Lust had flooded his head and smothered his capacity to think. His breathing was ragged and choppy, his chest heaved. Ash settled her lips around the dark crown of his cock and slowly swallowed it, taking a fraction more with every dip of her head, while below her mouth, her hand twisted and pumped. She licked, sucked, nibbled until Noah's fuse wire shortened. He tried to distract himself by counting tiles on the opposite wall but kept getting stuck at three.

"That is... Feels... Hot shit...shit... So good," he mumbled, hoping he hadn't gabbled unintelligibly.

When she pulled back to get another drink, he wanted to drag her back to his dick and finish him off, but this time she sucked his nipple and allowed the liquid to warm against him before she swallowed. Noah's head ached.

"Please," he groaned. *Fuck, did I just beg?*

More champagne passed from her mouth to his and Noah wondered if he'd ever be able to drink it again without thinking of this. Ash licked her way back to his cock and pumped it into her mouth while ten fingers drifted over his nipples to trace the muscled ridges of his ribs. When one of her hands fell back to wrap around his cock, Noah caught the other and pulled it to his mouth, drawing on her fingers in time with her sucking his cock. When he sucked hard, she copied him and his breath stuttered. He licked and she licked, he sucked fast and so did she. Her grip tightened around the base of his shaft, but the pressure on his balls was no longer enough to hold back the inevitable. Orgasm was on the rise all over his body. An atomic bomb couldn't have stopped it.

Well, he supposed it could – Fuck it, what was he thinking? Noah almost bit her fingers when Ash took another couple of inches of his erection into her mouth. His cock head brushed the back of her throat, the bullets left the gun and there was no way back.

"God, God, God," he grunted as fire shot from his brain, down his spine, into his legs and back to his balls. Cum erupted from his cock and his hips jerked, sending a wave of foamy water shooting from one end of the tub to the other.

Noah grasped her hand and held on tight as he emptied himself into her mouth and slid down into the water at the same time.

Should have asked.

Too late now.

Christ, when can we do that again?

As the last, wrenching spasm died away, Ash lifted her head and smiled at him. Noah wiped a fleck of his cum from her lips.

"You've rendered me speechless," he whispered.

For the first time in months he didn't want to fall asleep when he went to bed.

* * * * *

Dalton gave up waiting for pasta and retired to his room with a cheese sandwich, a packet of crisps and a beer. He was glad for Noah yet jealous too. Dalton wasn't bad-looking, but even when they'd been younger, whenever he was out with Noah, there was never any question as to who'd definitely get lucky and who probably wouldn't. Even in Noah's current fucked-up state, Ash wanted him, and she knew nothing about him other than what she'd read in the paper.

But then she only had to go online to find out some of it.

He opened up his laptop and went into Google. He had no difficulty uncovering information about Green Piece though they didn't appear to have a website. They were mentioned on individual and community blogs and on local business sites. Dalton opened a Word doc and copy-pasted details of the seven projects the company had undertaken, listed the links and printed it out. He gave a low whistle when he saw the number of links for Leopold Road. He'd thought the name was familiar. It was the home of Timothy and Denise North. Twenty-odd years ago, they'd enticed teenagers away from shopping centers, brought them back to their home and killed them. Eventually. Seven bodies had been found. There'd been some sort of bunker under the garden.

Dalton tapped Trevor Elleston into the search box. It was an unusual name so he thought he'd find something. *Did you mean Elleston Trevor?* the search engine asked. That was the name of the guy who'd written *Flight of the Phoenix*. Dalton couldn't find a link between any Elleston and Green Piece. Maybe it was an uncle on her mother's side. Googling *Ash Elleston* left Dalton scratching his head. It was as if she didn't exist. No trace on Facebook either.

He checked the time and hit speed dial. Dalton didn't usually call Ilya from inside the flat when Noah was there, but it was still raining and Noah and Ash were making enough noise in the room next door to drown out his voice.

"Again?" Ilya snapped.

Fuck you. "You were the one who wanted to know when anything changed. He's talking of starting a project, taking pictures to showcase a company called Green Piece that converts derelict sites into urban green space. Noah mentioned calling Wolfe to see if he'd commission it."

"Really?"

"He sounds brighter, more together." *That had to be good, didn't it?*

Ilya exhaled. "Where did he get the idea?"

"It's something Ash is involved with."

"So what happens when he dumps her?"

Dalton heard muffled laughter coming from the adjoining room. "Maybe he won't."

"She was supposed to be a quick fuck to get him —"

"Back in the saddle?" Dalton muttered. *Back under family control?*

"I didn't want them to get too serious. Give her a couple of thousand to disappear. I'll transfer it."

Ilya broke the connection before Dalton could tell him no. He tossed his phone on the bed. Maybe he wouldn't need to tell Ilya anything. Noah was so volatile, the chances of him and Ash still speaking by morning were not high. Yeah, he was better to wait.

Chapter Fifteen

Ash woke the next morning to find Noah staring at her. Their bodies were close under the duvet, though not touching. She could feel the heat between them, his warmth a soft caress against her skin. Last night had been a revelation. She'd never had sex like that, never come so many times, never had a guy groan like that when she touched him, never moaned so loud when a guy touched her. Not many times she'd woken with a guy lying next to her. A smile crept onto her lips.

"What's that for?" he whispered.

"We're still alive."

Noah's lips curled in a smile to match hers. Ash sighed. Well, it would match if she had a drop-dead gorgeous smile like him. It was a crime to look so good in the morning. The dark stubble peppering his chin made him look sexy not unkempt. His tousled hair seemed deliberately boyish, and the shadows beneath his eyes had almost gone. Ash didn't even want to think about what she looked like. Her hair alone was probably enough to frighten small children. Noah continued to stare at her.

"What are you doing?" Ash asked. *I bet I've got a spot. Damn.*

"Counting your eyelashes."

Oh God.

"You can't move until I've finished."

Ash blinked.

"Fuck it. One, two..."

"Funny guy."

"I don't want you to go to work today," he said. "You haven't finished auditioning for the role as my sex toy. It's a long, complicated process."

"Did you puncture your last one?"

Noah growled. *Christ, even his breath smells sweet.*

"I can't skip work," she said.

He frowned. "But I think you're coming down with something. You were very hot in the night. Then there was all that thrashing and groaning." Noah edged a little closer but didn't touch her. "You need to be kept under close supervision."

"I *have* to go in." She didn't want to, but people were expecting her.

He slid a warm hand onto her stomach and woke the butterflies nesting there. "Don't."

"I can't let people down."

"But you'd be letting me down if you go in today." His fingers danced lower until his hand cupped her pubis, and Ash's pulse jumped.

"I can't skip work because I don't feel like it." *Unlike you.* Ash waited for him to get uppity but he didn't.

"Okay." He gave a long-suffering sigh. "I'll come with you and give you a hand."

Those words thrilled her, but not as much as the next thing she heard. Rain beating against the window.

"Hear that?" she asked.

Noah lifted his head from the pillow. "You can hear my cock crying?"

She rolled her eyes.

"Rain?" he asked.

"Remember? I don't work when it rains."

"Thank you, God." Noah let his head drop back.

"I'll just check to make sure Martin's texted to confirm." Ash slid out of bed and walked over to her bag. She heard Noah moan when she bent over, and she giggled. He was obsessed with her butt. Two messages. One from Martin saying *See you next Wednesday*. One from Ronan saying *Are you alive?* Ash quickly tapped a message to both and dropped her phone back in her bag.

When she looked at Noah, he had one leg bent, tenting the duvet.

"I've got a present for you," he said.

Ash stepped toward him. "Does it need unwrapping?"

"Sort of."

"I've got a present for you too." She slid in next to him.

"Does it happen to be somewhere for me to put your present?"

She pouted. "Darn it, you guessed."

Noah dropped his knee and pulled her into his arms. "Mine is one of those gifts that keeps giving and giving."

Ash's breathing quickened. The combination of Noah's rough cheeks, silky hair and wet mouth were instantly arousing. He licked, kissed and nibbled down her arms, feathered his tongue behind her knees until she begged him to stop, then trailed his mouth the length of her spine while she begged him not to stop. He rolled her, turned her, flipped her like a pancake, and Ash loved every second of it. Noah sucked her toes, her fingers then her nipples until orgasm threatened, only to do nothing but stroke her damp mouth with his thumb until the wave retreated.

She was strung so tight, she repeatedly verged on the point of breaking several times, but Noah wouldn't let her come. He pulled her to the edge merely to drag her back. Ash was desperate, and yet she loved being played with like this, loved that core-deep sensation that grew and grew before the burst of release, loved the way her body responded to Noah's touch.

He arranged her on her hands and knees in the middle of the bed, set his knees on the outside of hers and trailed his tongue from her neck, down her spine and finally into the crease of her butt. When his mouth settled over the delicate folds of her sex, Ash panted into the pillow.

"You are so tempting," he whispered. "I want you to come on my mouth, but I desperately want to fuck you like this.

He blew on her damp folds, and the rush of warm air made her hips buck.

"Course, I could do both, but I'm not sure how much longer I can hold on."

"Shut up and choose," she begged.

He pressed the head of his cock against her sex, grasped her hips and pushed.

* * * * *

Noah left Ash sleeping, slipped on a pair of boxers, picked up his phone and sloped off to the kitchen. Dalton was in there, working on his laptop.

"Morning," Noah said.

"Afternoon."

"Shit. Is it?" He stuck the kettle under the cold tap. "Want a coffee?"

"I'm fine, thanks." Dalton pushed a sheet of paper across the table. "That's what I found."

Noah switched on the kettle, put the croissants in the oven and then picked up the sheet.

"I couldn't trace her uncle under Trevor Elleston. There's nothing on Ash either."

Noah's turned to face him. "So what?"

"Don't you think that's odd? No references to her at all?"

Noah glared. "I didn't ask you to spy on Ash."

"Okay. I'm sorry." Dalton held up his hands. "I apologize."

"Leave her the fuck alone, Dalton. Don't interfere. She's..."

"What?"

"Special."

Noah didn't miss the way Dalton's jaw tightened and it annoyed him. He picked up his phone and scrolled for Wolfe's number. He hesitated before he pressed call and steeled himself.

"Where the fuck have you been?" Wolfe roared.

Noah winced and moved the phone farther from his ear. He'd forgotten Wolfe didn't have a quiet on his volume control. "You don't know?"

"I heard you had your head stuffed up your arse. Extricated it yet?"

Noah smiled. "Almost."

"What do you want? Not to ask me how I am. I've been ill, swine flu, but what do you care? You just lie around feeling sorry for yourself until you need something. My guess is you're looking for work. I need someone for Crufts."

"Fuck off." Noah was not going to photograph a dog show, no matter how desperate he got. "I have an idea."

"Bore me."

Wolfe sounded like a big guy with broad shoulders and chest to match. He was no more than five feet five with no hair at all. But he knew everyone who mattered in the media world, was an expert on the visual side, and though he had a foul temper, he was also an astute businessman. Noah outlined his idea for a magazine piece on Green Piece, and even before he'd finished, Wolfe had picked it up and started to run.

"*Sunday Times*. They do a linked photo section in the magazine but I think they'd play this as an article. Or maybe *The Observer*. It would work for Channel 4 too. I'll give James Morgan a call. How soon can you have the photos?"

"Pretty soon."

"What does that mean?"

"Next week."

"Hang on, Noah. I need to take this call."

While Noah waited, he poured out two glasses of orange juice and made coffee. Finally, Wolfe came back to him.

"Bloody wanker. Christophe DeTours has got pneumonia, the inconsiderate bastard. Don't suppose you're free tomorrow?"

Noah thought of Ash naked in his bed. "No."

"You can't make yourself free? Christ, you're asking me for a favor and then decline to help me out of a hole? Maybe I should reconsider calling James Morgan."

Noah sighed. "To do what?"

"Sandra McKinnock is in Paris with the baby she's adopted in Vietnam. Exclusive interview for *Hello* scheduled for tomorrow, but now I have no photographer. I know it's not your sort of thing. Shit, not much *is* your sort of thing. I'll have to ask Dan Jones, though he's been pretty busy since you've been off the scene."

To say Noah detested Dan Jones would be an understatement. They had history and — "I'll go." *Christ, did I say that?*

"Great," Wolfe said. "You'll need to catch the Eurostar tonight. The interview is at the Four Seasons George V. Ten in the morning."

Of course it was, Noah thought. One of the most expensive hotels in Paris. Plus the chances of the petulant American movie star actually being ready at ten were nil. He'd be hanging around all day and probably the next.

"Buy me two tickets, leaving after seven tonight, returning Sunday evening and take it out of my fee. Usual rates."

There was a pause before Wolfe agreed. "I'll have them couriered over."

His hesitation perturbed Noah, but in view of the problem he now had to face, he let it go. How could he persuade Ash to come with him?

Dalton sat staring at him.

"What?" Noah snapped.

"Tell me I'm wrong, but didn't you just accept a job? What are you going to photograph?"

"Everything I detest, but I'm taking Ash with me as a reward. I just need to talk her into it."

* * * * *

Dalton had a problem.

Ash was more than a fling.

He'd sensed it from the very beginning, and the fact that she'd lasted the night more than confirmed this waitress wasn't a simple fuck. He should never have gone along with it, but at least Noah had begun to respond to something, and Dalton was too greedy to say no. The irony was that Noah would most likely have funded him while he wrote this book, though Dalton was too proud to ask.

At first, his role had been to keep Noah company, persuade him to eat and make sure he stayed safe. It hadn't been a bad idea to encourage Noah to find a woman, but Ash wasn't the quick fling he'd made her out to be. He'd let Ilya believe he'd paid her when he hadn't. And Dalton suspected the reason Wolfe was sending Noah to Paris was because after Dalton's phone call, Ilya had contacted Wolfe and asked him to give his brother work.

Now what am I supposed to do? Dalton rested his elbows on the table, pressed the heels of his palms against his eyes and rubbed. Was there any point not telling Ilya that Noah was taking Ash when Wolfe had probably already called him? Dalton picked up his phone and slunk to his bedroom. If only he'd said no when Ilya offered to pay him. He could have done this out of kindness, out of friendship, though he'd have been forced to work a day job, and that meant he couldn't always be there for Noah. On the upside, the novel was now going well, but Dalton had a sneaky suspicion he was putting too much realism in it, too much connected with conniving brothers and ruined friendships.

Dalton called Ilya and the number was engaged. It didn't have to be Wolfe but Dalton assumed it was. He kept trying until he got through and then related what he'd heard of the conversation and that Noah planned to take Ash to Paris.

"No," Ilya said. "That's not going to happen. Don't let it happen."

Right, I'll wave my fucking magic wand. "Why not, if it makes Noah happy?"

"I don't want him latching on to this woman now that he's finally getting himself out of his pit."

"But if she leaves him, he might sink back again."

"He'll find someone else. In fact, I have just the woman in mind. Pay that one off. Make sure he gets on that train."

Dalton sighed. "You're making a mistake. He likes Ash. More than likes her. He wants to do this project on the gardens she's worked on. I don't want him to be hurt."

"Look, I know this hasn't been easy, but now that Noah has accepted work again, he's obviously on the mend. You won't have to do this for much longer. Get him on the train, make sure she's not on it and there's a ten-thousand-pound bonus."

"No." Dalton swallowed hard, glad he was able to be defiant over the phone. Face-to-face with Ilya, he wouldn't have been as brave.

There was a short silence before Ilya spoke. "What?"

"Let it run its course. She's made him smile. Why destroy him again?"

"Why would I want to destroy him?" Ilya spluttered with rage. "I want what's best for him. Everything I've done has been to help him. This woman is not what Noah needs."

"How would you know what Noah needs?"

"Because I'm his fucking brother. Now do what I've said or I'll tell Noah exactly what you've been up to for the last seven—"

Dalton cut him off.

* * * * *

Ash knew Noah wanted to tell her something. He was like a fidgety puppy as he waited for her to finish eating the croissant.

"That was a lovely breakfast, even if it is two in the afternoon," she said with a smile.

"I have a surprise."

She groaned. "No more. I can't."

"A different surprise. Though watching you eat has given me a boner the size of Florida." He took a deep breath. "I want you to come to Paris with me."

Ash gasped. "Paris? When?" *Oh GodGodGodGodGod.*

"This evening. We return on Sunday. I have to work tomorrow, but hopefully we'll have all of Saturday and most of Sunday. Have you been before?"

High to low in an instant. "No, but—"

He beamed. "It's a beautiful city."

"I can't," Ash whispered. "I have to work."

"You can have a day off, can't you?"

"Not at this short notice."

The pleasure on his face faded to a look of sulky petulance. "Free ticket, free hotel and I'll fuck you as part of the package."

Ash glared, but her mind was already racing through ways of making Paris happen. She wanted to go. She could have just said yes and then found a way to make it happen.

"Call in sick," he pleaded. "Not sure I can make it rain again tomorrow."

"It doesn't matter if it rains. It's my day at the Citizens Advice Bureau. Maybe I can find someone to swap with me."

Noah flung himself out of bed, scrambled for her phone and thrust it into her hand, the expression on his face now one of desperation. "I want you to come."

He sat at her side and bit his fingernails. The first two people she asked said no, but the next said yes, and almost before she'd finished thanking her colleague, Noah was jumping around and whooping.

He stumbled to a halt. "You do have a passport?"

"Yes."

"Thank God for that." He stripped off his boxers, dropped onto the bed and caressed her jaw with warm hands. Noah stared into her eyes as he stroked her cheeks with his thumbs then trailed soft lips and a stubbled chin the length of her face.

Ash's fingers danced across his back. "Should I go home and pack?"

"Not yet."

Chapter Sixteen

"St. Pancras Station at seven, in front of the statue." Noah opened the door of the cab for her to climb in.

"What statue?" Ash asked.

He smiled. "You can't miss it. It's about thirty feet tall. A guy and a woman in each other's arms." He bent to give her a kiss on the lips. "See you soon."

As Noah watched the cab turn the corner, the courier arrived with the tickets. Noah signed for them and ripped open the envelope while he ran upstairs. They were booked on the Eurostar leaving at 7:15. He'd call Ash in a minute and tell her not to be late. *Oh God, Paris with Ash*. Excitement bubbled inside him. There was so much he wanted to do with her, to her, for her.

Noah yanked his overnight case from his closet, tossed it on his bed and packed. His photographic equipment went in another bag—cameras, lenses and the extra gear he might need.

"Anything else for the wash?" Dalton called from the doorway.

"Since when did you do my washing?"

"I just chucked your pants in with mine."

"My pants?" Noah scanned the bedroom floor. "Where's my phone?"

"Oh shit."

"Did you check the pockets?" Noah snapped.

"I didn't feel a phone."

Noah pushed past him and hurried to the utility room. The machine was into a wash cycle. No way of opening a front loader until the water had drained. He turned the knob and halted the program then flicked it to spin.

Dalton fidgeted at the door. "Sure it was in your pants?"

"Call me from your phone," Noah said. "See if we can hear mine."

Noah went to stand near his bedroom door.

Dalton walked up to him. "Straight to voicemail."

"Fuck."

Back at the washing machine, Noah paced while the machine powered down. Once he heard the click of the door release, he wrenched it open. A moment later he held a dripping phone.

"Christ. I'm sorry," Dalton said. "Makes a change that it's my fault."

"How's that supposed to help," Noah snapped.

"I'll sort out a replacement."

"I need it now."

Dalton shook his head. "There's no way of getting a new one tonight, but even if there was, it won't be fully charged for twenty-four hours."

"Ash's number's in there." Noah fumbled with the phone casing, pulled out the SIM card and wiped it on his pants. "Give me your phone."

"It's not going to work. It'd need unlocking."

"There must be a way of getting into it."

"Nowhere will be open now."

Noah sighed. "Fuck it. Well, it will be okay so long as she's not late."

* * * * *

Ash folded the last item of clothing and put it in her rucksack. To her disappointment, Kay had greeted her news about going to Paris with a distinct lack of interest. Her sulky housemate lay on the floor in the living room, exercising while she watched rubbish on the TV and had barely looked up when Ash rushed in to tell her. Neither Mike nor Ronan were home yet, and Ash knew she'd only told Kay because they weren't there.

After mentally running through the things she'd packed, Ash was satisfied she had what she needed, apart from her passport. She could pick up euros at the station. She opened her wardrobe, lifted the blue cardboard box from the top shelf and put it on her bed.

Odd that her passport wasn't at the top. Concern but not panic trickled through her. Ash tipped the box over on the bed and spread everything out. No dark-red passport. *Shit. Now* she panicked.

By the time she'd searched every drawer and even the pockets of her clothes, Ash was confounded. How could the damn thing be missing? She checked the time. 5:40. It would take forty minutes to get to St. Pancras. She went through everything again, fighting the urge to cry when she failed to find it.

Ash flew downstairs with her bag, dropped it in the hall and ran into the living room. Kay was doing sit-ups.

"Have you seen my passport?"

Kay huffed. "No. Why would I have seen it?"

Ash chewed her lip. She checked the stack of DVDs and moved the couch to look underneath. Common sense told her it couldn't be anywhere down here, but she didn't know what else to do.

"What's up?" Ronan stood at the doorway in his leathers.

"Noah asked me to go to Paris for the weekend. I'm supposed to be at St. Pancras by seven and I can't find my passport."

"Where do you usually keep it?"

"In a box in my wardrobe. I've checked. I've checked everywhere."

"Want me to look?" he asked.

"Oh please, thank you." Ash continued to search, looking in the kitchen cupboards, the cubbyhole under the stairs and among the telephone directories. Noah was going to think she'd done this deliberately. Bloody typical now that she was desperate to go, it looked less and less likely to happen. She glanced up when she heard Ronan coming and her shoulders fell when she saw his face.

"When did you last have it?" he asked.

Ash exhaled. "Italy, in May. But I remember putting it back in the box. I remember being disappointed they hadn't stamped it." She sat on the bottom step, a lump of lead in her stomach. "Well, that's it. I can't go."

"Don't give up yet." Ronan squeezed her shoulder. "Kay," he shouted.

Kay appeared in the doorway. "What?"

"Go and check where you keep your passport, just in case Ash's has somehow got trawled up with it. I'll look in Mike's room."

Ash had given up. They weren't going to find it. Why would it be anywhere but in that box? Maybe they'd been the victims of a very selective burglar. *Shit*. She slumped on the stairs, pulled out her phone and called Noah. It went straight to voicemail. *Double shit*. Ash took a deep breath and left a message. "I can't find my passport. I'm sorry, I'm sorry. Call me."

Kay came past her. "It's not with mine."

"Thanks for looking." Not a burglar then.

6:25. Ash had no chance of getting to St. Pancras for seven. She blinked tears from her eyes and called Noah again.

Why does he have his phone switched off? Or is he talking to someone? Ash left another message. "Still can't find it. I'm really sorry. Call me."

Ronan dropped down at her side.

"I can't make it anyway now. Thanks for trying." Ash tried to smile. "There'll be another time."

* * * * *

Dalton stared at his phone. He knew who was calling. Noah, using a pay phone at St. Pancras, in a panic because Ash hadn't turned up. He took a deep breath and picked up his mobile.

"Have you heard from Ash?" Noah asked. "There's no sign of her and we need to get on the train in the next couple of minutes."

"Don't miss the damn thing."

"If she doesn't turn up, I'm not going."

Dalton tensed. "You have to go. You can't let Wolfe down. He'll never give you any more work." *And Ilya will kill me if you don't kill me first.*

"Christ, Dalton, she could be lying dead in a ditch or something."

"Maybe she changed her mind. Get on the fucking train."

He could almost hear Noah glowering.

"I'm not waltzing off without at least knowing she's okay," Noah snapped.

"She's probably just late." Dalton moderated his tone. "Look, I'll go to Ash's house and find out what's wrong. I'll send a message to the hotel. Where are you staying?"

"Hotel Regencia. Get her on another train."

"I'll sort it out."

"You should have let me have your phone," Noah muttered, and ended the call.

Noah had begged and he'd refused. Dalton kept waiting for Noah to work out he could go online and get the numbers from the provider, but since Dalton had sorted out all the other lost or destroyed phones, maybe Noah hadn't realized. Dalton had Kay's number in his contacts, though he'd called her Blondie, but it was the call log he didn't want Noah to see. How was he supposed to explain all those calls from Ilya?

Dalton dropped onto the couch, leaned back and closed his eyes only to flash them open again. *What the fuck did I say? I'll go to her house?* How could he do that? He wasn't supposed to know where she lived.

This had seemed a lot more straightforward when he'd planned it. Pay Kay two hundred and fifty quid to hide Ash's passport and then he'd ruin Noah's phone. Dalton switched off his phone while he decided what to do. He didn't want to handle a call from Noah asking how the fuck he knew where Ash lived—not until he'd thought of the right answer.

No matter what lies Dalton managed to concoct—and he could think a few—the bottom line was if Noah found out what he'd done over the last seven months, he'd never forgive him. Dalton grimaced. He'd wanted to help Noah, he really had, but he'd gone too far. He'd risked wrecking their friendship because he wanted time to write a fucking book. More to the point, he'd risked Noah's health. No book was worth it. Why the hell shouldn't Noah go to Paris with Ash if he wanted to? Why the hell shouldn't he want her for more than a fling? Yeah, well, Dalton thought he knew the answer to the last one. Ash was no way good enough for Noah's aristocratic family, but it was time for an asshole of a friend to make amends.

He sent Kay a text. *Let Ash find her passport. You can keep the money.* Then he grabbed Noah's car keys.

* * * * *

By the time Dalton pulled up outside the house in Greenwich, he'd gone through multiple ways this could pan out. In order not to land Kay in the shit too, Dalton had to be the one to let Ash know where Noah was staying.

One knock and the door was opened by a guy he recognized. Dalton's mind went blank before it sprinted out of control. *Noah's doctor. Except it isn't. So who is he? Obviously he's Ash's friend. Why had he come to see Noah? How did he know about the Friday appointments?*

Dalton suspected he was opening and closing his mouth like a floundering fish.

The guy sighed. "Come in."

As Dalton stepped inside, Ash came rushing toward him. "What are you doing here? I can't find my passport. Noah's not answering his phone... Oh my God, is it Noah? Something's happened?"

She paled and staggered, and the dark-haired guy grabbed her elbow.

"He's fine," Dalton said. "I wrecked his phone, washed it with his pants and he's lost your number. He called me in a panic from a pay phone when you didn't turn up for the train. I told him to get on it and I'd come and see what was wrong. You've lost your passport?" *Did Kay not get my text?*

"We've searched everywhere," Ash said.

"How did you know where Ash lived?" the guy asked.

"Noah told me." He turned to Ash. "He's staying in the Hotel Regencia. You can catch a later train."

"Not without a passport." Ash let out a heavy sigh.

"Maybe one of your housemates took it by accident," Dalton said.

"We've searched everywhere," she said. "Mike's out, but Ronan's been helping me look. Kay did her room. I've taken mine apart."

Dalton had a clear choice now. He could offer more sympathy, suggest Ash call the hotel and leave Noah a message explaining what had happened then leave. Or he could put an end to this and tell the truth.

"Is Kay here?" he asked.

"No, she had a text message about forty minutes ago and said she had to go out," Ash said.

Fucking bitch. "She has your passport."

Ash's eyes widened. "How do you know?"

Because I'm a fucking bastard. "I told her to take it."

Ash turned white and Dalton's guilt sat like a rock in his stomach.

"In there. Now," Ronan snapped, and pointed to a door down the hall.

Dalton went into the living room and dropped onto a chair. Ash and Ronan sat opposite. Ash looked as though she wanted to throw up, and Ronan's face was dark with fury.

"This better be good," Ronan said.

Dalton took a deep breath. "Noah and I are old friends. We were at school together. Seven months ago, Noah's older brother Ilya asked me keep an eye on him for payment.

Noah had just been discharged from the hospital. I gave up my job and moved in with him. Noah doesn't know I've done this for money." Dalton swallowed to bring moisture into his mouth and looked straight at Ash. "Noah was intrigued by you from the moment you dropped food at his feet. The first spark of interest he'd shown in anyone or anything for months. I reported to Ilya and he said to find a way to bring the pair of you together. He gave me tickets for the club in Covent Garden. I traced you through the catering company Kay works for and I paid Kay to persuade you to come."

Ash stared at him without blinking. She had her arms wrapped around herself. Dalton didn't dare to look at Ronan. He could feel the waves of enmity rolling across the room, thickening the air, making it hard to breathe.

"You were never meant to be more than a quick fuck, just an ordinary girl for him to have fun with, but I know you mean more to Noah than that. Ilya knows it too and now that Noah's shown signs of improvement, Ilya wants you gone."

"He thinks I'm not good enough for Noah," Ash whispered.

Dalton nodded. "Ilya told me to make sure Noah went to Paris and you didn't. I paid Kay to take your passport."

Ash visibly shrank, curling in on herself. Ronan put his arm around her.

"Not much of a friend, are you?" Ronan spat out the words.

"No, I'm not. I should never have agreed to do this in the first place. Not for money anyway. But once I had, I'd provided Ilya with the means to persuade me to continue. And Ilya is very persuasive."

"So why tell the truth now?" Ronan asked.

Dalton took a deep breath. "Because Noah needs you, Ash. In Paris and in his life. It's not up to his brother who Noah chooses to be with. He can make his own decisions. The fact that he's making *any* decisions is progress. If you'd seen him seven months ago... What happened in Afghanistan might stay locked in him forever, but you're the light in his world, and I don't want him scuttling back to the dark."

Ronan rose to his feet and pulled Ash to hers. "We're going to search Kay's room. You sit there and do nothing. Don't even breathe."

Dalton knew he'd already done far too much.

As she followed Ronan up the stairs, Ash's heart pounded hard enough to burst through her ribs.

"What did I do?" she asked. "Why would she do this?"

"You did nothing other than be kind to her. Some people resent the generosity of others because it reminds them of their own failings. As to why? For money and because she's jealous. If Noah didn't want her, she didn't want him to want you either."

Ronan pushed open the door to Kay's room and Ash hesitated.

"What is it?" he asked.

"We don't go in each other's rooms unless we're invited."

"You're not a bloody vampire. Do you want to go to Paris or not?"

Ash stepped over the threshold.

* * * * *

Fifteen minutes later, they'd found nothing and Ash's adrenaline rush had faded, leaving her lightheaded with exhaustion.

"Okay." Ronan sighed. "Downstairs."

In the living room, Dalton rose to his feet. "Any luck?"

"Kay must have taken it with her," Ronan said. "We need to get her back here. Any ideas?"

"You'll only get one chance," Dalton said. "If she suspects anything, she's going to delay returning until it's too late. I texted saying to let you find the passport and she hasn't. She's working her own agenda now."

"Why not tell her the truth?" Ash snapped, suddenly furious. "Tell her I know what she did and I'm throwing all her stuff outside in the street if she doesn't get back within the hour? One more hour and I'll set fire to it."

Ronan and Dalton stared at her.

"She might not answer you or me," Ronan said. "Let Mike do it. I'll call him."

* * * * *

Ten minutes later, Mike called back to say Kay was on her way home on the offer of a takeout from her favorite Chinese restaurant. Ronan brought his laptop down and checked the trains. Ash called the Hotel Regencia in Paris and left a message for Noah. *I'm on my way. Ash.* She wanted to say *love* but the word stuck in her throat.

* * * * *

Forty minutes later, Kay turned up while Ash paced in the living room. The moment they stood face-to-face, Ash's fists clenched. Kay's gaze flicked between Ash and Dalton.

"Don't even try to wriggle out of this," Ash snapped.

Kay sighed. She put her hand in her bag and held out the passport. Ash opened it to check it was okay.

"Don't worry. I haven't given you a moustache." Kay sniggered.

"God, you really are a bitch," Ronan said.

She pouted. "It was just a prank."

"No, it wasn't," Ronan said.

Ash faced her. "I don't want you here when I get back. I want you to pack up your stuff and leave."

"You can't make me. It's not your house." Kay crossed her arms.

"As a matter —" Ash began.

"We don't want you," Ronan said. "It won't be pleasant living here with no one speaking to you. Think you'll get to watch what you want on the TV? Think we'll share our food? Let you go first in the bathroom? Call someone who thinks they're your friend, pack up and leave. Any damage you do, any trouble you cause, you'll live to regret." He turned to Dalton. "Take Ash to the station. Help her get on the train. I'm going to help Kay disappear from our lives."

At that moment, Ash had never loved Ronan more.

* * * * *

Ninety minutes later, Ash sat on a Eurostar train at St. Pancras, waiting for it to depart. She'd told Dalton to drop her off outside, but he'd come with her and tried to pay for her extortionately expensive ticket, but she wouldn't let him.

"I'm sorry," Dalton had said.

Ash knew he was, but that didn't make everything okay again.

"I've no right to ask this favor but I'm going to anyway. Please don't tell Noah what I've done. I want to do it myself. Face-to-face."

"You're supposed to be his friend."

"I want to show him that I can be. Please."

So Ash had agreed to keep quiet.

The train manager announced the train was about to leave. The door alarm sounded and the doors hissed closed. Ash sighed and settled back in her seat, looking through the window as the train pulled out of the station. She might be late but at least she was on her way.

* * * * *

Noah spent much of the two-and-a-quarter-hour journey on the Eurostar going through a multitude of scenarios regarding Ash's nonappearance, ranging from a grisly death under a bus to her changing her mind. As annoyed as he would be if she'd changed her mind, Noah really hoped she hadn't had an accident. He consoled himself with the thought that if there'd been a serious problem, she or Dalton would have found some way to contact him.

Every time a Eurostar employee walked down the train, Noah imagined they were bringing him a message, but they never stopped. In desperation, he paid a guy twenty quid to use his mobile so he could call Dalton, but the speed of the train made the

reception so bad, he'd not been able to understand a word he'd said. It was just a garbled series of cut off words. *Ash...can't...Kay...late.*

Noah consumed the bottle of wine he'd bought to share with Ash, and because he was too frustrated and worried to walk to the buffet, he drank it on an empty stomach. By the time he stepped from the train into the Gare du Nord in Paris, he was in a filthy mood. Noah took a taxi to the Hotel Regencia. He'd call Dalton when he got there.

* * * * *

A porter leapt forward to take Noah's bags almost before he'd stepped from the taxi. Noah glanced up at the façade of the hotel. Not a place he'd stayed in before, but it looked okay. Not that he cared. He wished he'd not got on the train.

Noah headed for the reception and someone called his name.

"Noah?"

He turned and straightened in surprise. "Valentina."

Valentina rushed toward him and threw her arms around him.

"What are you doing here?" he asked.

"Working with you."

Noah mentally groaned. Why hadn't he thought to ask Wolfe who was doing the interview?

"How are you?" she asked.

"Fine," Noah said. What other answer was there? "Are you staying here?" Of course she bloody was.

"Yes. Come and have a drink." Valentina clung to his arm.

"Let me check in. I need to see if there are any messages."

Valentina's parents were friends of his father, and the two families had spent holidays together. Most of the time she'd mooned after Ilya, but a couple of years ago she'd turned her attention on Noah. He wasn't interested. She annoyed him. Too obsessed with celebrities, too obsessed with herself.

Noah handed over his credit card to the man behind the counter and asked in French if there were any messages.

"No sir."

Noah frowned. "Are you sure? Would you check again?"

The man ran his finger down a page in a book. "Nothing, sir."

Disappointed, his stomach in knots, Noah slipped his key into his pocket.

"I'll have your bags taken to your room, sir."

"Thanks."

Noah turned, and Valentina stood at his back. "I've ordered us a bottle of champagne." She tucked her arm through his. "I heard you'd been ill. I'm so pleased you're better."

He ought to phone Dalton to find out what had happened to Ash, but why hadn't she left him a message? He had to assume he'd been dumped. Noah allowed himself to be guided to the bar. One drink and he'd leave.

Chapter Seventeen

It was almost midnight when Ash arrived. The taxi driver didn't speak English, but by the time she'd pronounced the hotel name in five different ways, he'd finally nodded and now they sat outside Hotel Regencia. Ash slung her rucksack over her shoulder and made her way to the reception. A slim guy in a smart black suit looked up at her approach. *Damn, was that a sneer?*

"Bonsoir, mademoiselle."

"Bonsoir. Do you speak English?"

"Yes. How may I help you?"

"My name is Ash Elleston. I'm staying with Noah Golitsin. Could you tell me which room he's in, please?"

The guy frowned, and the relief Ash felt to have finally made it wavered like a heat mirage.

"I can't provide that information."

Ash bristled. *"But we're together."*

"I'm sorry. I'm unable to give details of our guests."

He didn't look sorry, and Ash straightened her spine. *"I know he's staying here. I'm staying here too. I left a message for him earlier this evening."*

The guy consulted a book. *"Who did you speak to?"*

"I didn't take their name."

"What time was this?"

"Around eight. Look, can you call Noah's room and tell him I'm here?"

"That would mean admitting he's a guest. I can't —"

"Call him," Ash snapped.

The guy rolled his eyes and picked up the phone. He waited for a while and then put it down. *"No answer. I'm sorry."*

Ash exhaled. What she supposed to do now?

Was Noah asleep?

Not in the room?

Pissed off with her?

None of the above?

She'd slept almost all the way on the train, knocked out through nervous exhaustion. She'd refuel and decide what to do.

"Is there somewhere to eat?" she asked.

"The bar." He nodded to the far side of the ultramodern reception area.

Ash trudged over, pushed open the glass door and happiness filled her when she saw Noah. But as the door closed behind her, it took her smile with it. He sat on a leather couch next to a gorgeous, rake-thin woman with a long neck and creamy skin. She'd clearly been poured into her tight red dress. On the table in front of them were two bottles of champagne.

Oh Noah. It hadn't taken him long. Heart heavy with misery, Ash continued to stand there, looking at him, waiting for him to spot her. *I am not going to cry.*

"Permettez-moi de vous acheter quelque chose a boire."

Ash turned toward the voice and saw a guy in a linen suit smiling at her.

"I don't speak French," she muttered.

His smile widened. "Can I buy you a drink?" he asked in accent-less English.

Ash glanced at Noah who'd still not seen her, thought about saying yes and instead shook her head. "No, thank you."

She walked over on leaden legs and stood in front of the table. The woman spotted her first and put her hand on Noah's knee. Ash could have run then, turned tail and gone all the way home, but she clung to the hope that this wasn't what it seemed. She dropped the rucksack, sat beside him and put her hand on his other knee.

The shock then joy on Noah's face shattered all her worries.

"Ash," he gasped, and pulled her into his arms. "Where the fuck have you been?" He slurred his words and she realized he was drunk. *Idiot.*

"Mislaidd passport. I caught a later train."

He stared at her as if he couldn't believe she was there and then laughed. "Valentina meet Ash."

The blonde had a hand like a bird's wing, small and delicate. Ash resisted the temptation to squeeze hard.

"Pleased to meet you," Ash said, and received a slight nod in return.

"Want a drink?" Noah offered Ash his champagne.

He'd had quite enough. Ash took the glass.

Noah slung his arm around her shoulder. "Thank you for coming," he whispered.

Snooty Bitch poured out more champagne for herself. *Not leaving yet then.*

"Valentina's doing the interview tomorrow for *Hello*," Noah said.

"Want me to see if I can get you Sandra McKinnock's autograph?" Valentina smiled at her. "Grant Matthews might even be with her."

Ash knew kindness when she saw it, and this wasn't kindness. "Yes, please. Could you have her make it out to her biggest, hugest, greatest, most fantastic fan?"

The sarcasm won her a sneer. Noah had his eyes closed and was slumped back on the couch, semi-comatose.

Valentina gave her a vicious smile. "What are you wearing for Noah's father's party next week?"

"Not sure," Ash said. *A party?*

"I have the most stupendous gown. Huge pink thing. Layer upon layer upon layer. It's not often you get chance to wear a proper ball gown. We all make the most of it." She looked at Noah and sighed. "Well, I'd better call it a night." She nudged him awake and he jerked upright. "I'll see you tomorrow morning. We might as well go together. 'Night, sweetie," she said, and kissed him on the lips.

Ash didn't let a flicker of emotion cross her face. She'd seen the game played before. When Valentina had gone, Noah sighed. "I'm drunk."

No kidding. Ash drank the whole glass in one go.

He gaped at her and then laughed. "You do know one glass of that costs over a hundred pounds?"

Ash clapped her hand over her mouth to stop it from spilling out as she spluttered her amazement. She swallowed hard. "You're joking?"

Noah got to his feet and wobbled. "Nope. Valentina paid." Ash grabbed her rucksack and stood up beside him. He frowned. "Hold still."

"You're the one swaying."

"Too much to drink. Your fault." Noah hiccupped.

Ash abandoned thoughts of having something to eat and propelled Noah out of the bar. Her plans for a romantic rendezvous were diminishing by the second. "What room are we in?"

"Fourth floor," he mumbled.

Ash shoved him toward the elevator and didn't try to be gentle.

"Are you angry with me?" he muttered, and looked at her with huge, sorrowful eyes.

Ash wanted to laugh but made herself sound stern. "Why should I be angry with you? I left a message here to tell you I was going to be late. Dalton did too, but I had no word at all from you. I arrive to find I'm not expected as a guest, and the guy on the desk doesn't even want to tell me if you're staying here. I walk into the bar to find you curled up on the couch drinking champagne with a snake." Ash pushed him into the elevator and pressed the button. "Should I be angry?"

Noah pressed her up against the side of the elevator. "I thought you'd changed your mind. I thought you weren't going to come." He hiccupped again. "I want you to come lots of times."

The elevator pinged and Noah staggered out, Ash behind him. They went left until Noah stopped abruptly, looked at the numbers on the doors and turned round. "Other way."

"Where's your key?" Ash wondered if they were even on the right floor.

"Pocket. This is it," Noah slurred, and leaning back against the wall, he closed his eyes.

Ash felt on the outside of his pants, located the correct pocket and slipped her fingers inside.

"Found my pet snake?" Noah asked.

"I think it's dead. Rigor mortis."

He laughed and then groaned. "Fuck it."

Ash bypassed the keycard and stroked his cock with her finger. When she felt it jerk, she smiled.

"Shhhhit," Noah whispered.

She pressed herself closer, wrapped her fingers around the card and started to pull it out. "Got it." Then she let it go again.

"Keep looking."

Ash managed to curl her fingers partway around his cock and squeezed.

"Is that it?" she whispered in his ear.

"Oh yeah."

"It's a bit hard to get hold of," Ash said.

There was a small wet patch in his pocket dampening her palm.

"Keep trying."

Ash heard the elevator ping behind her and pulled out the card. She was amazed to find they *were* standing outside the right room. She bundled Noah inside, and he zigzagged for the bed.

"I just need to shut my eyes for a sec," he mumbled as he fell headlong.

Ash took out her mobile and texted Ronan. *With Noah. All fine.* It wasn't, but it would be.

She looked around the room. Noah's bags were in the corner. Ash unpacked her clothes and toiletries and then unpacked Noah's things. While she hung shirts and pants in the wardrobe, she ate the two packets of chocolate chip cookies sitting in a basket by the coffee machine. A mistake because they only made her feel more hungry.

Ash undressed, used the bathroom and then took off Noah's shoes and socks. When she rolled him over, he had two, round, foil-covered chocolates sticking to his forehead. Ash laughed, peeled them off, unwrapped them and ate the gooey mess inside.

By the time she had him naked, she was exhausted. Ash knelt on the bed, looking down at him in the light from the lamp. *He is lovely.* He had a narrow waist and slender hips that jutted out. His cock lay curled in a nest of dark curls and she thought it was the first time she'd not seen it erect. It made him look even more vulnerable.

Ash turned off the light and curled her body protectively around his under the covers.

* * * * *

No. *Can't. Don't make me. Won't.* Noah's brain felt about to explode. He couldn't breathe. He couldn't think. He had to get away. He thrashed around, trying to get free, and when his hand found flesh, he squeezed hard. Harder.

"No—ah."

A light came on, and as Noah blinked, he registered a hotel room, bed... *Oh fuck, Ash.* She had one arm stretched toward the bedside light, the other trying to pull his fingers from her neck. He let go, saw the look of fear on her face and jerked himself aside.

Oh God, oh God, oh God, oh God.

"Noah," she whispered. "It's okay."

He lay on his back and flung his arm over his eyes. The sound of his ragged breathing filled the room. Ash edged closer and settled her head on his shoulder.

"Sorry, sorry, sorry," he gasped.

She stroked his chest. "It's okay. Don't worry, I'm here. You're safe."

Noah slowly came out of it, his chest less tight, his breathing easier.

"Did I hurt you?" he whispered. "Oh fuck, of course I did. I had my hand around your throat. You should run away from me and not look back." He pressed his arm harder against his eyes.

"Noah, I'm all right. No damage done. A bad dream?"

"My whole life is a bloody nightmare." He dropped his arm and settled his gaze on Ash. "*Was* a nightmare." Noah swallowed hard. "We need something to drink."

"I'll get you some water."

As she sat up, he caught her arm. "See what's in the fridge."

"I think you've had enough alcohol."

He gave a cheerless laugh. "It's for you. I need to be drunk to tell this and you need to be drunk to hear it."

Ash glanced at the clock. "It's three in the morning. I don't want anything to drink and you've had enough."

Noah pulled her into his arms and pressed his face against her hair. "I need to talk. I need to tell you things. But I'm afraid if I do, you won't be able to love me."

Ash wrapped her arms around his back and hugged him hard. His heart pounded so fast Noah felt as if it were going to burst out of his chest.

"I want you to love me," he muttered into her hair. "But you won't be able to. No one could." He pulled back to look at her. "Do you think you could love me?"

Ash nodded, but he didn't believe her. He had to tell her this, had to tell someone before it ate him up and there was nothing left of him but an empty shell. They lay face-to-face, and Noah slid his hands down to hold hers.

"After we were captured by the Behnam, I yelled that I was with the press." He sighed. "I don't know what I thought they'd do. Pat me on the back and let me go? Oh fuck it, yeah, I did. For a few selfish moments, I wanted them to see I wasn't like the other two. I wasn't a soldier, they didn't need to kill me, I wasn't on anyone's side."

Noah swallowed hard, but the lump stayed put in his throat. "The three of us were taken to a camp up in the hills. Dave and Tommy had been badly beaten. Me, not so much. A few thumps in the stomach when I didn't move fast enough. A slap in the face when I tried to talk. They chained us in a hut, not close enough to touch, and the first time they brought food, they fed me and not Dave and Tommy. I'd eaten before I realized they weren't getting any. Dave said they were just playing mind games and next time I might not get fed. The following meal was some sort of stew and rice and it was only given to me. Nothing I could throw to them. I said I wasn't going to eat it and Dave told me I was a fucking fool, and if they'd had the food, they'd have eaten it. So I did."

He screwed up his eyes and then snapped them open to look at her. "Men came every few hours and took either Dave or Tommy away. They beat them, asked them questions and brought them back. I waited for them to drag me out, but they never did. They had something different in mind for me."

His grip on her hands intensified. "The leader came, yelling and shouting at Tommy and Dave in Pashto or Dari. None of us understood more than a few words. Then he turned to me and said in a crisp, clean English accent as if he'd just read the news on the BBC, "Choose which man you wish to die."

Ash gasped. "Oh Noah."

He chewed his lip. "I refused and he made himself clearer. If I didn't choose, he'd kill all three of us. Slowly." Noah shuddered. "What the fuck was I supposed to say?"

His eyes brimmed with tears. "I didn't want to choose. If it had been just me who would die, then I think I'd have told him to go fuck himself, but if I didn't choose, I could have allowed a man to die who wouldn't have otherwise." Tears rolled down his cheeks. "Then they said they weren't just going to kill the man, but behead him, stick his head on a pike and drag his body through the camp. They'd take pictures with my camera and put them on the internet."

"Oh God," Ash whispered.

"Tommy had a three-month-old baby he hadn't seen. Dave had a girlfriend he was going to ask to marry him when he went home. I'd eaten with them, drunk with them, laughed with them. How could I let Tommy's wife see his body treated like that? How could I let his son grow up knowing what had happened to his father and that it was my fault?"

"Not—"

"Yes, I know," he blurted. "Not my fault, but it was. I'd made friends of those guys. Dave in particular. We just clicked. Laughed at each other's jokes, played tricks on each other."

Tears rolled down Ash's cheeks now. Noah had to pause to take a breath, but the words rolled out of him and with every word he uttered, he felt the weight start to lift from his shoulders.

"Dave said, let Tommy live because he's got a baby. Tommy said he was ten years older than Dave, he'd had more of a life. Then they changed and they both pleaded with me to pick them and I wanted the earth to crack and swallow me up. But it didn't. And I knew if it had been either of them who had to choose, they'd have picked me to die and I wished, wished, wished that was the way it was." He released a shaky breath. "The leader of the rebels stood there and demanded an answer."

Ash pressed her lips together.

"I chose to save Tommy and I couldn't look at either of them. I felt it was the most cowardly thing I've ever done. The truth was they were probably going to kill us all anyway. I should have sucked it up and told the guy to take a leap and I should have looked at Dave when I gave my answer and I didn't. They said they'd behead him the next day. Oh Christ, that night was hard." He shuddered as he remembered what they'd talked about. "We cried. Dave gave us messages to pass to his family and he said he didn't blame me, that I wasn't to blame myself, that if we got out, I was to let it go. Oh fuck, let it go? How the fuck could I do that?"

Ash gave him a puzzled look. "You said you visited Dave in the hospital. So what happened?"

Noah shuddered. "Early the next morning, they came and said they were going to kill Tommy not Dave. More fucking mind games. Before they could, there was an attack on the camp. A rescue bid. The Behnam rebels ran out, and then British soldiers burst into the hut. They f-freed us and said helicopters waited on the south side of the encampment. The place was in an uproar, huts on fire, machine guns rattling, people screaming. The soldier leading me out was hit in the arm. I didn't think, I just picked up his gun and used it, dragged him with me. I found Tommy sheltering behind a cart with Behnam guys coming up behind him." Noah huffed out a shuddering breath. "I must have thought I was invincible. I rushed over, firing the f-fucking gun like I was spraying water, and guys fell down. Only when I reached Tommy he'd been hit...he gave me this little smile...and I thought he was going to be okay...and I held him and he died in my arms."

"Oh Noah," Ash whispered.

"The place was in chaos. There were explosions going off one after the other. The wounded soldier with me was helped by his colleagues and I went looking for Dave. I found him trapped by his legs under a pile of rubble. I tried to free him, but I couldn't without help. He kept telling me to run and I really fucking wanted to, but it was my chance to put things right, and if I died doing that, then at least I'd..." He brushed the tears from his face. Noah wondered if he'd ever cried this much before.

"I kept shooting until someone came to help me dig Dave out. One of his legs didn't come out with him. The other was mangled. When I arrived in Helmand, I'd been

issued with a couple of new style tourniquets with Velcro straps, and I'd freaked out a bit at that. I never thought I'd have to use one. For some reason, the Behnam had left them in my pocket. The medics said I saved Dave's life. I didn't want to leave him, but they took him on a different helicopter. I didn't realize I'd been injured as well until I fell over."

He brushed a tear from her cheek with his thumb. "Tommy dead, Dave gravely injured, and I found out later four other soldiers were also wounded. All my fault because I'd insisted on them driving me to a ridge that would give me a chance to take a brilliant picture and impress people. My stupid, fucking, fault."

Ash put her finger on his lips. "You were doing your job and they were doing theirs."

"It's not as simple as that."

"Yep, it is."

He looked into her eyes and released a small laugh. "Then why I have spent the last seven months in hell?"

Ash took a deep breath. "What they made you do, choose who to save, was a form of torture. It was worse than something physical because it's harder to get over. But you *can* get over it. I know you don't believe that yet, but you *will* get over it."

Her faith in him meant a lot to Noah. He'd told her now and she was still here with him, not freaking out, just holding him and saying the right things.

"Would you feel any differently if it had been Tommy who survived and not Dave?" she asked.

He didn't want to answer that. "I've never told anyone what I've just told you. I don't want you to repeat it."

"I won't. I promise." Ash cupped his face with her hands. "I can't put your world right, Noah. No doctor can put it right. Not even time can do it. Only you can."

"I'm trying."

"Try harder."

His mouth twitched in a half-smile and he pulled her to lie on top of him.

"What should I do?" he asked.

"Go and see Tommy's wife. Go and see Dave."

He exhaled. "Okay."

She raised her eyebrows.

"I will," Noah said.

"You might mean it now, but you'll have changed your mind by Monday."

She knew him too well.

"Can we not talk about it anymore while we're here?" he asked.

Ash tapped his head with her finger. "If you promise not to think about it either."

His hands slid over her backside. "You're just the distraction I need."

Ash pushed back her disquiet and plastered a smile on her face. She could be the distraction he needed, his plaything for a while, but she suspected the damage to her heart would be severe. His brother thought she wasn't good enough for Noah. Dalton had been paid to maneuver Noah into using her then leaving her. Noah said he liked her because she was ordinary, but Ash wasn't ordinary at all.

The thought of telling him *her* secret had bubbled in Ash's mind from the moment she sat on the train, but his confession had shoved hers back behind locked doors. Noah didn't need more problems.

She was horrified by what had happened to him, couldn't imagine what she'd do if she'd been put in that position. No wonder his head was messed up. She understood why he felt guilty, but the world was full of what ifs. No point dwelling on the past, nothing could be changed. Noah had a bright future and she wanted to help him seize it.

Pushing herself up, Ash shrugged off the sheets and set her knees on either side of Noah's hips. She ran her gaze over the tight, copper peaks of his nipples, the hard plains of his abs and followed the enticing, dark line of hair running below his erect cock. She almost skittered her fingers over his scars and realized in the nick of time this wasn't the moment to make him think of when he got them.

Ash took his hands and lifted them to the top of the bed head. "If you let go, I'll stop."

She stretched her body over his and slid her hands up his arms until her fingers settled over his clenched fists. Then she rubbed herself against him. Breasts against his chest, her nipples brushing his, her belly caressing his cock, her mouth plastered to his.

"Oh God," he gasped between kisses. "What are you doing?"

"Scent marking."

Noah snorted.

"Better make sure I get you everywhere." Because there was a bitch in heat in a room not far away.

Ash pushed herself up on her knees and reached for his cock, letting the rounded head press against her folds.

"You're driving me crazy," Noah whispered.

She took in the darkness of his eyes, the hitch in his breathing, the flush of arousal on his cheeks and lips. A gush of her cream trickled down his cock, and they both groaned. Ash lowered herself a fraction and tightened her muscles around the tip of his erection.

"Chrissssst," he hissed.

"Try not to move," she whispered. "Let me be in control."

As slowly as she could, Ash moved her hips up and down, but only enough to engulf the very tip of his cock, loving the combination of his rigidity and velvet softness. She took in a little more of him and then slowly pulled back, drawing up her muscles as tight as she could.

Noah seemed to have stopped breathing. He held himself motionless beneath her while Ash lifted herself up and down. When she twisted her hips, it was her undoing. Some place inside her ignited and she was unable to stop herself from shifting faster and harder. She wanted him deep, wanted him to touch her heart.

Ash might have told him not to move, but when he did, she didn't want to stop him. Noah's hips were rocking, bucking, pushing his hot, thick length into her as she drove herself down onto him. Wet flesh slapped wet flesh and as her hands crept to his shoulders, Ash lost herself in the rhythm. Her ears ringing, lights flashing behind her eyes, electricity poured through her veins.

She dropped onto his chest, and Noah's hands wrapped around her butt, lifting her onto his thrusts, pulling her down so his pubic hair rubbed her clit. Ash cried out as she came, muffling her cries against his shoulder. Noah kept thrusting and then spasmed inside her, his mouth against her head as he whispered her name over and over.

He was asleep before Ash had come down and a sad smile tugged at her lips.

Chapter Eighteen

As Ash slept beside him, Noah lay thinking. He'd told someone, and the world hadn't ceased turning. Ash felt pity for him, but not pitied him, and there was a difference. One question had made his stomach churn. Would he feel any differently if it had been Tommy who'd survived?

The truth was it would have been easier for Noah if Tommy had survived because then he wouldn't have to think about Dave remembering Noah hadn't picked him. To know there was a guy out there condemned to death by Noah for the flimsiest of logic was one reason why his life had gone to hell. What did Dave think about him? Did he hate him?

Noah had tried to leave it to chance. He'd held a piece of straw in each hand and asked the guys to call out which hand had the shortest, but they wouldn't. They kept telling him it didn't matter who he chose, but Noah couldn't accept that. He obsessed over what to do until his head felt ready to explode, and he'd blurted Dave's name when he should have kept quiet. How could he have even thought they'd let any of them survive?

He'd been sitting in his car when he'd opened that fucking letter about a medal. Noah had opened the door, thrown up and stuffed the letter out of sight in the glove box. *A medal?* He'd acted out of guilt and fury not bravery.

He eased away from Ash and crept to the bathroom. Noah recoiled when he looked in the mirror—dark shadows under his eyes, pale cheeks and his hair sticking up all over the place. He was surprised his head didn't pound. He stood under the shower, twisted the lever to the right and hoped cold water would turn him back into a human. He gasped at the first icy blast, but at least it reminded him he was alive. Noah rested his palms on the tiles and arched back to let the water play on his face. He was going to wreck this weekend if he didn't get his head in gear.

Noah startled when Ash pressed up against his back, and wondered why she didn't yelp at the temperature. He scented coconut, and then her hands rubbed shampoo into his hair, her fingers pressing into his scalp. Noah adjusted the temperature to tropical and heard her sigh. She massaged his shoulders, sliding soapy hands down his back onto his hips and then over his backside. One finger trailed up and down the crease of his butt cheeks and a moan slipped from his lips. She knelt behind him, hands rubbing gel around his thighs, down his legs, around his ankles. His cock perked up and his balls decided it was safe to come out and play.

"Wash my hair?" she asked.

Noah grabbed the little bottle of shampoo and as he turned, she took his cock in her mouth. *Oh God. She'd tricked him.* While he could still think Noah tipped gel onto his

palm. Ash flicked her tongue down his cock and nibbled at the base before wrapping her mouth around his balls. He threaded his fingers in Ash's soapy hair and rubbed while she played with him, pulling the delicate skin of his sac tight with her lips and then letting it wrinkle in her mouth. Grunts spilled from him as she licked behind his balls, her tongue pressing and teasing the sensitive triangle of flesh.

His hips shifted restlessly. Excitement zipped along his veins as his body responded to her touch. Eyes closed, he leaned back so the water missed his head, hit his chest and poured down his body. He had one hand in Ash's hair and the other cupped her cheek, stroking the curved bone with his thumb. She licked, sucked and kissed his cock until Noah could barely breathe. When he felt her finger press against his asshole, he stopped trying to breathe.

Oh fuck, oh fuck, oh fuck.

The finger slipped in, sucked in by his body, and as Ash pumped his cock into her mouth, she fucked him in the ass with her finger. His brain fogged. *Bad, bad – good, good, good.* She curled her finger, circled over his prostate, and Noah cried out, the noise echoing around the bathroom. He forced his eyes open to look down at her, and when he saw her face, the starlike drops of water on her lashes, her lips around his cock, he spurted into her mouth. The long, wrenching spasms racked his body as if he were doing more than emptying his seed into her, but his soul.

Noah didn't let Ash leave the bathroom until he'd made her come twice. He'd been aiming for three, but she tricked him and escaped.

"I'm starving," Ash told him as she grabbed clothes and dressed, hopping around the room to keep out of his reach. "All I've eaten since you fed me those croissants are two cookies and two chocolates I peeled off your face."

Noah laughed. "I take it I passed out on them. Right. First we'll eat and then you can come with me to the Four Seasons. The chances of Sandra McKinnock wanting to be photographed at ten in the morning are zero. The chances of her even doing the interview today aren't high. I'm not going to waste my time sitting in a hotel lobby."

He gave up trying to snag Ash and put his clothes on. She wore a white, cotton dress covered in blue flowers with cross-over straps at the back, and blue sandals. A pale pink cardigan hung over her shoulders together with a small pink purse.

Noah slipped on his jacket. "You look lovely." He took her hand and pulled her into his arms. "More than lovely. Beautiful."

Ash smiled and Noah felt as if he'd stepped into sunshine.

* * * * *

Dark clouds rolled in when Valentina joined them for breakfast. She signaled the waitress to lay another place and Noah suspected she'd lain in wait until they came

down. He was a little surprised Ash hadn't quizzed him about her, but then they'd had other things on their minds.

When Ash came back from the buffet carrying a plate piled with pastries, Valentina verged on hyperventilation.

"Are you going to eat all those?" she asked in astonishment.

"Yes." Ash smiled, picked up a *pain au chocolat* and bit into it, licking the flakes off her lips.

"Good?" Noah asked, staring at her mouth.

"Mmm..."

He glanced at the green apple and single, dry, crisp bread on Valentina's plate and smiled. Why did women think being bony was attractive?

"Are there any shots in particular the editor wants me to take?" he asked.

"Just the usual."

"Such as?"

"You're the photographer." Valentina cut her apple into tiny pieces.

"Maybe you could get her to wrap the baby in a blanket and dangle it out of the window," Ash said. "Even better if there are screaming fans below."

Noah coughed into his orange juice. Valentina tried to kill her with a look and failed.

"Personally, I'd like to see some honest photographs," Ash said. "Sandra throwing up when she has to change the baby's diaper, baby throwing up on Sandra's new dress. Oooh, you might even get a shot of projectile vomiting."

Valentina heaved and Ash laughed.

I love her.

Noah's hand shook and he spilt his juice as he put the glass down. *Oh God.*

* * * * *

Valentina complained all the way to the George V. "Why do we have to walk? The magazine would pay for a cab. My shoes aren't meant for this. They're Jimmy Choos."

Noah rolled his eyes. "It's a few hundred yards. I think Jimmy Choos can get you that far. I need the fresh air." He didn't add *Think of the calories you'll burn* because he suspected Valentina had an eating disorder.

He tried not to think about the L word that had slipped into his head, but every time he looked at Ash, his heart swelled. She seemed entranced by everything they passed. Her gaze flicked from one side of the road to the other and over the façades of the buildings. He wanted to know what she was thinking, but he could hardly hear himself think with Valentina ranting in his ear.

The 1920s art deco, white-stone hotel appeared unprepossessing from the exterior, but once they walked through the large glass doors, it was easy to see why the place had such a good reputation. A magnificent tapestry hung behind the desk of the sweeping two-story reception. Scattered throughout were elegant pieces of sculpture and elaborate flower arrangements. It had been his mother's favorite hotel in Paris, and Noah felt a pang of regret for happy times lost.

Valentina strode past the doormen to the reception. "Valentina Kandinskaya and Noah Golitsin of *Hello* magazine to see Sandra McKinnock. She's expecting us."

"Good morning, *mesdames, monsieur*, if you'd like to take a seat."

Noah hoped they were comfortable. They were likely to be using them for a long time.

Sandra McKinnock's PA came down promptly with the news that Sandra was still eating breakfast. By the time the PA appeared for the third time, Noah had lost his patience.

"I'm very sorry. She's feeding the baby."

"Tell her thirty minutes and then I'm leaving," Noah said to the harassed-looking woman.

Her shoulders slumped as she walked back to the elevator.

Valentina *tsked*. "We can't leave."

"You know as well as I do that she probably won't even see us today. It'll be one excuse after another. The baby's asleep. The baby needs feeding. Sandra's asleep. Sandra's on the phone. Sandra's got a headache. Sandra's been abducted by aliens. Keep waiting." He sighed. "I've better things to do." He glanced at Ash, who was wandering around the lobby inspecting the flowers.

Valentina sidled closer on the couch. "Has your father met Ash?"

Noah felt a twist of discomfort knot his guts. "Not yet. But how can he fail to like her?" He stared straight at Valentina until she dropped her gaze. When he turned to look for Ash, she was on her way back.

There were mere inches between him and Valentina, but Ash sat there anyway. She ended up on Noah's knee and Valentina grumbled under her breath as she moved out of the way. Noah smiled as he slid his arm around Ash's waist.

"This is so beautiful," Ash said. "I bet the rooms are lovely."

"You couldn't afford to stay here," Valentina snapped.

Noah tensed, but Ash put her hand on his arm. "How do you know?" she asked.

Valentina sneered. "You're wearing a dress from a high street store, probably last season's, and sandals that couldn't have cost more than twenty pounds."

"Twelve pounds actually," Ash said. "They were on sale. But take a look where I'm sitting."

Valentina huffed.

Oh God, I do love her. She's fucking fearless.

When the PA appeared again to tell them the star couldn't see them this morning and to come back at four, Noah stood. "No. I'll be here tomorrow at ten." He grabbed his bag and Ash's hand and walked out, leaving Valentina spluttering behind them.

"Are you going to get in trouble?" Ash asked.

"I couldn't give a shit. I'm not wasting you and Paris on some arrogant celebrity."

"Where are you going?" Valentina tottered after them.

"Run," Noah said. "She'll never catch us in those shoes."

* * * * *

Within a few hundred yards, Noah began to wonder if they'd ever get anywhere. They kissed on every corner, cuddled in each little park and wrapped themselves around each other as they waited to get over the road. If they missed the lights telling them to cross, they kissed while they waited for them to change again. He tried to think when he'd been this happy, and he couldn't remember. He'd forgotten how to have fun, and Ash had reminded him.

"Oh, the *Champs Elysees*," Ash said. "Let's get to the middle." She tugged him over the crossing and stopped in the central island. "The *Arc de Triomphe*. God, it's huge. Wow, look at the trees. This is fantastic."

"The French call this the most beautiful avenue in the world." Noah couldn't tear his gaze away from her. "I love you."

The words had just slipped out, but he meant it. He didn't know what he expected Ash to do or say. So long as she didn't run, he could cope. Noah didn't want her to parrot it back to him, though maybe he did. She stared at him with her huge eyes and then wrapped her hands around his neck and pulled him into a kiss. In the middle of one of the most famous streets in the world, with pedestrians passing, cars roaring either side tooting their horns, Noah kissed her back as if they were on their own—in bed. He very deliberately tasted every inch of her mouth. Their kisses grew increasingly undignified as lust overwhelmed their common sense.

When they broke apart, Noah looked at her as if he couldn't quite believe the way he felt. He put his arms around her and held her close.

"Don't move for a minute. I've got a cock that's an idiot."

Ash quirked her mouth in a smile. "You kiss better than anyone I've ever met."

"Thank you," he mumbled.

"It's like you're pouring liquid electricity into my veins."

"Oh God."

"Every time you even look at me, I ache," she whispered.

"Shut up," he hissed.

Ash grinned and squirmed against him. "One touch and my panties are damp. You need to be locked up."

Noah sighed. "That's great. Now you can't move for another ten minutes."

She laughed. "Café across the road. Let's have a drink."

Noah didn't miss the smug grin on the waiter's face when they sat at a pavement table. But he didn't care if their sloppy romantic behavior made people laugh. He wanted everyone to know how he felt about her. For one totally insane moment, he wished he'd had a ring to give her. Except she didn't like rings. And it *was* insane. They'd only known each other a few days, but Noah was sure he wanted her in his life.

* * * * *

He took her on a tour of the city on the upper deck of an open-top bus. They missed a lot because they were too busy kissing and feeling each other up on the backseat like horny teenagers. Noah managed to get his fingers in her panties, hidden by his jacket and swallowed her moan as she came.

"We're going to get arrested," Ash whispered.

"I don't care."

He didn't. He only cared about Ash. Noah saw the city afresh through her eyes. He took pictures of things she pointed at, took pictures of her pointing at them. Ash had given up asking him not to, but she kept sticking out her tongue or putting a crazy expression on her face when he turned the lens in her direction. She was like a will-o'-the-wisp, and all Noah had to do was be patient and catch her when she didn't expect it. He loved her and that was all that mattered.

Ash felt as though she'd been caught up in an alternate reality. She was in Paris with a gorgeous guy who'd told her he loved her, and when the moment was right, she'd tell him that she loved him too. Ash stamped on the nagging voice in her head telling her this wouldn't last. She *wanted* to be happy. She *wanted* it to last. When she got 'round to telling Noah her secrets, he'd understand. *Please*.

Late afternoon, they found themselves outside a big department store and Noah stopped. Ash suspected he'd led her here deliberately.

"I'd like you to come to my father's party next Saturday." Noah brushed her lower lip with his thumb. "I want to buy you something to wear."

A flurry of emotions skittered through Ash, excitement and pleasure running alongside worry and dread. Noah had no idea she'd already been marked down as "unsuitable" by his brother and presumably his father, but she wanted to go to the party, wanted for once in her life to wear a fantastic dress.

"Valentina plans to wear a huge pink ball gown," Ash said.

"When did she say that?"

"Last night. I think you'd dropped off the planet by that point."

Noah squeezed her fingers. "Then let's find a huge ball gown for you."

He slouched in a leather chair while Ash tried on dresses with the help of an assistant who spoke not a word of English. Ash came out of the changing room to pirouette in front of him. The prices were ridiculous, but she wanted to treat herself. No way was she letting Noah pay.

"You sure Valentina said she was wearing something like that?" he asked when Ash appeared in a blue dress that took up the entire room.

"This is too big," Ash said. "What happens if I need the bathroom?"

"You could carry a portalo around with you under that."

Ash screwed up her face. "Eww."

Noah smiled at all the dresses, but the one that made him sit up was a magenta gown with a full skirt made of contrasting shimmering colors. Ash liked it too, but it was Noah's reaction she'd been waiting for. The ruched bodice had a sweetheart neckline smothered with beading and embroidery and it was so tight it hurt. Ash loved it.

"You look gorgeous," he said.

"I feel like Cinderella." Though a sliver of doubt had crept in as she'd tried the dresses on. "This is what the women will be wearing? Not evening gowns?"

"I don't care what they wear, I want you in that."

They fought over who'd pay, but Noah insisted, and though Ash found it difficult to back down, she did. The box holding the dress was so large, they had to take a cab back to the hotel. When it wouldn't fit in the trunk, the driver put the long oblong across the back, perched on their knees.

Noah slid his arm along the back of the seat and twirled his fingers in her hair.

"Thank you for the dress," she said, and gave him a quick kiss.

He tugged at her hair. "Is that all I get?"

"I *was* going to wait." Ash danced her fingers over his crotch.

The moment she touched his cock, it began to swell, and Ash bit back her laugh.

"It's not funny," Noah muttered, though he was smiling.

Ash could feel the heat of him through the material. She glanced at the driver and caught his eye in the mirror. He couldn't see what she was doing behind the box. She kept her hand on Noah's crotch and leaned against him, mouth to his neck, sliding her fingers under his jacket to pinch his nipple through his shirt.

"Oh God," Noah moaned.

A scrape of her nails over the bulge at his groin and his pulse jumped under her tongue. While the fingers of one hand still played in her hair, Noah pulled her dress free from where it was caught under the box and slid his hand onto her bare thigh. He drew circles with the pad of his fingers and excitement shimmered through her.

Ash kissed her way to his mouth and pressed her tongue between his lips. Kissing Noah was like eating a spoonful of her favorite ice cream. There was no hope of putting the container back into the freezer until she was full. Ash slid her tongue along his, nipped it with her teeth, sucked it, pushed it back, pulled it forward. Noah's hand pressed the back of her head, keeping them together, and as they kissed, his fingers crept farther and farther up her leg. Ash smiled into his mouth as she waited for him to discover she'd taken off her panties before she left the changing room.

Yep, that's it. His fingers slid over her damp folds and his body went as stiff as his cock. Ash swallowed his moan though didn't manage to completely muffle it.

"Ash, Ash," Noah breathed her name against her mouth. "What the fuck are you doing?"

But he didn't stop her when she unfastened his pants and eased down the zipper.

She didn't stop him when he pushed his fingers inside her and rubbed her clit with his thumb.

Ash felt herself grow wetter. Her pulse leapt and she dipped her fingers inside his boxers to wrap them around his cock. They struggled to keep silent, the tension on Noah's face, the tight set of his jaw matched by the way she bit her lip and kept swallowing the moisture flooding her mouth.

"Don't," he whispered.

But he didn't stop her when she pushed down the material of his boxers and took his cock out, wrapping her fist around it to pull the skin up over the rigid core and then back down to expose the dark-red head.

She didn't stop him when two fingers turned into three and he pushed harder, deeper into her.

His eyelids fluttered as she played with him, running her thumb around the ridge below the crest, pumping him into her palm then squeezing at his root. When she ran a finger over the glistening fluid seeping from his slit and brought her finger to her mouth, his hand faltered. She licked off the pre-cum and Noah shuddered.

"Cinq minutes," the driver said. *"Vous voulez je fais un long detour?"*

"Non, merci," Noah said, and turned to Ash. "We're nearly there."

Noah pulled his hand from between her legs, lifted hers from his cock, and with difficulty, persuaded his clearly indignant organ to go back into his boxers.

"What did the driver say?" Ash asked.

Noah grinned. "He asked if we wanted to take the long way round."

When the cab pulled up outside Hotel Regencia, the driver opened the rear door on her side. Ash climbed out and Noah exited the other side with the box strategically positioned.

"Next time. No box," the driver whispered, and winked at Ash.

She suspected her face went as pink as her cardigan.

* * * * *

The moment Noah kicked the door of the room shut, he dropped his bag and the box and growled. Ash backed away, but he snatched her wrist and pulled her up close. His hand slithered up her thigh under her dress onto her butt and he groaned. "You little monkey."

Noah slipped his other hand under her butt and carried her to the bed. He laid her down and pushed her legs toward her shoulders.

"Christ, look at you. All...wet."

He held her ankles with one hand and with the other unfastened his pants and freed his cock.

"I was a breath away from coming in that cab," he whispered. "I wanted to yank you onto my lap and thrust into you. And I didn't give a fuck who'd see us. You're definitely going to get me arrested."

His frustrated expression made her grin.

"Oh, you think it's funny?" he asked.

"The driver whispered to me 'no box next time'."

"You like the idea of other people watching us get off? Sorry there was no one near in that park in Greenwich?"

"I don't know," Ash blurted. She'd only ever imagined that in erotic dreams. To do it for real seemed a big jump. "Probably not, but I might be persuaded." She had a feeling she couldn't deny Noah anything.

"I can't wait. You drive me fucking insane with need."

Noah pressed himself home, sinking deeper and deeper until his hips rested against hers. She loved the feel of him so thick and hard inside her, and a tingling lassitude crept through Ash, flooding her veins, seeping into every cell until her entire body felt primed, ready, waiting. His stroke lengthened and he rocked into her, filling her over and over, faster and faster.

"Yes, yes, yes." She moaned the word as her head fogged with pleasure.

"Ash," he gasped.

She lifted into him as he drove into her, pulling her faster toward release. Her chest tightened and the muscles of her sex clenched as hot pleasure ripped through her. The wave caught her, wrapped around her and rolled her toward the shore. Ash broke with a keening cry, and as orgasm overwhelmed her, she pulled Noah along too. He cried out as he spurted inside her before sagging bonelessly over her.

His fingers curled around hers and held tight. "Don't ever leave me."

Chapter Nineteen

"Dinner and dancing?" Ash brushed her hands down her creased dress as they walked from their room to the elevator.

"You look great," Noah said.

No, she didn't. A quick shower had freshened her up, but Noah wanted her in a dress. This was the only one she'd brought, and the iron in the room was useless. Her joking suggestion that she wear the ball gown had been treated with a moment's serious consideration before he'd shaken his head.

He tugged her over to the reception desk, spoke in French, and the woman went away and came back with a sturdy paper bag emblazoned with the hotel's name.

"Dinner," Noah said, and propelled her outside. "Shall we walk?"

When he took her hand, Ash would have gone with him anywhere. She hadn't realized how much holding hands could mean. *He's mine. She's mine. We're together.* Ash was waiting for an opportunity to tell him about herself, but it wasn't something she could just blurt out, and she didn't want to wreck the evening. Though when *was* the right time to tell him something so horrible?

"You did put your panties back on, didn't you?" he asked.

"Yes."

"Sure?"

"Want me to show you?"

Noah's lip twitched. "Go on then."

Ash lifted her dress to her waist.

Noah yelped and pulled it down. "You're crazy!"

Ash smirked. "You were the one who wanted to see."

He slung an arm over her shoulder. "If I ask again, ignore me."

"Where are we going?"

"*Jardin Tino Rossi* on Quai St. Bernard. It's a narrow garden that runs along the Seine with amphitheaters facing the river. Something special happens in them on summer nights. We'll picnic in the park and then join in."

A shiver of anxiety trickled down Ash's spine. "I don't know if I'm into people watching us," she whispered. "If you want to, I'll try, but you have to hide me with your body."

Noah squeezed her shoulder. "I hope there are lots of people watching. I want them all to see how beautiful you are. In *every* position."

Oh God.

"Don't worry," he said. "My hands will be all over you."

Bloody hell.

"And I want yours all over me." He winked at her.

"I'm not sure I'm brave enough."

"Course you are. If I can do it, so can you."

Shit. "Don't the police get upset?"

"As long as there's no trouble, they don't mind."

It was no good. She'd have to say something. Being watched by a few people in some enclosed space was one thing. Having sex outside with possibly hundreds watching didn't appeal. Ash couldn't believe the police turned a blind eye. There would be mass arrests in London.

"Hear that?" Noah asked.

"Music's not going to help."

"We can't do it without."

Ash sighed when they walked into the park. It was full of people dancing. Fully clothed. *The bastard.* He'd been winding her up.

"Oh no," she said, putting as much disappointment into her voice as possible.

Noah laughed. "I'm not fooled. I know what you thought." He pulled her over to a stone seat at the back of the park near a curving statue that looked like a pretzel. "Let's see what we've got." He put the bag between them.

Ash's mouth watered. "I hope it's bread, cheese and red wine."

It was. Two baguettes, pats of butter and a wedge of soft cheese with paper plates and napkins, plastic knives and glasses.

Noah unscrewed the wine and poured it. "I didn't want us to have to take anything back. It can all be dumped." He held his glass to hers. "Thank you for coming."

"Thank *you* for coming."

Noah laughed. "No, thank *you*. Thank you, thank you, thank you."

"It was more than five," Ash said. "I counted. It —"

He pushed a chunk of bread in her mouth.

Ash wondered if a meal could be more perfect. Under a warm, summer sky, music in the background, twinkling lights in the trees, stars above and Noah beside her. Ash thought if she died now, she'd had her special moment.

When they were done, Noah stuffed the bag into a nearby bin and returned. Ash's heart had taken up trampolining. If it bounced any harder on her stomach, she was going to be sick. She didn't want to wait to say this any longer. What if a meteorite landed and destroyed the city, what if a tidal wave swept down the Seine and they drowned, what if a — ?

"What are you thinking?" he asked.

"That I love you," she whispered.

The smile on Noah's face almost made her cry. They sat and stared at each other as the world faded around them. *Oh God, I really do love him.* Ash felt Noah clutch her hands, and then there was a tremendous bang. A split second to think *meteorite* before the sky erupted in bursts of light, one explosion chasing another until they joined in a cacophony of sound and garden of color. Noah's grip tightened and his gaze flickered from side to side as his breathing turned noisy.

"Oh God, God, God," he gasped.

"Look at me," Ash said.

He turned to face her.

"I love you," she said.

"Oh shit. Didn't know...fireworks."

"Come and dance." Ash stood and tugged him to his feet.

"I...can't."

The bangs still echoed around them as Ash drew him down to an amphitheater. She could feel him shaking.

"I'm sorry," he muttered.

"Shhh." Ash moved into a space, kept tight hold of his hand, found the beat and danced the salsa in front of him. Forward and back, changing her weight, feet together, counting in eight. She never stopped looking into his eyes, willing him to forget the fireworks, because they could make their own fireworks if he joined in.

Noah slid his other hand to her waist and shifted his hips. Ash smiled as he moved with her, smiled harder when he took control, raising his hand to tell her to turn, when to dip. She felt him slide into the arms of the music, letting his body follow the pulse. When Ash shifted her weight and did a Cuban hip swirl, Noah laughed.

"Now you," Ash told him.

She didn't expect him to do it but he did. They owned their bit of the dance floor, turning and spinning in each other's arms. They laughed and smiled and stared at each other as they danced deeper into each other's hearts. Fire and passion blazed inside them, and when the music ended and Ash heard applause, it was a moment before she realized the crowd was applauding them.

They danced all night. Danced back to the hotel, through reception, in the elevator, down the corridor to their room and finally slumped backward hand in hand onto the bed, exhausted.

"I'm not sure that was such a good idea," Noah said with a moan. "There isn't one part of me that doesn't ache. Only one part aches in a good way."

"Want a massage?"

"Oh God, are you the perfect woman?"

She stripped off his clothes and straddled him, running her fingers down his spine.

"Ahhhh," Noah groaned.

She was still working on his back when her mobile started to ring.

Noah groaned. "If you were really perfect, you wouldn't answer that."

"At this time of night, it has to be important." Ash's heart rate soared as she took the phone from her bag. She almost dropped it when she saw the caller ID. "Oh God." Ash sat on the bed and swallowed hard.

"What's wrong?" Noah knelt behind her.

As he put his chin on her shoulder, she pulled away, stood and paced toward the door. "Hello."

"Ash Elleston?"

"Yes."

"My name's Iain Prescott. I'm a doctor at —"

"I recognize the number," Ash muttered. She'd memorized it years ago, knowing one day she'd get this call and it would finally be over.

Noah sat on the bed, staring at her.

"I'm afraid I have some bad news," the doctor said.

Easy to guess that this was the news Ash had been waiting for, but not bad news at all.

"Your mother's dying. She's requested you come and see her."

Shit. It *was* bad after all. Dying not dead. *Fuck.*

"I don't want to," she blurted.

The doctor cleared his throat. "I understand how you feel, but there's a problem. Your mother says there was an eighth murder and she'll tell us where the body is located if you come and say goodbye to her."

Ash groaned. Goose bumps erupted all over her arms and legs. She wanted to say no, but how could she?

"How much time do I have?" she whispered.

"I don't expect her to live beyond another twenty-four hours."

"I'm in Paris."

"Ah."

She sagged. What choice did she have? "I'll come now."

Ash let the phone drop from her hand. She rubbed her arms but the bumps stayed put.

Noah put his hand on her shoulder. "What's happened?"

She took a deep breath. "My mother's very sick and she wants to see me."

Ash averted her gaze from Noah and began to pack her things.

"You said she was dead."

"Dead to me."

Noah followed her 'round as she picked up her clothes. "I don't understand. Why did you lie?"

Ash glanced around the room and then fastened the straps on her rucksack. "I wanted her to be dead, so I said she was."

"What about your father? Is he alive?"

Ash didn't miss the sharp tone in Noah's voice and flinched.

"No, he's really dead," Ash muttered. "He killed himself."

"I'll come with you."

Ash looked up at Noah then and wished she'd told him sooner, wished she had time to explain. "Thank you, but no. You have to stay and take those photographs."

"Fuck that."

Ash caught his hand as he reached for his suitcase. "No. You can't let people down."

"I want to come with you."

"I don't want you to come."

Noah pulled his hand away and tightened his mouth into a thin line. "Guess that says everything, doesn't it?"

Ash flinched. "I'm sorry. I should have told you. I wanted to. Meant to. But..." She took a step back and dropped her gaze. "It's just too much to explain now."

"Fucking try," he snapped. "I mean I understand you're upset about your mother, but you just told me you loved me. I want to be there for you. I can meet her, tell her —"

"No, you can't."

"Why the fuck not?"

"You can't see her. I can't explain. Not now. Not like this."

He stamped around the room. "Fuck off then."

Now Ash was angry too. Bad enough that she had to break the promise she'd made to herself and go to see her mother. She didn't need Noah making it more difficult. She picked up her rucksack and walked out.

* * * * *

Minutes later, when Noah's brain kicked back into gear, he began to pack. What the hell had he been thinking, getting angry with her? He suspected Ash had only told him to stay because she knew this was the first job he'd had in months and she didn't want him to mess it up. There were things more important in life than taking photos of some up-her-own-arse celebrity.

He raced down the stairs. There wouldn't be a taxi immediately available at this time of night. She'd have to wait. When he couldn't see her in the lobby, he dropped his case at the desk and dashed through the doors, but there was no sign of her outside. And he hadn't thought to write down her number, he'd have to contact Dalton to get it. *Fuck, fuck, fuck.* Back at the desk, as Noah tapped his foot, waiting for the clerk to finish on the phone, he listened.

"She wants to leave as soon as possible... I'd estimate forty minutes from now... Cost is not an issue..." The clerk laughed. "Just a rucksack."

Noah thought of the box holding the dress, still sitting in the room. *Fuck.*

"Yes, *monsieur?*"

A twenty Euro note opened the desk clerk's mouth again. Ash had hired a private jet to fly her to Castle Donington, an airport near Nottingham. *A private jet?* How the hell could she afford that?

Noah went back upstairs and flung himself down on the bed.

* * * * *

Within two hours of walking out of the hotel room, Ash's cab pulled up at the entrance to Rampton Psychiatric Hospital. The trip had cost a fortune, but what choice did she have? Her only regret about the money was having to waste any of it on her mother, but there were no scheduled flights from Paris to the UK before six thirty and no Eurostar either. If there was a family somewhere still grieving a lost child after all this time, then money was irrelevant.

Ash gave her name to the security guard and another guard came to take her to Dr. Prescott's office. This was the second time she'd been to Rampton. The first time she'd been a child with a different name.

Her heart banged around in her chest as she was ushered into the room. Two men were in there, and Ash instinctively knew one was a policeman. The other stepped forward to shake her hand.

"Miss Elleston, I'm Iain Prescott. This is Detective Inspector Marshall. Thank you for getting here so quickly."

"So she's still alive?" Ash asked.

"Yes. I think she's hanging on for you." The doctor smiled at her.

Ash didn't smile back.

"What's killing her?" she asked.

Ash saw the doctor raise his eyebrows at the way she phrased the question.

"Cancer. She's in no pain."

Pity.

She turned to the policeman. "What do you want me to do?"

"If she's telling the truth about there being an eighth victim, get her to tell you where the body is buried. Exact details. Ask her for a name and when it happened and why this one wasn't buried at the house like the others. Also, are there any more?"

Ash nodded. Her stomach churned. She had her hands clenched to stop them shaking.

"You'll have to leave your bag in my office," the doctor said. "There's a metal detector you need to pass through, so please leave your phone and anything that might set it off."

She emptied her pockets and put her phone in her bag. She'd switched it off after she left the hotel in Paris.

"Ready?" the doctor asked.

No. "Yes."

* * * * *

Denise North opened her eyes the moment Ash walked up to her bed. The doctor and policeman were behind a screen but could hear everything. Ash thought she might not recognize her mother, but she did. The frail figure lying in a hospital bed attached to a drip had wrinkled skin now and gray hair, but her eyes were the same. Cold, cruel and calculating. Ash expected to feel something, possibly anger, maybe some smidge of sympathy for what might have been, but she felt empty.

No, it's not that. Ash wasn't empty. Her emotions were hiding. She wanted this woman to see nothing. Ash straightened her spine. Her mother had done enough damage and not just to her. She couldn't hurt Ash now.

"Hello, Girl." The voice was raspy, but it sent a shudder through Ash. Maybe she could still be hurt.

Girl was what her parents called her. They only used her name when other people were around.

"Who else did you kill?" Ash asked.

"What are you up to these days?"

Ash could see the effort it took for her mother to talk. Her breathing was ragged, her chest heaving.

"Married a lawyer. We've three kids. I work part-time in a library. Who else did you kill?"

"Liar. You'll never have children."

Ash didn't move a muscle but she felt as though she were submerging into icy water. "Who else did you kill?"

"She's in the allotment. Under Stan's shed."

Oh God, oh God. Ash clenched her fists behind her back.

"You look like you've been to a party," said her mother.

Ash glanced down at her dress. "I was dancing." *Having the best time of my life until you ruined it.*

"Didn't get that from me."

"I didn't get anything from you." *Damn, damn, damn.* That had slipped out before she could stop it.

"Yeah, you did. Money. And we made you, me and Tim. You're ours. Were and always will be. Can't change that even if you change your name and dress yourself up as someone else."

Bitch. Ash shook her head. "I made myself. I brought myself up. I fed myself. What's her name?"

"I did her." She let out a choked laugh. "All on my own."

Ash swallowed the bile rising in her throat. *Not my mother, not my mother.* Ash repeated the words in her head.

"Come out, Prescott. I know you're there. A copper too, I expect. You've brought my daughter back to me. That was the deal."

"I'm—" *Don't rise to it,* Ash told herself. *Don't react. But I'm not your fucking daughter.*

The two men came to Ash's side.

"Your dad didn't know about this one. She was all mine. It was your fault. Stealing that book. You remember that?"

"Yes," Ash whispered. Her legs and arms felt as heavy as if they'd turned to stone.

"The police came, and afterward your dad punished you. I wanted to do it. Still, I could hardly break your other arm. Social services would have been down on us like a ton of bricks. So I found someone else to break."

Oh my God. The knot of horror in Ash's stomach was a churning ball of snakes and she began to curl in on herself.

"Were there more?" the policeman asked.

"I'm not speaking to you." The snap in her mother's voice jerked Ash upright.

Ash took a deep breath before she spoke. "Are there others the police don't know about?"

"No."

Ash took a deep breath. "What was her name?"

"She was pretty. Nothing like you. Long hair and a cute smile. She was a good girl, but that didn't save her."

"What was her name?" Ash asked.

"Tell me you love me and I'll tell you."

A fiery ball of hatred flared in Ash's chest. They were just words, but she made them brittle with tears and anger. "I love you."

Her mother smiled. "Natalia Golitsin."

Ash's vision blurred. The room began to spin, everything fragmented into lines and angles and then blankness.

* * * * *

DI Marshall drove Ash back to London. He'd milked her of everything she knew about the allotment and the details of when her arm had been broken until she was too emotionally exhausted to say any more. When she'd heard the name Natasha Golitsin she'd feared the worst. The doctor put Ash's faint down to stress. Ash felt as if her heart had broken and it was still broken. Golitsin was too unusual a name for there to be no link to Noah. He said he'd had a sister who'd died. The detective told her Natalia's father would be grateful to her. Had he spent all this time hoping she might be found alive? One of those kids kept imprisoned in a basement? Or had he accepted she was dead and now he could put her to rest?

It might be coincidence, but Ash knew, she just knew. Her worry over telling Noah about her evil parents faded into insignificance. Her mother had killed his sister and she'd done it because Ash had stolen that book. The detective told her it wasn't her fault, that what she'd done hadn't been a trigger for her mother to kill again, but Ash knew better.

"You're lucky you survived," DI Marshall said. "They could have killed you."

Ash knew why she'd been spared. She'd made them look normal—an ordinary family. She hadn't understood as a child why her parents had done what they did, nor did she as an adult. A number of books had been written, even a film made, but people could only guess *why* they gained pleasure in abduction, torture, rape and murder. It was beyond Ash's comprehension and she was glad of that. If she thought too much about it, she'd go mad.

Only one thing filled her mind now. Everything had been spoiled. She'd tried to escape her past and failed. *Noah will never want to see me again.*

Chapter Twenty

When Ash and the detective arrived at the allotment, it had already been closed off with yellow and black tape. Police vehicles lined the road and several officers prevented anyone from entering.

"All we need you to do is to point out Stan's shed and then I'll have you taken home," Marshall said.

Ash exited the car and walked down the gravel path. She hadn't been here since she was a child. The allotments were a few hundred yards from where she lived. Stan had been a neighbor. An old man then, he was surely dead by now. He'd brought her here one day when he'd found her crying in the garden. Her parents had left her without a key. Stan had *tsked*, and despite Ash's protest he'd pushed a note through the door to tell them what he thought about what they'd done and that he'd taken her to the allotment. Ash had paid for that.

Nothing here looked different, apart from the mass of police officers and the worried-looking gardeners who stood by their sheds, but the thought of what had happened here made her stomach churn. Ash pointed to a small wooden hut with a horseshoe hanging above the door. The shoe hung the wrong way. She knew that now, but hadn't known then. All the luck had drained out.

Ash stepped away as officers went into the wooden structure. The owner looked bewildered as he was led away to allow the police to do their work. Ash wondered if tomorrow he'd be telling his story on the TV. She stared at the rows of lettuce, remembering it had been set with peas when Stan had brought her here. She'd picked them one-handed and pulled out weeds as she went. One weed had come up with a butterfly necklace and Ash had snuck it into her pocket, delighted to have found something so pretty. One small action with big consequences because if she'd given it to Stan, maybe Natalia Golitsin would have been discovered sooner. Of course, it was always possible the necklace had nothing to do with Natalia, but Ash still needed to tell.

"I found something here," she whispered.

The detective turned to look at her.

"When I was a little girl. It was in the soil. A butterfly necklace."

His deep sigh confirmed what she suspected. "I don't suppose you still have it."

"Actually, I do."

* * * * *

The detective drove her to the storage facility and followed her to her unit. Ash unlocked the door and switched on the light.

"This is a lot of space for not much," Marshall said as he looked around.

Ash took down the box holding Teddy Robinson and lifted him out.

"Sorry, Teddy," she muttered, and pulled more of the stuffing from his back. Her fingernail snagged metal and she tugged the necklace out.

It was even prettier than she'd remembered. The wings were smothered in red, green and white stones. Ash handed it over and he let it drop into an evidence bag.

"I didn't know whose it was. I was too young to read newspapers and I wasn't allowed to watch television. I'm sorry." *Oh God, he had no idea how sorry.*

"You've nothing to be sorry for. I can't imagine you had a very pleasant childhood."

"No," Ash said in a quiet voice. "Not pleasant at all."

"I'll drive you home."

"Thank you. I'm going to take the box with me."

"Can I give you a hand?"

"I'm fine, thanks."

Ash gathered her past into her arms, and on the way out, ended her arrangement with the storage company.

Before they'd reached Greenwich, Marshall had a call to say they'd found human remains under the shed. Ash felt as though part of her had died then.

Ash sighed. "Will it take long to identify her?"

"Probably not. We're looking for a match rather than a stranger. DNA, dental records, clothes and the necklace, it's more than likely to be Natalia."

Marshall pulled up outside her house. Ash climbed out and gathered her things from the backseat.

"Thank you," he said. "I'll let you know the outcome."

* * * * *

Noah lounged with his eyes shut and his feet on the coffee table in the opulent reception of the George V. Four excuses so far from Sandra McKinnock and it was now midafternoon. Valentina was the one annoyed today. For once, Noah had hardly opened his mouth. He ignored Valentina's questions, and eventually she'd called him a total shit and a few other choice names and turned her back on him.

He'd rerun what had happened and still couldn't figure things out. If Ash lied about her mother being alive, had she lied about other things too? Had she invented abusive parents to stop him from feeling sorry for himself and make him sorry for her? He thought she was an ordinary girl, but she'd chartered a private jet to fly her back to the UK. Where the hell did she get the money for that?

And she'd left behind the dress he'd bought her.

On the other hand, after a phone call out of the blue to tell her that her mother was very sick, how could she think straight? What right did he have to ask to go with her? If he could believe Ash, then she and her mother didn't get on, but faced with never seeing each other again, they might have been reconciled at the end. A little bit of Noah wished Ash had wanted her mother to meet the man she'd said she loved.

When the PA appeared and told them they could go up, Noah rose to his feet and grabbed his bag. If Ash's real reason for wanting him to stay was so that he would do this job, then he wouldn't let her down.

* * * * *

Much to Ash's relief, the house was empty. She carted her stuff up the stairs. Kay's door was open, and when Ash looked inside, she saw it had been stripped of most of her belongings. Rage over Kay's actions had faded to deep disappointment. They were supposed to be friends. It worried Ash she'd not used better judgment. Trying to be kind to everyone had blinded her to behavior she'd spent too long excusing. Ash continued up the last flight.

She put her things in the bottom of her wardrobe and emptied her backpack. This had been the best and worst weekend of her life. Hard to know whether she was glad she'd gone to Paris and had those special moments or whether she'd have been better off if Kay had never given back her passport. She closed the wardrobe door. No point in what ifs. It made no difference whether she'd gone or not. Her mother had murdered Noah's sister. Nothing could change that. She'd been forced to utter three words to her mother that she'd never said in her life. It didn't matter that her mother knew she didn't mean it.

Ash gathered up her laundry and carried it downstairs. Despite the way they'd parted, she knew Noah would call. Switching off her phone would only bring him to the door, and how could she possibly speak to him? Until it was confirmed the body was that of his sister, how could she make love to him, talk to him, be with him? He needed to learn the truth from the police, and then Ash would tell him her role in the story. Maybe.

There would be no ball, no wearing of the gorgeous dress—not that she'd remembered to bring it—no fairytale happy ending. On the contrary, there was likely to be unpleasant publicity, particularly if the press found out who she was. Then she'd have to move. That was the reason she'd taken her things out of the storage depot. Mike and Ronan could continue living in the house and find two others to share. Ash's ownership of the property was hidden in the files of a management company with instructions her identity was to be kept secret. She'd have to lose Green Piece too, but Martin could run it as long as the cash injections continued. The tour guiding might have to finish too. A real life Jack the Ripper's daughter leading the tour? Ash didn't want to be on display.

She stood leaning against the washing machine when her phone rang. Ash checked the caller ID before pressing the button.

"Hello."

"It's Iain Prescott. Your mother died fifteen minutes ago. I'm sorry."

Ash presumed the sorry was automatic. Who could possibly be sorry Denise North was dead?

"Thank you for letting me know."

"Your mother made certain requests regarding her funeral. She wanted —"

"No," Ash said. "I won't be attending her funeral. I have no interest in what she wanted. Do what you like with her. If you require money, please let me know."

"The state will cover the cost. What about her things?"

"I want nothing of hers. She was manipulative until the very end, I won't be used again." Ash didn't feel angry, just exhausted.

"Er...her ashes?"

Use it as cat litter sat on the tip of Ash's tongue but she restrained herself. "It would be fitting if she remained in the grounds of Rampton."

"I'll see to it. I am sorry, Ms. Elleston. She was a...difficult woman. I can imagine what your upbringing was like."

"Try not to," Ash said. "Goodbye."

She stuffed her phone back in her pocket and felt...nothing. Not even relief. Ash had spent so long pretending her mother was dead, she had nothing left inside.

The front door banged and she heard Ronan and Mike laughing. Ash plastered a smile on her face and emerged from the utility room.

"Whoa, what are you doing back?" Ronan asked.

"Got an early train. Noah's tied up all day taking photos of Sandra McKinnock and her baby so I decided to come home." *Oh God, I hate lying.*

"Have a good time?" Mike asked.

"Great." Ash smiled. "What happened with Kay?"

Ronan rolled his eyes. "We half got rid of her. Come in the kitchen and while I cook, I'll tell you."

* * * * *

Dalton walked up the stairs to Ilya's flat, his heart heavier with each step. This time, Ilya wasn't waiting at the door but had left it ajar. Dalton knocked and walked in. He'd already given Ilya a partial explanation of why Ash had ended up in Paris with Noah. It was the truth. Almost. Dalton had paid Kay to hide the passport, but Ash had found it and Kay had been thrown out of the house. Now he'd have to tell the rest of it.

"I'm in here," Ilya called.

Dalton closed the entrance door and walked into the lounge.

"Sit down," Ilya snapped.

Dalton dropped onto the couch, regretting he'd reacted so fast as his bum hit the seat. Like an obedient dog. *Shit.*

Ilya tapped his fingers on the arm of the chair. "I had a call from a friend of mine who did the interview with Sandra McKinnock while Noah took the photographs. According to Valentina, Noah was in a filthy mood this morning and in an even filthier mood when he got off the Eurostar a little while ago. Fortunately, he was charm personified while he was with the American and was the only one there who managed to persuade the baby to stop crying. Valentina couldn't get much out of Noah, but she did discover Ash had flown back to the UK early this morning."

Fuck. All that effort for nothing? Dalton wondered if he'd be able to keep his part in this quiet.

Ilya picked up a tumbler holding what looked like scotch and drank the last mouthful. Dalton barely stopped himself licking his lips.

"The bad news is that Noah was carrying a box Valentina thinks held a designer dress, a large box, which suggests evening wear, implying Noah intends or intended to bring Ash to the ball. Not going to happen."

Oh God. Ilya was like a dog with a bone.

"I want to know why Noah was in such a pissy mood. Has he broken up with this woman or not? I do *not* want him in that frame of mind on Saturday. I do *not* want him to bring anyone on Saturday."

Dalton took a deep breath. "I won't do your dirty work for you anymore. Let this thing with Ash rise or fall without interference. At least she's brought Noah back to life. Be grateful for that."

Ilya scowled. "What does she want? More money?"

"I've never given her any money. I paid her housemate, that's all."

Ilya leaned forward. "Then give her the money now. I put it in your account. I presume you've not spent it."

"She wouldn't take it."

"How do you know unless you've offered it? Take it out in cash and put it in her room."

Dalton shook his head. "So you can throw that snippet in Noah's face? No, I won't do it." He stood up, put his hand in his pocket, pulled out a check and laid it on the coffee table. "I've had enough. I'm going to tell Noah everything when he gets back."

Ilya moved so fast, Dalton had no time to flee. A hand around his throat and he was on tiptoe. *Fuck. Can't breathe.*

"You say nothing. He thinks you're his friend. Leave it that way. You can make your excuses and move out – after the ball."

Ilya thrust him away and Dalton hit the wall. He put his hand to his throat and rubbed.

"You want to be responsible for Noah sliding back?" Ilya asked. "How do you think he'll feel if he learns I've paid you to be his babysitter for the last seven months? You've more to lose by telling him than me. You're his friend. I'm just his interfering older brother."

"He deserves better from both of us."

Ilya glared. "Everything that's been done has been in his best interests."

"You mean your interests," Dalton snapped, and walked out.

* * * * *

Noah braked so sharply on the drive outside Floriton Hall that he left long gouges in the gravel. He slammed his car door and walked back to kick the stones into place. The moment he arrived at the flat, he'd checked the phone for messages. None from Ash. One from his father. He might have ignored Ilya, but his father made it clear Noah had to come straight here.

When he walked into the drawing room, his father and Ilya sat on chairs opposite each other. They were grim-faced and drinking. *What have I done now?* But when they looked at him, Noah guessed for once this wasn't about him. Ilya poured him a drink. It *definitely* wasn't about him.

"We've had the police here," his father said.

Noah's legs hit the back of the couch and he sat.

"They believe..." His father broke off, and let out a shuddering breath.

"They think they've found Natalia's body," Ilya said.

Noah had to repeat Ilya's words in his head until he took in what he'd said.

"Natalia?" he whispered. After all this time, hearing his sister's name still made his chest hurt. None of them still believed Natalia was alive, despite recent cases where abductees had survived years and years of incarceration, but...

"The clothing with the...body matches the description of what Natalia was wearing. And then there's this." Ilya pushed something across the coffee table.

"Oh Christ." Noah recognized the butterfly necklace his sister had loved so much. "Don't the police want to test that? W-where was she? W-what happened? Do they know?" Noah glanced between his father and brother.

"I told the police not to bother testing it," his father said. "It wasn't found with Natalia, but in soil nearby. Someone has confessed to killing her." He tightened his mouth and breathed through his nose for a moment. "It happened the day she went missing. She was buried under a shed on an allotment in Lewisham."

Noah put his drink down before he spilled it. It had taken a long while to stop thinking about Natalia. Not that he ever had completely, but one day he realized he'd

gone an entire day without thinking about her. Then it was a week and gradually he'd learned to live with the loss, to not well up when he was reminded of something she'd said or done. A sweet and trusting child, she'd wandered away from their mother while she visited a friend in Lewisham hospital. Eventually, their mother had killed herself, convinced Natalia was dead and because Ilya had been supposed to be looking after Natalia that day, their mother blamed him as well as herself.

Noah was so angry with her for that.

"Who did it?" Noah asked.

"It was a woman," Ilya said. "Denise North."

"A woman?" Noah gaped at him. "Do we know her? Did she work for us?"

Ilya shook his head. "She and her husband were convicted of the murder of seven children. All but Natalia were buried under the Norths' house or in their garden on Leopold Road in Lewisham."

Noah remembered the name. One of the sites the company Ash worked for had transformed into a garden.

He swallowed hard. "I take it the woman's already in prison. What made her confess?"

Ilya gave a bitter laugh. "She talked before she died this afternoon. I suppose she was trying to atone. That's really going to get her into heaven. *By the way, God, there's just one more they didn't know about.* The fucking, fucking bitch." Ilya jumped up and strode over to the window, his shoulders shuddering.

Noah clenched his teeth. How could a woman do that? She was a fucking monster. *My sister, my sister. Oh Christ.* Memories of that terrible day flooded back and Noah shuddered.

He turned as his father came to sit at his side and put his hand on his back. "It's a terrible shock. At least we know what happened now."

"We should cancel the ball," Ilya blurted.

"There's no reason to do that," his father said in a tired voice. "Life goes on, at least for a while."

Noah stiffened. "What does that mean?"

Ilya spun round and Noah saw the look exchanged between his brother and father, and he groaned. "What are you keeping from me?"

"I have early onset nonfamilial Alzheimer's," said his father.

Oh Christ. "Meaning?" Noah croaked.

"It's not an inherited condition, which is good news for you." His father smiled and gave him a hug. "I'm going to forget things and get confused."

"You already forget things and get confused. So do I," Noah said.

"More forgetful. More confused. But not yet."

"Are you going to...die of it?" Noah asked.

"If I live long enough. It takes between three and twenty years to run its course."

"Three years?" Noah gasped.

"Or twenty," Ilya snapped. "There are new drugs coming on the market all the time. There's a doctor in Switzerland who's—"

"Why didn't you tell me?" Noah asked, feeling hurt and betrayed.

"We thought you had enough to cope with." His father patted Noah's knee. "Sounds like things are improving though. Ilya tells me you've been working in Paris?"

Noah turned to Ilya. "How did you know?"

"Valentina called me."

Bloody woman.

"What were you photographing?" his father asked.

"An American movie star and the six-month-old she's adopted."

"Did it go well?"

Noah started to bristle at the questions, and then recognized this was probably the most he'd said to his father in months, that none of them wanted to dwell on Natalia. But Noah's head buzzed. His sister found, his father sick, Ash angry with him.

"How do you feel?" his father asked.

"I'm okay." How could he say anything else?

"Good," said his father. "Because Sophia and her parents will be at the ball on Saturday. She's looking forward to seeing you again."

Oh God.

"She'll make a good wife," Ilya said.

"You marry her then," Noah snapped.

"She thinks you want to marry her," his brother snapped back.

Noah glowered. "And whose fault is that?"

"Boys," said their father. "This is not the time."

"Sorry," Noah muttered.

"I apologize," Ilya muttered.

Noah wanted to tell his father about Ash, but it wasn't the right time for that either.

Chapter Twenty-One

Ronan handed Ash a glass of wine. "You sure you're all right? You look upset."

"I'm fine." She made herself smile and sat at the kitchen table while the guys worked. Could she do this? Behave as though everything was normal? The lies would get more and more complicated.

"Did you see anything of Paris?" Mike asked. "Or were you otherwise engaged?" He laughed and Ash rolled her eyes.

"We did a bus tour. That was fun. Last night we danced the salsa by the Seine and picnicked under the stars. *That* was fantastic."

"And now from fantasy to reality," Mike said. "Go to bed, get up, go to work, go to bed."

She watched Mike and Ronan clatter round, getting in each other's way as they concocted a stir-fry. She wished her reality was a fantasy.

"What happened with Kay?" she asked.

"She's gone to stay with her sister in Fulham," Ronan said. "We packed most of her stuff into a taxi. She'll have to come back for the rest." He turned to look at her. "I don't know how you put up with her for so long."

"She was having a hard time." Ash twirled her glass, letting the wine swirl higher and higher. "It's not easy being continually disappointed."

Ronan frowned. "It's her own fault. She set her expectations too high. She's pretty, but too short to make the big-time as a model. No amount of dieting can change that. Kay took advantage of us all, avoiding her share of the chores, eating our food, but she was actively unpleasant to you."

"And she moaned all the time," Mike said. "Can we pick the new one?"

Ash snorted. "I seem to remember, you were the one who persuaded us to choose Kay."

"Ash should choose. It's her house," Ronan said.

The sound of chopping stopped and Ash stared into her glass, sensing the guys were staring at her.

"What?" Mike gasped.

"That's what you almost told Kay, isn't it?" Ronan asked.

"Yes."

Ronan nodded. "I stopped you because I didn't want you to give her any ammunition."

Ash looked up and Mike gaped at her. "You own this house?"

"Yes."

"How the hell did you get a mortgage?" Mike asked.

"I don't have one. I used an inheritance."

Mike slid his arm around her shoulder. "I've suddenly realized you're the most alluring female I've ever seen."

Ash wriggled free, her giggle genuine.

"She's taken," Ronan said.

Her subsequent smile wasn't genuine at all.

"How did you find out I owned the house?" she asked.

"I checked with the Land Registry," Ronan said. "I was suspicious that everything seemed so secretive."

"Serves me right," Ash muttered.

She forced herself to eat the stir-fry, and when the guys settled in front of the TV to watch a gory horror film, she escaped upstairs. There'd been no calls to her phone. No messages left. She paced her room in an agony of indecision.

What should she say when Noah *did* call? Would he call? If the police had told his family about Natalia, had he made the leap and joined the dots? If not, she'd have to join them for him. But if the police hadn't yet said anything because they were waiting for the autopsy report, she'd have to lie to Noah about the visit to her mother. Ash had intended to tell him the truth about her past, but that was before the truth had grown into something so devastating. Ash didn't want to be the person who told him about his sister. It would be easier not to say anything, never to see him again, but the pain of that closed her throat.

She had to face facts. There could be no future for her and Noah. If his family didn't think she was good enough before, pretty soon their disapproval would turn to outright hatred. It would all unravel. Dalton would tell Noah he'd been spying on him for his brother, and if he added Ash had known, she'd be further damned.

Once the news of her mother's death and the discovery of Natalia's body hit the press, it could only be a matter of time before the newshound jackals came here. Ash's hopes of happiness would never come to fruition. Even worse, Noah had been getting better and now she'd probably pushed him back into that dark depression.

Ash leaned against her bedroom wall, resting her head against the cool plaster. She wasn't a coward. She didn't run from trouble, but somehow that seemed the best thing for her to do for everyone's sake. She could reinvent herself in another city. Change her name again. A phoenix had yet to rise out of the ashes of her past. Maybe it never would, but she'd keep trying.

She emptied her small purse onto the bed, transferred the contents to a larger handbag and added a few toiletries and a couple pairs of pants. At some point she'd come back to get all her things, but she didn't want the guys to know she'd taken off. Once she found a place to stay, she'd call and tell them she'd be back in a few weeks.

Ash burned her bridges.

A phone call to Phil Smith, her boss at the Citizens Advice Bureau to tell him she was sorry, but due to personal problems she could no longer volunteer. Did she want to talk to him? No thank you.

Another call to London Then And Now, a groveling apology for letting them down with so little notice and she no longer had a paying job.

The last call was to Martin to tell him she wouldn't be around for a while, but her uncle would increase his wages to make up for her absence. When he'd pushed, Ash told him she was going on holiday and she'd send him a postcard.

She left her mobile in the wardrobe. There'd be no temptation then to speak to Noah. She felt as if something had died inside her.

Ash went downstairs with her bag and tucked it under her coat in the hall. Mike and Ronan were still in the living room.

She popped her head around the door. "Is it okay if I use your laptop?" she asked Ronan.

"Go ahead."

Ash took it into the kitchen and sat at the table. While she was lying low, she might as well try to do something useful. Noah would have neither the time nor the inclination to follow up on his promise to go and see Dave, but Ash had plenty of time and still wanted to do what little she could to make things better for Noah. When she'd finished on the computer, she deleted the history of the sites she'd visited. She wished she'd replaced the laptop that had died on her a month ago. Maybe now was the time to buy a new one.

She hesitated in the hall, mouthed a silent "goodbye" to the guys then picked up her jacket and bag and slipped out of the house. Ash walked into Greenwich and caught the train to London Bridge. She went into the station hotel and ten minutes later unlocked a door on the third floor.

Her bag fell from her hand as she looked at the huge bed. It was hard to think when she'd been more miserable. Her unhappy childhood seemed so far away. Despite telling Noah a bit about it, she didn't dwell on it. There was no point. Ash had thought she could rise above her background and be the person she wanted to be, but she should have known that her past would merely wait until she was at her most happy to bring her down.

Noah's flat was less than a mile away.

Oh God, Noah.

Before she dissolved into tears, Ash picked up the phone, dialed 141 to block the number and called Ronan.

"Hi," she said.

"Hello, unknown caller. What's happened to your mobile?"

"I'm just calling to let you know I've gone away for a few days on family business."

"You're not upstairs?" Ronan's voice was sharp. "You snuck out?"

"Yes. I'll explain when I get back."

"Explain now," Ronan said. "What family business? You don't have a family. What's wrong?"

This was exactly why she'd gone without saying goodbye. Ronan would have wormed the truth out of her.

"Nothing's wrong," she said, doing her best to sound normal.

"It doesn't sound like nothing. Ash, what is it really? Noah? Paris? Tell me. Where are you? I'll come get you."

Ash took a deep breath. "I'm fine. I'll call you. I promise." She put the receiver down before he could say anything else.

Her head felt like it might explode, as though her brain were trying to push out everything it didn't want to know, couldn't stand to know. She curled up on the bed and closed her eyes.

* * * * *

Dalton paced across the living room of the flat, trying to decide on the right thing to do. He'd gone to a bar after he'd left Ilya's, but alcohol, as usual, hadn't solved his problems, only made him more confused. Much as he might like to, he couldn't avoid Noah forever. Dalton had promised Ash he'd tell him Ilya had paid him to babysit.

Except Ilya's words echoed in his head. Dalton didn't want to be responsible for Noah sliding back into a black hole. He'd had a reprieve when he'd arrived at the flat to find Noah's bags and no Noah. Along with Noah's photographic equipment and suitcase, there was a large box emblazoned with the name of a Parisian department store. Dalton lifted the edge to peek inside and saw what he presumed was a dress for Ash. Was that where Noah had gone?

When he heard the door open, Dalton had to fight the urge to rush to the bathroom. No point delaying this, but when he saw Noah's white face, Dalton swallowed the groveling apology he was about to make and came up with, "What the fuck's the matter?"

"I feel like a nuclear bomb just went off. The initial blast didn't kill me but what's following might."

"Do you need a drink?"

Noah sighed. "No."

"Where've you been?"

"Floriton Hall. My father gave me a whisky. I shouldn't have driven back, but I couldn't stay there."

Dalton felt a rush of relief this wasn't about him. At least he didn't think so, mostly because Noah hadn't yet hit him. "What's wrong?"

Noah didn't answer. *Shit, are we back to the long silences?*

"Is this about Paris?" Dalton asked.

"It's about everything." Noah clenched his fists.

"You're worrying me now, pal. Sit down." Dalton pushed Noah onto the couch.

"It's going to be in the papers tomorrow," Noah whispered.

"What?"

"Natalia's been found."

Dalton gasped. "Oh my God. Alive?"

Noah shook his head. "Remember the Leopold Road killers? Natalia was buried in an allotment. That's why she wasn't found. Denise North made a deathbed confession."

Dalton sat at his side. "Christ, Noah. After all this time."

"Yeah."

Dalton swallowed the lump in his throat. "Well, at least you know now. So where's Ash?"

Noah sighed. "Ash had a call last night telling her that her mother was very ill and wanted to see her. I was going to leave with her but she told me I couldn't meet her mother."

"Couldn't?"

"First she said she didn't *want* me to see her and then she said I couldn't." Noah straightened and then rose to his feet. "Couldn't. Why the hell *couldn't* I see her?"

"Well, if she was dying, that's understandable."

"Ash chartered a fucking private jet to get back here fast."

Dalton gulped. "A private jet? How the hell could she afford that?"

"I don't think she can," Noah snapped, and then took a deep breath. "One of the gardens Ash worked on was in Leopold Road."

"Yeah, it was one of seven sites. That's what the company she works for does, isn't it? Convert unwanted, derelict sites into gardens."

Noah paced across the room. "Ash is told her mother is dying. She has to get back quickly. Denise North is dying and wants to make a deathbed confession. Am I forcing jigsaw pieces into places here?" He turned to stare at Dalton. "What if Ash is Denise North's daughter?"

The words took awhile to register, and when they did, Dalton found himself speechless. Noah stood, waiting for him to say something.

"No, no, no." Dalton shook his head. "Don't go down that path. Ash's name isn't North."

"So she changed her name."

Dalton stood up. "Come on, Noah."

Noah gave a grim smile. "Remember you could find virtually nothing about her on the internet?"

"You're not thinking straight."

"Right age."

"Christ."

"Ash had abusive parents."

"A lot of people do." Dalton grew more worried by the second, not because he thought Noah was right, but because he thought he was losing his mind. "Have you actually asked her?"

"I don't have her fucking number. You wrecked my phone. Remember?"

"There's a new one charging in the kitchen."

Noah rushed out and a few minutes later came back. "She's not answering."

"Probably because she's sitting at the bedside of her sick mother."

"Maybe."

Dalton sensed Noah's hesitation and leapt on it. "No maybes about it. Just because Ash came home to see her mother and she happened to have worked on Leopold Road does *not* mean she's the North's daughter. Send her a text and tell her you're thinking of her and to give you a call when she can. If she's sitting in intensive care, holding her dying mother's hand, you're going to feel so bad for even thinking any of this. Ash is the best thing to happen to you since—well, you've changed. Don't let her slip through your fingers."

Noah closed his eyes and rolled his shoulders. He opened his eyes and stared at Dalton. "You're probably right. I was just so pissed off at her for not wanting me with her. She told me to stay and take the photos. I lost my temper. Christ, the moment she actually needed me more than I needed her, and I fucked it up. I don't blame her for not wanting to speak to me. I'll text her. I can send flowers to her house."

"She might not be there. Where does her mother live?"

Noah ran his fingers through his hair. "I have no idea." He took a deep breath. "Do me a favor, Dalton. Don't tell Ilya about any of this. I know I'm acting crazy."

"Why would I tell—?"

"Do me another favor. Don't pretend you don't know what I'm talking about."

Dalton opened his mouth and shut it again. Noah stared at him, his face blank and Dalton sagged. He was relieved Noah knew. Saved him having to find the right words.

"How did you find out?"

"The call log on your phone. How long has it been going on?"

Oh shit, maybe he doesn't know. Dalton shifted uneasily on the couch. "Ilya offered me money if I gave up my job to come and live with you."

Noah's jaw twitched.

"I didn't do it just for the money. I was sick of my job, I wanted to write fulltime and I thought I could help you."

"Ilya's paying your rent?"

"Yes."

"I don't suppose you had much to report. Noah didn't get up today. Noah ate an egg. Noah took a piss." He slumped on the couch. "Until Ash." He furrowed his brow and Dalton could see him doing the sums. "Oh God, don't tell me that." He leapt to his feet and paced. "Don't fucking tell me Ilya fixed me up with Ash."

"You left that wedding talking about her. She was the first woman you've had an interest in since you came out of the hospital. The first interest you've had in anything."

Noah stopped pacing and stared at him in fury. "Is that why you dragged me to that fucking club, because you knew she'd be there?"

"Ilya thought she'd be good for you. Something to cheer you up. I paid Kay to make sure Ash came to the club. Then when it seemed as if you liked Ash too much, Ilya wanted the relationship broken. I paid Kay to hide Ash's passport."

Noah clenched his fists. "You fucking bastard."

He leapt across the room and Dalton threw himself backward over the couch and scrambled away. "Listen. I changed my mind. I decided I wasn't going to lie to you anymore and I told Kay to give the passport back, but she had her own agenda and it took some maneuvering to get hold of the thing."

Dalton pushed himself upright and backed away as Noah came toward him. "I drove Ash to St. Pancras and put her on the train. I know she makes you happy. I told Ilya I wouldn't be involved anymore, and he threatened to tell you what I'd been doing. All he cares about at the moment is you going to this ball on Saturday and Ash not going."

Noah stumbled to a halt and groaned. "He's a fucking dick." Then he looked straight at Dalton. "And so are you."

* * * * *

Ash didn't think she'd sleep but she did only to wake up choking, tears sliding down her face. She reached for Noah, touched cold sheets and then cried again. When she didn't seem able to stop, Ash stood under a cold shower until she snapped out of it. What had she told Noah? To make yourself happy, try to make someone else happy. Nothing could bring back Noah's sister, but Ash could help him fight his personal demons.

She checked out of the hotel before it was light, bought three newspapers that had a picture of Natalia on the front page and caught a train to Leatherhead. The inside pages were full of pictures of a smiling Natalia and details of Noah's family, and Ash couldn't bear to read those sections. She was disappointed, though not surprised, that the papers

all reported Denise North would only tell her daughter where the eighth victim was buried. So who'd blabbed? The police? Someone at Rampton?

The press didn't yet have Ash's name, but they did have the one given to her when she'd been taken into the care of the social services, Sally Beauman. Before she'd been put with a foster family, she had a new name and new documents to protect her and to prevent corrupt foster parents from selling stories about a minor. No such protection existed now. *The Sun* had devoted several inches to her. They'd worked out how old Ash had been when Natalia had been killed, and printed her age. They'd even found a school photograph and ringed her face. *Anyone know where she is? What she's doing?* There were quotes from foster families who'd looked after her. *Quiet. Moody. Never played with other children.* That was because the other children bullied her. Safer to stay by herself, amuse herself, talk to herself. The tone of the column made Ash squirm, but she was a woman who still had a life and there was one who didn't. *And if I hadn't stolen that book, Natalia would still be alive.*

The Daily Mail added the detail that Jane North had inherited her father's money after he died. No point leaving it to his wife who was in prison for life. Ash hadn't known until she was twenty-one how much money she had. Wise investment by her legal guardian, a lawyer she'd met twice, had added to the total, and Ash remembered when he'd given her the news, how she'd run from his office and thrown up in the bathroom. The paper speculated that the anonymous donation of money to the families of the victims received six years ago was from Jane North. They were right.

* * * * *

Ash caught a taxi from Leatherhead station to Headley Court. The converted Elizabethan farmhouse was out in the middle of nowhere, surrounded by trees. Ash passed through one security check, but when she reached the main entrance, the door was still locked. She sat hunched up on the steps, hugging her knees.

According to what she'd read on the internet, Dave was likely to have been moved from the hospital in Birmingham down to this rehabilitation facility. Maybe Noah had been here too. She didn't expect it to be easy to worm information out of anyone. Even so, Ash figured she had a better chance in person than on the phone and hoped they could send a message to Dave if nothing else.

When the door finally opened, she pushed herself up to face a young man in an army uniform. His badge said Corporal Burton.

"Been camping on the doorstep?" he asked.

"I should have checked what time you opened."

He smiled at her. "Have you come to see someone?"

Ash followed him inside. "Yes and no."

He walked stiffly to the reception desk and sat behind it. Ash wondered if he'd been injured in combat. *Stupid, of course he has.*

"Take a seat." He gestured to a chair.

Ash sat. How was she supposed to explain this horrible mess? She opened her mouth and a lump in her throat stopped up her words.

"It's okay," he said quietly. "Take your time. We're here to help. Has someone you know been injured?"

Ash dragged air into her lungs. "Yes, and he has PTSD."

"Ah. So he's here?"

"No. I don't know if he ever came here. He was a civilian photographer in Helmand and there were two soldiers with him but they were captured by the Behnam." The words bubbled out of her now. "There was a rescue attempt, one guy died and the other nearly died, but Noah saved him. The soldier who died was called Tommy. Dave was the name of the one who survived. He lost his legs. It's him I'm trying to find."

"You know how many men we have come through here who've lost legs? A first name's not much to go on. Do you know his regiment, rank?"

"No."

"The date?"

Ash's shoulders dropped. "Seven months ago, but I don't know the exact date."

"I might be able to find out, but you know I can't divulge anyone's address or even give you their phone number."

"I thought maybe you could call them and ask if they'd see me."

He smiled. "You did, did you?"

"I have to help Noah. Something bad happened out there that he told me about and I think only Dave can put it right."

He stared at her for a moment and then nodded. "What's Noah's surname?"

"Golitsin."

He frowned. "Is that the same —?"

"Yes. His sister was murdered. They just found her body."

"What's your relationship to Noah?" His tone had sharpened and Ash guessed what he was thinking.

"I'm not with the press."

His mouth tightened. He didn't believe her.

"I'm telling the truth," she said. "Until yesterday, I was Noah's girlfriend."

"What happened yesterday to change that?"

She took a deep breath. "I need you to trust me so I'm trusting you not to tell anyone this. Noah doesn't know either, not yet anyway, though he will soon. I found out it was my mother who killed his sister."

He gasped. "Fucking — excuse me."

Ash tightened her fingers around the edge of the seat. "My name was Jane North. Social services changed it to Sally Beauman and I changed it to Ash Elleston. Please help me to help Noah."

"Wait here."

The corporal pushed himself up and disappeared through a side door. Ash sighed. Her identity might be a secret now, but it probably wouldn't remain that way for much longer.

It was fifteen minutes before the corporal came back, but he had a smile on his face and a piece of paper in his hand. "Dave's last name is Miller. He said come when you like."

Ash leapt to her feet.

"He also said, it's about time."

Chapter Twenty-Two

Noah felt as if he'd taken a couple steps forward only to slide a hundred feet back. He'd been betrayed by Ilya, Dalton, to a certain extent by his father's silence about this bloody illness, by Ash's lack of communication and now by his cock. He lay in bed with his hand unenthusiastically pumping an unresponsive organ until the expression "flogging a dead horse" came to mind and he gave up in disgust.

As pissed off as he was with Dalton, Noah had become used to him being around. He hadn't forgotten how patient Dalton had been when he'd come out of the hospital. Noah knew he'd probably been discharged too soon—physically fine, mentally not fine, but the guilt he felt surrounded by guys who were so much worse off than him had become unbearable.

Dalton had pushed him to wash, to get dressed, to eat. Everyone tiptoed around him while Noah sank into a deeper depression. Dalton cooked food he'd specifically asked for and then Noah didn't feel like eating it. He went for long periods not speaking. He said what the psychiatrist wanted to hear until the effort of pretending grew too much for him and he turned to an alternative. A visit to the wrong sort of club, a chat with Ronan and Noah thought—why not? Maybe a different kind of pain would help him escape from the overwhelming weight of guilt. Except Ronan's whip hadn't worked either.

Noah got out of bed and went into the bathroom. Last night, he'd left message after message on Ash's phone and she'd not called him. He imagined her sitting in some hospital next to a mother who'd treated her like shit, and he wanted to be there for her—except she wouldn't fucking let him. Noah was so tense, his muscles ached. Even his damn teeth hurt.

He stepped into the shower, stood under hot water and still felt chilled. It pissed him off so much that Ash made it her life's work to help others and yet didn't want to accept help herself. Only didn't he understand that mindset? Noah hadn't wanted help either, though unlike Ash, he hadn't been good at offering it in the first place. Maybe she had her own form of post-traumatic stress disorder dating all the way back to her childhood. Noah ground his teeth at the thought of a father who'd deliberately snap his kid's arm. That was probably why Ash had said she didn't want kids. He hadn't dared to talk to her about that because he wanted kids.

He wanted Ash more.

Noah could feel himself sliding back into misery and he didn't like it. What had Ash said to him? To make himself feel happy, he needed to make someone else happy.

He wanted to be sitting outside waiting when Ash walked away from her mother.

He wanted to kiss Ash and make her feel better.

He wanted to tell her about his father, about his sister, about his bastard of a brother.

Noah *needed* her.

Why hadn't she called him?

When he came out of his bedroom, Dalton was piling boxes in the hall.

Noah frowned. "What are you doing?"

"Moving out."

"Did I ask you to?"

Dalton blinked. "No. I thought you'd want me to go."

"Don't. I haven't thought of a way of extracting my revenge yet, but I will. I don't want to have to go looking for you. It's too inconvenient. You know how lazy I am."

Dalton cracked a smile. "I can't afford to pay rent until I get a job."

"How's the novel going?"

"Really well."

"Then keep writing it." Noah shrugged. "Ilya can continue paying your rent. You can feed me and I'll tell you what to feed him."

Noah turned, but his attention was snagged by the intercom hanging off the wall by the door. "What happened to the intercom?"

"I disconnected it. I went out for bread and when I got back, the press was gathering on the doorstep. The papers are in the kitchen. I bought all of them. I figured you might want to see for yourself Ash isn't involved in this."

"I wish I could get in touch with her. She's still not answering her phone."

"Maybe one of her housemates knows where she is."

"Do you have their number?"

"Only Kay's and she's not there anymore. They threw her out when they discovered she'd taken Ash's passport." Dalton shifted uncomfortably. "Sure you want me to stay?"

"Yes." Because without Dalton, Noah feared he'd slide even faster.

He read the papers while he ate breakfast and felt curiously detached from the rehashing of what happened all those years ago. There was a piece in one of the papers querying the whereabouts of the North's daughter, and despite one half of his head telling him it wasn't Ash, the other half kept saying—what if it is?

Noah *had* to find her.

When there was yet again no answer from Ash's phone, Noah asked Dalton to get the number of the house phone from Kay. While he waited, Noah called London Then And Now and discovered Ash didn't work for them anymore. A call to Martin revealed she'd told him she was going on holiday. If the sinking sensation in Noah's stomach grew any worse, he thought he might throw up.

"She didn't mention her mother?" Noah asked Martin.

"I thought her mother was dead," Martin said. "Is Ash all right? You're worrying me now."

"I'm sure she's fine."

Noah wasn't sure at all. Dalton passed him a piece of paper with Ash's house number but no one answered when he called. There didn't seem any point driving to Greenwich. Noah gave a heavy sigh.

"What are you going to do?" Dalton asked.

"Go and see my shrink."

Noah picked up his jacket, took the back way out to avoid the press, walked to London Bridge station and caught the tube to Knightsbridge.

* * * * *

The door of the semidetached house opened before Ash knocked. A stocky guy with red hair smiled at her.

"Dave?" she asked.

"Yes, and you have to be Ash. The corporal was right. Your smile made me smile. Come in and shut the door behind you."

He walked stiffly down the hall, but Ash was impressed he could walk at all. She spotted a chair lift, and a wheelchair was tucked under the rake of the stairs. Ash followed him into a lounge. A television was on in the corner. Dave sat awkwardly in a leather armchair and winced. Ash noticed metal coming from his shoes where his ankles should have been. It seemed weird to see him wearing running shoes. She dragged her gaze up to find him staring at her.

"It's hard, tiring and frustrating," he said.

"Not going to matter if you step on a snake though." *Crap, why did I say that?*

He laughed. "And sprained ankles are a thing of the past."

"That's true."

"Thank you for not saying 'I'm sorry'. I've heard enough sorrys for a lifetime. Would you like a drink? You can make it yourself. Everything's out in the kitchen. Shirley leaves things ready."

"Your girlfriend?"

"Fiancée."

"Congratulations, and yes, I'd love a drink. What can I get you?"

"Tea, two sugars. Thanks."

Ash had hoped making a drink would give her time to calm her mind, but it was still racing when she went back into the lounge. She set his tea on a table by his side and took a seat on the couch opposite. He'd turned off the TV.

"Where to start?" She blew out a long breath.

"How about you tell me what Noah told you."

Ash swallowed. "They told him to choose between you and Tommy. That they were going to behead one of you and drag your body through the camp and photograph it. Noah chose Tommy to live though they changed their minds anyway." Her eyes welled up and she bit her lip.

"Don't cry," Dave said in a quiet voice. "I'm here. I'm still alive."

"Noah's riddled with guilt."

"And that's why he's not been to see me?"

"He said he came when you were in the hospital. A couple of days ago, he said he *would* visit you, but life's become more difficult now and I'm scared he might change his mind."

Dave nodded. "Right. What I'm going to say now, he needs to hear from me and not you, but because you've made all this effort to see me, I'll talk to you. What happened out there, stays out there. The three of us were in a bad way, mentally and physically. Tommy and I knew what would happen once they had us, while Noah still hoped. The stupid bastard made us hope too even though we knew there was no way this radical group would let any of us survive."

He smiled at Ash. "I like Noah. He made me laugh. But I understood why Noah picked me to die. Tommy had a kid. Noah made the right choice. And if I'd been made to choose between the two of them, I'd have picked Noah to die. I wonder if he's thought of that."

Ash cradled her mug but didn't drink.

"I saw his picture in the paper," Dave said. "He saved a kid at Beachy Head. Was he thinking about killing himself?"

She took a deep breath. "Yes."

"What did you have to say about that?" He stared at her intently.

"That it was an insult to the guy who'd died and an insult to you."

Dave chuckled. "No pulling your punches. You aren't a psychologist then?"

"No."

"Noah's a good man. He took a lot of flak from our unit when he arrived, but he never complained. He played football with us, organized a game of cricket and he was like a...breath of fresh air in the camp. Me and Tommy thought he was a bit wet behind the ears, but when it came down to it, Noah showed more bravery than I've ever seen from anyone. And I've seen a lot."

Ash's heart swelled with pride and sadness.

"He could have run for the helicopter or kept his head down and hidden, and he didn't. Under heavy fire, he saved lives and risked his own several times. He was like a thing possessed. I reckon he'd been watching too many action movies, but he saved my

life. He stayed when I told him to go. I want..." Dave took a deep breath. "I want to thank him. And I want to thump him and tell him not to be such a fucking idiot. Excuse my French. He shouldn't be wasting his life rehashing stuff he can't change. I don't have legs. No point whining about it. It's not going to stop me from doing everything I want to do."

She could see the determination in his face in the hard set of his jaw.

"Shirley wants to waltz at our wedding next summer and I'm going make it happen. I'll play football with our kids and learn how to ski. I'm lucky. There were guys a lot worse off at Headley Court. I'd rather lose my legs than my eyes or part of my brain. And I'm not sneering at Noah because he can't get his head around this. Soldiers are trained for combat and what that might bring. Noah wasn't. I recommended him for the medal and three others put his name forward too."

"A medal?" Ash raised her eyebrows.

"Ah. Maybe I shouldn't be surprised he hasn't told you. If he's blaming himself for what happened, for choosing me, then he's not going to feel he deserves a decoration. But he does."

"Wow," Ash said. "Thanks for speaking to me. I feel better about pushing Noah to see you now that I know you're not going to throw knives at him." She stood up and her gaze drifted to the back window. "That's quite a garden."

"We bought the house before this happened. I was looking forward to working on it."

Ash looked out over an untidy rockery, an overgrown lawn and flowerbeds where plants had blended into a tangled mess. She turned to face Dave. "Like a hand with it?"

"I could do with a few legs." He laughed.

Ash took a card from her bag and handed it to him.

"Green Piece," he read. "Martin Jones?"

"The company Martin and I work for specializes in transforming neglected plots into green havens. We use volunteers and persuade local businesses to supply materials. Martin would love to get his hands on your garden. He wants to enter the Chelsea Flower Show. He could practice here. What do you think?"

"How much would it cost?"

"A few cups of tea and the odd sandwich."

"I'd be a fool to say no."

"I'll tell Martin to give you a call."

"Thanks." He beamed at her. "Shall I call Noah? I was waiting for him to come and see me. I didn't want to make difficulties for him, but it strikes me we need to talk sooner rather than later."

"I'll have to call with his number. I've not got my phone with me."

"With all this business about his sister, you sure it's the right time to speak to him?"

Ash nodded. "Seven months is long enough."

* * * * *

Noah put his finger on the buzzer of the door he'd never wanted to see again and waited. The thought of what Ronan had done to him here made him shudder.

"It's not Friday," Ronan said.

"I need to talk to you."

"Are you asking me to *make* you talk or is this just a friendly chat? Because if it's the former, the answer is no. You're involved with Ash and she's my friend. That makes it personal and I don't do personal."

Noah clenched his fists. "This is important. I need to talk to you about Ash. I'm worried."

"Top floor. Not where you usually go."

The lock clicked and Noah pushed open the door and went in. He carried on past the middle floor with the room he never wanted to go into again and up the next set of stairs. Ronan stood in a doorway in paint-splattered jeans and t-shirt.

The door closed behind Noah and he stared at what was clearly an artist's studio. On the far side a line of windows flooded the room with light. Canvases were propped against the wall and one stood half-finished on an easel—a desolate landscape of ice that made Noah feel cold just looking at it.

"You can paint," Noah blurted.

"You thought I spent all day playing with my whip?"

"I didn't think."

Ronan frowned. "No, that's your problem. What do you want?"

"Ash. I need to talk to her. Where is she?"

"I have no idea. She snuck out last night. Said she'd be away for a few days on family business."

"She's been home?" Noah's mind raced. Did that mean her mother was in a local hospital?

"Odd though because as far as I knew, she didn't have a family," Ronan said. "I assumed you'd upset her again."

Noah groaned. *Damn*. "What did she say about Paris?"

"You did a bus tour, danced the salsa by the Seine, picnicked under the stars and it was fantastic."

"That's all?" Noah asked.

"I'm not fucking playing twenty questions with you." Ronan stepped right up to him. "What have you done?"

Noah firmed his stance. "Ash had a call to say her mother was very ill. She chartered a private jet to fly back but wouldn't let me travel with her. Since then I haven't been able to contact her."

"A private jet?" Ronan furrowed his brow. "I'm beginning to wonder if I know her at all. She told me her mother was dead."

"That's what she told me."

"So, was she lying about the call?"

"I don't think so. I called London Then And Now and she's resigned. Martin Jones thinks Ash has gone on holiday. I didn't know who to speak to at the Citizens Advice Bureau, but I suspect she's not going back there either."

Ronan yanked off his t-shirt and unfastened his jeans. Noah gulped. "What are you doing?"

"Getting changed. We'll check her room for clues."

Noah turned his back and wandered over to the other canvases.

Ronan laughed. "You've seen me naked. What's your problem?"

"You bring out the worst in me," Noah muttered.

When he turned, Ronan wore motorcycle leathers. "Think you can ride behind me without falling off?"

"Yes, you wanker," Noah snapped.

Ronan locked his studio and Noah followed him down the stairs.

"How often do you..." Noah nodded toward the door he was used to using.

"None of your business."

"Sorry." Sometimes Noah really wanted to deck the asshole, but he kept his clenched fists at his sides. His focus was to find Ash, and Ronan was trying to help.

In the courtyard at the back of the building, Ronan unlocked the pannier on his bike and took out two helmets. He passed one to Noah.

"You're going to be cold in that jacket. Bunch up behind me and hold tight."

* * * * *

Ronan was right. By the time they reached Greenwich, Noah was frozen.

"Coffee?" Ronan asked as they walked in.

"Please."

Ronan tossed his jacket onto the stairs and Noah trailed him into the kitchen.

"I heard about your sister." Ronan flicked on the kettle. "Sorry there was no happy ending."

Noah sighed. "Impossible after all this time. Even if she'd been alive, what state would she have been in?"

Ronan pinned him with his gaze. "Is she one of the reasons you're fucked up? Did you manage to blame yourself for her disappearance? Refused to look after her while your mother went to the hospital?"

"That's one thing I *don't* blame myself for. I wasn't at home. I was staying with a friend in Cornwall. My brother—yeah, well, that's a different matter." Noah took the coffee and wrapped his cold hands around the mug.

"Why?"

"Ilya was supposed to stay with Natalia that day, but he went off somewhere, so our mother had to take her instead. After she disappeared and didn't come back, Mama committed suicide."

Ronan leaned against the countertop. "Ilya's your brother?"

"Yeah, the fucked-up idiot."

"Does he blame himself?"

"Yes, and he never talks about Natalia. He clams up if she's mentioned."

"Seems like it should have been your brother coming to see me instead of you. Presumably that's why you made the crack about wishing you'd killed your mother."

He nodded.

"So what do you blame yourself for? Why did you need me to punish you?"

Noah swallowed hard. "My fault a soldier lost his legs. My fault another soldier died."

Ronan sighed. "Christ, I wasted all that energy on you and now you just *tell* me? My guess is you wanted photographs and persuaded them to take you some place where you were ambushed. If you hadn't been there, none of it would have happened. Right?"

"Ye...s."

"You don't sound so sure."

"Ash made me see that it might have happened anyway. I still feel guilty, but not so desperate. Not about that."

"Kindness worked when the whip didn't. I was never what you needed."

"I love her," Noah whispered.

Ronan smiled. "Yeah, she's an easy woman to love, isn't she? Even for messed-up jerks like you. Have you told her?"

"Yes, and she told me she loves me, so I don't understand why she isn't answering any of my calls."

He wasn't going to tell Ronan his crazy theory. None of his business. That was between him and Ash. Anyway, the guy would probably bite his head off.

* * * * *

They found out why Ash wasn't answering her phone when they looked in her wardrobe.

"Shit," Noah said. "Why would she leave her phone?"

"Because she doesn't want to talk to any of us."

Ronan reached toward a box on the top shelf and then drew back his fingers. "That was where she kept her passport. She wasn't worried about me checking it before, but I didn't really look at what was in there."

"All I want to know is if there's any clue where her mother might be."

Ronan lifted the box down and sat on the bed. There were more boxes in the bottom of the wardrobe and Noah lifted one out. Inside lay an old teddy bear with the stuffing coming out.

"There's nothing in here," Ronan said. "Just bills and things."

Noah moved a thick book and smiled when he saw it was a natural history encyclopedia. The box underneath held a bunch of letters.

Ronan crouched at his side. "What are they?"

"Letters to Santa."

They looked up when they heard the sound of a door opening. Noah's heart surged, but Ronan put his finger to his lips and slipped out of the bedroom.

"What are you doing here, Kay?" Ronan's sharp voice rang out, and Noah sagged with disappointment.

"I've come for the rest of my stuff," Kay snapped.

"You were supposed to have handed over all your keys."

"I found another."

Noah tuned out and opened the first letter, the envelope written in a child's hand.

Deer Santa,

Pleeez cud I have a doll that opens and closes its eyes.

I have been gud.

Love Jane North.

Noah gasped. The coffee he'd just drunk surged back up his gullet. He dropped the letter and rushed for the bathroom. Even after he'd brought up everything in his stomach, he couldn't stop retching.

"Christ. Are you okay?" Ronan asked behind him.

Noah clutched the toilet and retched again.

Ronan pushed a glass of water into his hand. "I drank that coffee too. It wasn't that bad."

Noah swilled out his mouth, took deep breaths and finally his stomach settled. He pushed himself to his feet, wiped his mouth on toilet tissue and flushed. When he turned to Ronan he saw Kay behind him in the bedroom, looking at the letters.

"Fuck." Noah shoved Ronan out of the way, stormed over and snatched a letter from her hand. "What the hell do you think you're doing?"

"Same as you. Being nosy. Jane North? Christ."

"Don't breathe a word to anyone," Noah snapped. "Get out of here. You've caused enough trouble."

Kay pouted and walked out. Ronan stood staring at him. Noah picked up another letter and handed it to him.

"Dear Santa," Ronan read. "*Please could I have a jigsaw with animals on it? I have been really good. Love Jane North.*" He looked up. "Jane North?" Ronan shook his head. "She lied to me? Ash told me her parents were dead."

He looked more bewildered than angry. The door slammed loudly downstairs.

Noah slumped on the bed. His heart pounded. "I thought it was just a coincidence. My sister's killer is on the point of death. Ash rushes off to see a mother who's very sick and won't—*can't* let me go with her. Ash has transformed the site of the murders at Leopold Road into a garden, which happens to be her family home. She's resigned from her job and she's deliberately left her phone here. She's hidden who she is for all these years and now thinks she'll be exposed. Oh fuck. No wonder she didn't want to speak to me."

"Kay won't keep quiet."

Noah sagged. "I wonder what my father will say when I tell him I've fallen in love with the daughter of my sister's killer?"

Chapter Twenty-Three

Noah was relieved not to see Ilya's car in the courtyard when he parked at Floriton Hall. It was going to be difficult enough explaining this to his father, let alone his brother. He handed his jacket to the butler.

"Drawing room?" Noah asked.

"Yes sir."

His father looked up from his book and smiled when Noah walked in. "This is a pleasant surprise."

No, it isn't.

"How are you?" Noah asked.

"Who are you again?"

Noah gaped and then released a choked laugh. He dropped down into the chair opposite his father. "I've got a problem."

His father put his book down.

"There's this girl," Noah blurted.

He wasn't surprised by the raised eyebrows. Noah couldn't think when he'd ever started off a conversation like this with his father.

"She's kind and funny and beautiful and...happy." Well, she *had* been happy. "Just right for me."

"This is the woman you took to Paris?"

Noah should have known. He wondered what his brother had said.

"Ilya didn't say much. Merely that she was unsuitable." His father answered his unasked question.

Noah bristled. "Since when is my brother responsible for deciding who's suitable for me? He can't even find a woman who's prepared to put up with *him*, so I don't see why he has to bloody well interfere in my life."

"You haven't exactly made good choices in the past. Ilya wants what's best for you. As I do."

Noah sucked in a breath.

"So what's your problem?" his father asked. "Sophia?"

"Not really. Maybe a bit. I might have led her to believe there could be something between us, but that was before I went out to Afghanistan. She sent me a 'get well soon' card, and kept calling. I haven't spoken to her." He sighed. "To be honest, I don't think she's any more interested than I am. Ilya should marry her if he likes her so much."

"Ilya's thinking of the family name."

"Well, the woman I want has a name you won't like. When I met her, she told me her name was Ash. Not the name her parents gave her." *Oh God, this is hard.*

His father sat up in his chair and gave him a puzzled look.

Noah took a deep breath. He'd just have to blurt it out. "Her name's Jane North."

He watched the color drain from his father's face and gulped.

"Oh my God, Noah."

"I love her," Noah whispered, his heart aching at the distress he'd caused his father.

The door opened and Ilya strolled in. Noah sagged. *Fuck. That's all I need.* The guy had a radar for trouble.

"What's wrong?" Ilya glanced between them.

"Noah's given me some disturbing news."

Ilya glared at Noah. "What have you done now?"

"Ash is really Jane North."

For once in his life, he managed to shock Ilya into silence. His brother looked like a statue, still and marble-white.

"Ash had a phone call when we were in Paris to say her mother was gravely ill. She flew back. I assume the deathbed confession was her telling Ash about Natalia."

"You can't be serious," Ilya snapped. "You're not in love. You haven't known her five minutes. This is just part of your...illness. You're clinging to someone who showed you affection."

"I love her," Noah said. He did, and it felt right saying it. Soothing, comforting.

Ilya began to pace. "Don't be a bloody idiot. She was paid to go out with you. She was supposed to be a distraction, a quick fling to cheer you up."

"Paid?" asked their father.

"Dalton didn't pay her," Noah said. "He paid her housemate to make sure we were in the same place at the same time and then to make sure we weren't. I know all about the business with the missing passport. Neither Ash nor I were aware you were behind the scenes pulling strings."

"I'm confused," their father said to Ilya. "What do you and Dalton have to do with this?"

"Ilya's been paying Dalton to babysit. Only my brother pressured him to take his duties a little too far."

Ilya's wide shoulders slumped and he dropped into an armchair. "Well, it doesn't matter now, does it? You can't possibly have a relationship with the daughter of a murderess, let alone one linked to our family. What the hell would people say if they knew?"

"I love her." *I love her, I love her, I love her.*

Ilya sat forward and glared at him. "Forget her. Have you no respect for Natalia? Christ, every time you look at this woman, you'll remember what her mother did. Our sister is dead. Our beautiful, sweet sister had her life snatched from her by this woman's mother, a fucking vicious monster. You *cannot* do this, Noah."

"I love her." What else could he say?

Ilya jumped to his feet. "Stop fucking saying that. You have no fucking idea what love is. You're still suffering from PTSD. You've stopped seeing the psychiatrist and you're using this woman as a crutch. Have you even tried to come to terms with the mess in your head?"

Noah's blood boiled in his veins. He pushed himself up. He'd never wanted so much to smash his fist into Ilya's face.

"And what about Sophia?" Ilya spat the words into his face. "She's coming here with her parents expecting you to propose to her."

"Then she's going to be disappointed," Noah barked, staring his brother right in the eyes.

"Oh no she's not," Ilya snapped back.

Noah glared at him. "What the fuck have you done?"

"It's all arranged." Ilya glared back.

Noah glanced at his father, but he looked just as puzzled as Noah felt.

"I've spoken to Sophia's parents," Ilya said. "Her father had a fabulous diamond that's been in the family for two hundred years set into a ring so you could present it to his daughter on bended knee. It was meant to be a wonderful surprise for Father, for the two of you, for everyone, and now you've fucked it all up."

Noah couldn't believe his ears. "Have you gone mad?" He wanted Ilya to tell him it was all a joke, but he could see from the look on his brother's face that it wasn't.

"No, that's you."

"You fucking..." Noah swung at Ilya's jaw, but his brother knocked his fist away. Ilya didn't block the thump in the gut.

"Boys, stop it," said their father.

They pulled apart and Ilya turned to face their father. "Father, tell him. He can't possibly love this common woman."

"What does Ash think about all this?" his father asked. "It must be as disturbing to her as it is to us."

"Hardly," Ilya scoffed.

"Stop it, Ilya. She hardly targeted your brother, did she? Ash must be very upset. How is she, Noah?"

"I haven't been able to talk to her," Noah muttered, grateful his father worried about Ash.

"Why not?" his father asked.

"She's disappeared."

His brother snorted, and Noah stuffed his clenched fists in his pockets.

Ilya took Noah's elbow and propelled him to a corner of the room. "So what the hell was all this about? If she's gone, you've come here and upset Father for nothing."

Noah looked at his father's white face and sagged. "I'm sorry." He stumbled toward the door and flung it open. He shouldn't have come. Why had he thought he could make his family understand?

* * * * *

One press of a button in a hotel room pushed Ash straight into a nightmare—Kay being interviewed on a chatty breakfast show by a smartly dressed female presenter and the Welsh guy Ash had always fancied. Kay was perfectly made up and wearing a dress she'd bought a month ago that cost her a week's wages. She still owed Ash her share of the gas bill.

"Yeah, that's right. I lived with her for nearly a year. Though the three of us knew her as Ash not Jane."

Oh shit.

"Were there never any hints she was pretending to be someone else?" asked the good-looking, dark-haired Welsh presenter.

"She never wanted her photo taken, and I can see why now. I thought it was because she was insecure about her looks, what with me being a model and an actress." Kay smiled.

I was such an idiot to ever think Kay was my friend. Ash quivered with rage. A photo came up on the screen. A shot of Ash drinking a pint of beer when they'd had a barbeque in the garden. *Bloody hell.*

"What did she do for a living?" asked the female presenter.

"She works a few jobs, but one of them is for a company called Green Piece. They tidy up scruffy bits of land. One of the sites they worked on was on Leopold Road, where the murders had been carried out. Obviously it was where she used to live. Maybe Ash suggested it as a site. I suppose she might have been looking for something."

Ash's jaw dropped. Kay was unbelievable.

"Such as?" asked the guy.

"Maybe more bodies?"

Ash wanted to stuff Kay in a hole and bury her.

"She might have known about this last victim and thought she was still somewhere in the grounds," Kay said.

"How the fuck could I know that, you moron?" Ash shouted at the TV.

"The really creepy thing is that Ash and I worked together at a wedding at Floriton Hall. I wonder if she wanted to meet Natalia's father."

"Fuck, fuck, fuck." Ash yanked at her hair. "Isn't someone going to tell her she's an imbecile?"

The woman cleared her throat. "But Natalia's body hadn't been found then, had it? Ash was the one who told the police what her parents were doing. If she hadn't come forward, there would certainly have been more murders."

Ash shivered, goose bumps racing down her arms.

"If she'd come forward sooner, there might have been less," Kay retorted.

I didn't know before then. I didn't know.

"She shouldn't have gotten that reward the newspaper offered," Kay said. "That doesn't seem right. She shouldn't benefit from others' misery."

Kay leapt from one subject to another, slinging shit wherever she went. All the things that had lain buried for nearly twenty years were back in the public eye. Ash had given away every penny of the reward once it came under her control. It all went to the families of the victims.

"What's she like?" the man asked.

Ash didn't want to listen but couldn't bring herself to switch off the TV.

"Average really. Just ordinary. Except she isn't, is she? I wouldn't have gone to live there if I'd known who she was." Kay shuddered. "Like mother like daughter, right? And her dad too. How could she be normal? It's in her genes. I never felt completely comfortable in that house."

Ash clenched her teeth. She'd been nothing but kind to Kay.

"How did you discover her real identity?"

Yeah, how did she?

"There was a pile of letters in her room signed by Jane North. Ronan, another housemate and Ash's boyfriend Noah – well, former boyfriend probably – were looking through her stuff. And that's the other amazing thing about all this. Noah is Natalia's brother. He's been going out with the daughter of the woman who murdered his sister."

Ash mustered enough energy to press the remote's off button and then fell back on the bed. *Oh my God.* Noah and Ronan nosing through her personal belongings? How could they? They were the two men she trusted more than anyone. Now she felt as though they'd ripped her sordid past bare for all the world to see. And in front of Kay? How could they do this to her? How could Noah? Is this how he repaid her for loving him?

Well, it was out now. Her dirty little secret. She'd been nine years old when one morning she'd walked to the police station instead of school. A late-night raid on the fridge and she'd seen the cellar door ajar for the first time ever. She'd crept over and heard a whimpering cry that didn't come from her mother or father. Ash had raced

back to her room. A little while later, she watched through the window as they carried something wrapped in black plastic down to the shed.

When her parents went to bed, she put a glass to the wall and listened. Amplification of sound waves was something they'd been talking about at school. Ash heard the name Julie Beard and a few other things that made her bite her lip in case she made a noise. It was the name of a teenage girl who'd gone missing. Julie's sister was at their school. A year older than Ash.

The police hadn't believed her, and looking back, Ash could see how crazy it must have sounded, but she told them what her parents had done to her over the years and the way she had to look after herself. She said she couldn't go back home because they'd kill her, and that if the police didn't check the shed, they'd look very bad when her parents were eventually caught. Now, she could see she was lucky the policeman she spoke to decided to check her story. Otherwise, she'd have been another victim.

Ash never returned to school. She never went home again, but the policewoman who looked after her for a while made sure she got her things. Teddy, her book and the box of letters. Her parents' faces were on the TV for weeks, though someone always switched it off if Ash was in the room. Ash wished she'd understood what they'd been doing and said something sooner. She might have saved Noah's sister.

She curled up on the bed and buried her face in her arms. Had she been wrong to hide who she was for all this time? Why should she have to tell people what her parents had done? They'd judge her for something that happened when she was a child.

Kay was a bitch. And Ronan and Noah had no right to go through Ash's things. But at least there was no more wondering if Noah knew. The whole of the UK knew. Probably the whole world. And Ash had found out something about Noah. He used to live in Floriton Hall. The older guy and the younger one she'd seen when she'd become lost at the wedding were his father and brother. If she'd read the newspapers properly yesterday, she'd have realized sooner, though it wouldn't have changed anything. Life was still shit.

Ash wanted to be hugged, but there was no one to hug her. How could Noah ever want to see her again? And after what he'd done, did she even want to see him?

* * * * *

Back at his flat, Noah couldn't settle. He'd slept badly, his phone close by in case Ronan called to say Ash had come back. He alternated between despair and fury. If Ash really loved him, why had she disappeared without saying a fucking word? Why hadn't she told him about her parents? He'd opened his heart and told her about Dave and Tommy, why couldn't she do the same? Was Ilya right, that he should forget her? Was it something about him that was unlovable? Was this karma for what had happened in Afghanistan?

Questions piled up in his head, building one on the other until everything became such a jumbled mess, Noah had to shut down to stay sane. He told Dalton to get rid of

Ash's dress and then slipped so fast into a morose silence that he frightened himself. The questions began again. Wasn't she concerned about him at all? Didn't she care? Why didn't she call him? Was she okay? Was she hurt? Nothing went through his mind except for unanswered questions until he thought his head would explode.

One day blended into another. He ate—sometimes. He washed—sometimes. He refused to speak to Ilya. He mumbled lies to his father about being fine. He was just waiting.

Waiting.

Waiting.

He didn't turn his head when he heard the knock at the door. Dalton came in.

"It's a call for you. Not Ash. Some guy called Dave. Want to speak to him?"

Noah stiffened. *Dave?*

"He says it's important."

"I don't want to talk to him."

"He told me if you said that I was to remind you that you owed him one."

Noah pushed himself to a sitting position on his bed and took the phone. He had to grip it hard because his hand shook so much. He didn't speak until Dalton had gone.

"Hello," he muttered.

"If Mohammed won't come to the mountain. Not that I'm planning on climbing any mountains. Next year maybe."

Noah's heart jerked. "How did you get my number?"

"Well, that's nice. How are you, Dave? Fine, thank you. How about you?"

"Sorry."

"Let's try again," Dave said.

Noah took a deep breath. "How are you?"

"Alive. How about you?"

"I feel like shit."

"Tough. Why haven't you been to see me?"

Noah screwed up his eyes and then opened them with a sigh. "I fucked up your life. I'm sorry."

"You didn't fuck up anything. The Behnam are responsible for this shit, not you. They killed Tommy, not you. You fucking killed them though. I was impressed. Seriously impressed. You didn't panic. You kept your head. You saved lives. Ever thought about joining up? Have to do something about your hair. That shaggy mess won't cut it. Your attitude needs work as well."

"I'm sorry," Noah blurted.

"Shut the fuck up about being sorry. You made the right choice. Tommy had a kid. But the truth is that none of us would have walked out of there alive no matter what

you want to tell yourself. They were fucking with your head. If you don't let this go, then they won."

Noah swallowed hard.

"I don't blame you for anything," Dave said in a quieter voice. "You saved my life. You listened to what the medics said when you arrived and under fire – You. Saved. My. Life. Not just mine, others too."

Noah opened his mouth and then closed it.

"You still there?" Dave asked. "I'd have preferred to have this conversation face-to-face."

"Sor – I'll come and see you."

"Next week. Wednesday. You know where I live?"

"Yes."

"You fucker. You could have visited."

"Sor – I'll bring fish and chips."

"Bring a six-pack or I won't let you in. One last thing. There's no shame in this, Noah. You were doing a job, just like we were. People need to see what we're up against. Pictures work a lot better than words. We were unlucky, that's all, and yet lucky at the same time. Don't waste your life thinking of what might have been. Neither choice would have changed anything. See you on Wednesday."

Noah dropped the house phone and picked up his cell. Ronan answered on the second ring.

"No," he said. "She hasn't come home."

* * * * *

By Friday evening, guilt weighed too heavily on Ash for her to stay any longer in the hotel. The media speculation had died down. There'd even been an interview with Detective Inspector Marshall who'd said Ash should be left alone. He reminded people she'd been a young child when her parents had been arrested, her life had been one of severe mental and physical abuse and she'd done everything she could to help the police. There was nothing wrong in changing her name and trying to put the past behind her.

But it was too late. Ash couldn't put everything behind her. She couldn't escape the girl she'd been, only try to make her the woman she wanted to be. She owed explanations to a lot of people, and without her phone, she could do very little. So she went home.

* * * * *

The moment she stepped into the house, Mike came out of the kitchen.

"Ash," he gasped.

Ronan appeared behind him. He rushed forward and pulled her into his arms. Ash felt Mike hug her too, and she fought not to cry.

"You are such an idiot," Ronan muttered into her hair. "How are we supposed to cope without you? Where have you been?"

She let herself be tugged into the living room.

"A hotel. I thought the press might have people here."

"They did. They were outside for a couple of days, but Ronan got rid of them. Are you okay?"

Ash dropped onto the couch. "Yes and no." She looked up at Ronan. "You went through my stuff."

"We we worried about you. I know I broke the rules, but you'd have done the same."

He was right.

"Am I forgiven?"

Ash nodded.

"Want something to eat, to drink?" Ronan asked.

"I've made spaghetti bolognese." Mike beamed.

"And I persuaded him to wash up as he went along," Ronan said.

"Yeah well, who knew you were so good at arm wrestling?" Mike glared at Ronan and smiled at Ash. "I'll set the table for three."

"I need to make a couple of calls." Ash rose to her feet.

"Large glass of wine or small?" Mike asked.

"Huge," she said.

"I'll be guarding the door. No running away." Ronan gave her a stern look.

Ash ran upstairs and stumbled to a halt when she reached her room. Over by the window was the dress box from Paris. Her lip trembled and she bit it so hard she tasted blood. Grabbing her phone from the wardrobe, she went to sit on the bed.

She could have just taken her things and gone to live in another city, but her past would still be there waiting to claw at her. It was time to stop running, stop hiding and be honest.

"Martin, it's me."

"Ah. Holiday not work out?"

Ash was relieved he didn't sound angry. "I'm sorry."

"What for?"

"Not telling you everything."

"Why should you have told me? It wasn't something I needed to know, was it?"

Ash took a deep breath. "There is no uncle. I provide the funding for Green Piece. I'm using the money my murdering bastard of a father left me."

Martin sighed. "I'd wondered over these last few days and started to put two and two together. So, is that it? Are we done?"

Her heart lurched. "No, we're not done. Not unless you want out. Do you?" She held her breath.

"No. You took me on when no one else would. We work well together. I like you, Ash."

She smiled. "I want to keep Green Piece going. I've had another idea for more projects. The gardens of injured servicemen back from Afghanistan. We could make them accessible and easy to manage. I've chosen the first one. Take this down." She gave him Dave's number. "He's expecting a call from you."

"Okay, I'll get on it."

"I did wonder if you wanted to practice on his garden for Chelsea."

Martin gave a yip of delight. "See you next week?"

"See you."

"Oh Ash, what about Noah? Will he come too?"

A brief but paralyzing burst of pain hit her chest. "I haven't seen him. 'Bye, Martin."

Ash made the next call before she could change her mind. No point trying to compose in her head what to say because she doubted her brain and mouth would cooperate.

Not a problem. Noah didn't answer. *That says everything.*

Back downstairs, she put on her cheerful face and went into the kitchen.

"Wow, it is clean in here. How come you didn't wash up as you went along when I suggested it?" she asked.

"Ronan is kind of persuasive. He's also bloody strong, considering he messes around with paint brushes all day."

"Built your bridges?" Ronan pulled out a chair for her.

"I confessed to Martin I don't have a benevolent uncle."

Mike ladled sauce onto her spaghetti. "Green Piece is yours?" he blurted.

"I'm using the money my father left me. God, I hate calling him that."

"The garden business is a good thing to do, Ash." Ronan smiled at her.

They all began to eat.

"This is delicious," Ash said. "I'm so sick of room service."

Mike twirled his fork on his plate but didn't lift it to his lips. "Do I have this right? You own this house. You fund a business that makes no money just does good deeds. You only work a paid job for two days a week."

Ash filled her mouth. Ronan had a half-smile on his face while Mike looked increasingly confused.

"Am I missing something?" Mike asked.

"What would you do with money from someone so evil?" Ash asked. "I bought a house, but I didn't want to live here alone. I wanted the family I never had. I ended up with a bitch of a sister, but two brothers who mean the world to me."

Ronan reached across the table to stroke her arm.

"Oh Christ," Mike muttered. "You didn't... Oh fucking hell, Ash. It was you, the anonymous benefactor? You paid off the loan?"

She shrugged. It was pointless denying it. "The debt was crippling you and it wasn't even your debt. I went to see Logan and —"

Mike's fork clattered to the table. "You did what?"

"He was quite reasonable."

Ronan sniggered.

"It's not fucking funny," Mike snapped. "The man's a thug."

"He was a pussy cat," Ash lied.

Mike blew out a long breath. "Thank you. I'll pay you back of course."

"No, you won't," Ash said. "I'm trying to get rid of this money."

"Oh God. I don't know what to say." Mike clasped her hand. "Why don't you fancy me?"

Ash laughed. "You know damn well I'm not your type. I chose you carefully. Kay not so carefully. I still partly blame you." But she made sure he knew she was joking.

"Talking of choosing. Have you spoken to Noah?" Ronan asked.

She focused on her wine. "He's not answering his phone. Not a surprise really. I saw how many calls he made to me that went unanswered. I doubt he wants to see me ever again." Ash forced a curve on her lips but couldn't maintain it.

"Sure about that?" Ronan tipped his chair back and reached to scoop up an envelope from the counter.

Ash opened it.

Knyaz Arkady Golitsin

Requests the pleasure of your company

At the celebration of his 60th birthday

At Floriton Hall

On the 10th September 7:30 p.m.

Carriages at midnight

Chapter Twenty-Four

Noah avoided the lights and music coming from the public rooms and headed for the private side of Floriton Hall. He locked a smile on his face and pushed open the door of his father's drawing room. "Happy birthday, Papa."

He put down the present he'd bought and gave his father a hug. The embrace was maintained longer than Noah expected and his throat tightened. He felt a bit like the lost sheep, only he still hadn't found his way home, not really.

"Are you okay?" his father asked.

Noah shrugged. He wasn't okay, but he didn't want to spoil his father's celebration. He only intended to stay at the ball long enough to be seen and then he'd disappear.

"I wondered where you'd got to," Ilya snapped from the other side of the room. "I said seven o'clock. Typical that you—"

"Ilya!" their father barked. "Shut up." He turned to Noah. "You look very handsome."

The three of them were in tuxes and wing-tip collar shirts, but where their father wore a silver bow tie, theirs were black.

"I wish your mother..."

Noah put his arm around his father's shoulders, and at the edge of his vision saw his brother stiffen, a tic fluttering over his cheek. Noah sometimes thought their mother's death had more of a profound impact on his brother's life than his own. Noah was always on his father's heels while Ilya worshiped their mother.

"Open the champagne, Ilya," their father said.

A bottle of Cristal sat chilling in a silver ice bucket. Once they all held a glass, they knocked them together.

"To you, Papa," Ilya said. "Congratulations on your birthday."

"Congratulations," Noah echoed.

"Who are you two? Where am I again?" their father asked.

Noah snorted.

"Don't joke about it," Ilya said.

Their father sighed and shook his head. "Rather I cried? I'm not dead yet."

"Sorry," Ilya mumbled.

The cold champagne slipped smoothly down Noah's throat into an empty stomach. Maybe he'd eat *before* he left.

Ilya handed their father an envelope. "My gift."

Noah's heart sank. It was bound to be something extravagant. The gasp from his father confirmed it. *Shit*. It wasn't a competition, though Ilya always acted as if it were.

"I remember you saying how much you wished you'd taken up astronomy," Ilya said.

Noah's heart hit his feet. *Double shit*. He and Ilya had been thinking along the same lines.

"A trip to Hawaii *and* you've arranged a special visit to the observatory on the Big Island?" Their father beamed. "I didn't think the public was allowed to —"

"They're not," Ilya said. "I called in a few favors."

"Fantastic. That's wonderful, Ilya." His father hugged him. "Thank you."

Noah stood uncomfortably next to the gift he'd bought. "Prepare yourself for disappointment."

"You could never disappoint me." His father caught Noah's cheek and turned his face so that they looked at each other. "Never."

"I've tried not to," Noah whispered.

A moment passed between them, and then his father ripped away the wrapping to reveal a telescope.

His father laughed. "Great. Now I can stargaze here. Thank you, Noah. Did you two conspire?"

"No." Ilya glared at Noah, and Noah looked away. The days when he had his brother had done anything together were long gone.

By the time Noah helped himself to another glass of champagne, his mood had mellowed. It wouldn't kill him to be pleasant for the evening. All he had to do was not think about —

"Have you heard from Ash?" his father asked.

"No." Noah had given up hoping she'd call. It seemed ironic that *he* could see past what her mother had done and she couldn't.

"Good," Ilya snapped. "Make sure you ask Sophia to dance first."

"I'm not dancing."

Ilya glared. "Why not?"

A smile slipped onto Noah's lips. "I've decided never to do anything you tell me again. I was thinking the other day how it always seems to get me into trouble. The hole in the greenhouse roof, the statue in the lake, Sophia."

"Noah, I need you to dance with Sophia," Ilya said, his tone pleading.

"If I feel like it."

"It's important she enjoys herself. I'm trying to do business with her father."

"You dance with her then," Noah said.

"I will, but she'd rather dance with you."

"Tough," Noah muttered.

"Look, you little sh—"

"Play nice, boys," their father said. "Noah, it won't kill you to dance with Sophia. Ilya, if you tried saying please once in a while, you might find people will respond better."

* * * * *

As the three of them made their way to the formal rooms where the guests were gathering, Noah made a promise that after nearly ruining his life himself, he wasn't going to let anyone else do it for him, especially his interfering brother. Ash had made Noah see that a happy future was possible, but maybe it was time to accept that it might not be with her. He swallowed hard but the lump remained in his throat.

He had to let Ash go. He couldn't make her want to be with him. She shouldn't feel guilty about Natalia's death, but Noah knew only too well the power real or imagined guilt could wield. He needed to think of his father and—though it annoyed him to admit it—Ilya as well. If Noah brought Ash into their lives, would they think of what happened to Natalia every time they looked at her? It wasn't the same for Noah because he loved Ash. The thought brought an ache to his heart.

I love her. I don't want to lose her.

Until Ash told him to his face that she didn't love him, how could he walk away?

* * * * *

Ash was caught between laughter and tears. *How the hell did I let Ronan talk me into this?*

"Bend," Ronan said.

"I am."

He was trying to stuff her into a black cab, but the dress was resisting. Ash twisted her hips, shot the last couple of feet and ended up sprawled over the seat.

"Cute backside," Ronan said.

Ash squeaked and reached behind to try and flatten the material. Mike opened the door on the other side and helped her upright.

"I don't want—" she began.

"If you say that once more, I swear..." Ronan glared at her.

Mike kissed her on the cheek. "Have a lovely time."

Ash smiled. "'Bye, Mike."

Ronan sat beside her and closed his door. If he hadn't agreed to come with her, Ash wouldn't be doing this. She wanted Mike to come too, but Ronan was the only one brave enough to gatecrash.

His hand crept over hers and squeezed her fingers. "Stop worrying. You look gorgeous."

"I look like one of those dolls used to disguise toilet rolls."

He laughed. "You look ravishing."

Ash knew he was only trying to cheer her up but when she'd put the dress on, her heart had swelled with...excitement, pleasure, hope. Noah wouldn't have sent the dress if he didn't want her to wear it. He wouldn't have sent the invite if he didn't want her to come, though Ash wished he'd talked to her. She felt terrified about meeting his family, but if Noah held her hand, she thought she could face anything.

* * * * *

Oh shit. Ash walked into the magnificent ballroom on Ronan's arm and pleaded with the floor to open up and swallow her. Snorts of laughter from close by sent ice zooming around her veins and she shivered. She could have coped with sneers because they knew who she was, but not because she looked an idiot. How crazy was that? How shallow was that?

"Courage," Ronan whispered, and gripped her more tightly.

"Get me to a corner," Ash whispered back. "Try to stop me from knocking anyone over on the way."

Ronan led her to the side of the room.

Bloody Valentina for making her think this was what to wear. People were staring and some were sniggering. Until she'd walked in, Ash had felt glamorous. Now she felt an idiot. The women all wore slinky evening gowns, some bigger than others but no sign of any other full-bodied ball gowns.

"Please, please, please take me home," she whispered.

"No."

When she tried to pull free, Ronan didn't let her go.

He bent his head to her ear. "Listen to me. You look fantastic. You're not a coward. You can do this."

But Ash's confidence had packed its bags and scuttled off with its tail between its legs. Why had she believed Valentina? Even when Noah had questioned the style in the store, Ash hadn't registered she'd been tricked.

"Maybe if we sneak into a bathroom with a pair of scissors?" Ash barely restrained her whimper.

"You need a drink," Ronan said. "Stay here and I'll get us some champagne."

Ash wanted to beg him not to leave her but instead she took a deep breath and scanned the bustling crowd for Noah. She sighed when she spotted him walking beside the man she now knew was his father. The guy on his other side had to be Ilya. Ash's heart pounded. Noah looked so handsome, but he wasn't smiling.

He hadn't seen her yet and Ash trembled with anticipation. He was yards away, though several people stood between them. If he'd just turn. His brother turned first. When Ilya gaped at her and then pressed his lips together, Ash realized he knew who she was. Looked as if Noah hadn't told them she was coming, which would make things even more difficult. Before Noah saw her, Ilya sent his brother and father off in a different direction and then he advanced on her like a wolf.

"What the fuck are you doing here?" he whispered.

Without waiting for an answer, he grabbed her wrist and pressed something on the wall behind her. Ash had a split second to think about screaming and decided not to. He wouldn't hurt her. *I hope.* Ilya bundled her through a hidden door into a small, dimly lit sitting room. The opening closed behind them.

"Answer my question," Ilya snapped.

"Noah invited me."

"Hardly. Not even he would be so crass as to invite the daughter of the woman who killed our sister. Your face has been all over the papers and the television. The moment my father sets eyes on you, he'll know who you are." He paced around the room. "Christ, woman, he's only just found out Natalia is dead. What the hell were you thinking?"

She hadn't thought. She was a selfish idiot. "I love Noah," she whispered.

Ilya stamped across the room to stand in front of her. "Well, don't. He doesn't need love from someone like you. He doesn't need *you*."

Ash blinked and angrily rubbed a tear from her cheek. "I'd like to hear that from him."

"Not tonight. You're going to spoil everything. This is a big night for Noah as well as our father. I don't want him distracted." He raked her with his gaze. "Christ, what the fuck are you wearing? You think you're Cinderella?"

Unhappiness welled up inside Ash like a geyser preparing to blow. She burned with embarrassment and her limbs tingled. The dress seemed unbearably tight around her chest and she found herself unable to speak. It was only a matter of time before she either burst into tears or collapsed. She'd leave right now.

Ash headed across the room toward the normal door, but it opened and Noah's father walked in.

Oh God.

He glanced between her and Ilya and then held out his hand. "I'm Arkady Golitsin."

When Ash put her hand in his, he brought it to his lips and kissed it. The lump in her throat grew painful, the constriction of her lungs more intense.

"And you're Ash Elleston." He didn't let go of her trembling fingers.

Ash tried to speak and nothing came out of her mouth.

"You seem to be secreted away with the wrong son." He stared pointedly at Ilya.

"She has no right to be here," Ilya said. "I was just persuading her to leave."

His father smiled at Ash. "Please call me Arkady. I'll call you Ash, if I may."

"Father, are you listening to me? We don't need her here tonight."

Arkady tucked her hand in the crook of his arm.

"You look spectacular," he said. "I wish everyone was wearing a dress like yours. I should have specified it on the invitation."

A shuddering breath escaped Ash's lips. *Oh, don't be nice to me, please. Just look at me like Ilya, as if I'd crawled out of a dung heap, and let me scuttle away.*

"I'll get her a cab," Ilya said.

Arkady glared at him and then turned back to Ash. "I wanted to talk to you."

Ash's mind raced out of control, zooming down a path to nowhere. What on earth had possessed her to come? She should have guessed she'd have to speak to Noah's father, should have guessed he'd ask questions and that he wouldn't like her answers. There *were* things he needed to hear, but tonight wasn't the right time. She had to make excuses and leave. She dragged moisture to her mouth and spoke.

"I'm sorry for coming. I thought the invite I received was from Noah, but someone must have been trying to spoil this evening for you." The dam had burst and now she couldn't prevent the words pouring out. "I'll leave at once of course. My dress... I'm sorry. I was tricked. I wasn't trying to stand out. I never wanted to cause any trouble for anyone. Ever." Ash gulped air. "I don't know what to say about your daughter except how sorry I am, and I know that's nowhere near enough. My parents were the worst people in the world, and I'd give anything to rewind the clock and make it all not have happened." *Christ, did any of that make sense?*

"Shhh." He used the pad of his thumb to wipe away the tear slipping down her cheek. "You were a little girl. You weren't and aren't responsible for what your parents did."

Ilya huffed and his father arched his brow. "Am I wrong, Ilya?" he asked. "I don't expect you to take responsibility for my bad decisions."

"I know it's not her fault," Ilya mumbled. "I never meant to imply that."

Oh God. Thoughts of running were overwhelmed by the need to do the right thing. Maybe Ash only had one chance to say this, and that moment was now.

"What if it was?" she whispered. "If I'd been a better child, if they'd liked me more—they might not have taken those girls and killed them." The pain in Ash's chest spread to her legs and her knees trembled beneath the gown.

Arkady shook his head. "You're not responsible—"

"But I am," Ash whispered. "Let me tell you this and then you never need to see me again." She took a deep breath trying to calm herself. "I was seven years old and I wanted a book I'd seen in a box outside a shop. My parents never bought me anything so I didn't bother asking for it. Only I wanted that book so much." She shuddered as she remembered.

"I think it came to represent everything I couldn't have. No sweets, toys or friends. I'm not saying this to make you feel sorry for me, I just need you to understand what my life was like. Cold, empty and without color. The book was full of pictures of animals and I used to look at a few pages every time I passed."

Arkady stared at her intently. Ilya's jaw was clenched tight as if he was going to explode any moment.

"One day, my birthday, I hadn't had a single present. I took the book and ran. The shopkeeper knew me. When I got home, the police were waiting. They told me off and my parents did too, but they didn't shout or scream, and I knew I'd be punished later. When the police had gone, my father broke my arm." Ash tightened her fingers into fists.

"Shit," Ilya gasped.

Arkady stiffened. "That —"

"Please let me finish." Only Ash wondered if she could. Her chest felt as though her heart was crushing her lungs. "When I went to Rampton last Sunday, my mother recalled that incident and told me she hadn't been able to break my other arm in case the authorities became suspicious." Ash gulped. *Oh God, oh God.* Her voice had dropped to a whisper. "She looked for someone else to break instead." Ash's eyes filled with tears. "So if I'd been a good girl and not stolen that book, you'd still have your daughter. I'm very sorry."

Noah's father pulled her into his arms and pressed his face against her hair. "You poor girl."

"Oh my God, oh my God." Ilya kept repeating the same phrase over and over.

"And now I've hurt Noah as well," Ash whispered. "He hasn't spotted me yet. I'm sure you must have a back entrance I could sneak out of. I promise you and your family will never see or hear of me again."

Arkady pulled back and held her by the shoulders. "I invited you to come tonight."

Ash gaped and then clamped her jaw shut. Ilya groaned and dropped onto a couch, his head in his hands.

"Now it's your turn to listen," Arkady said. "You are not responsible for what your parents did. They blighted your life just as much as they did that of my family. And even on her death bed your mother was still determined to hurt you. It's hard to countenance anyone could be so despicable as to blame a child in that way."

"Mother did," Ilya whispered into the silence.

Ash turned. Ilya's face was haggard. He looked like Noah hiding from the fireworks.

"What are you talking about?" Arkady asked.

"Mama said it was my fault because if I'd done what I was supposed to and stayed home with her, Natalia would never have been at that hospital." Ilya raised his dark eyes to his father. "Then Mama went away and killed herself."

Arkady groaned. He sat beside his son and put his arm around his shoulders. "Ilya, Ilya. She didn't mean it."

Ilya pulled away and jumped to his feet. "Of course she bloody meant it. It *was* my fault, just like part of this was Ash's fault too."

Ash winced.

Arkady stood. "The only one responsible is Denise North. Ilya, your mother was just as wrong to say that to you as Ash's was to say what she did to her. I will not let you blame yourself. Your mother was distraught with grief and guilt. Don't you think I feel guilt over her death too? If I'd been more supportive, noticed she wasn't coping, could I have prevented her from killing herself? Things happen in life and we have to deal with them or they take us down too."

It all came back to her, Ash thought. One action, the theft of that book, had set into motion a series of events that had devastating effects on everyone. Ilya stared at her and Ash knew that was what he was thinking. If it hadn't been for her, if she'd never been born, if—

"Both of you, stop it," Arkady said. "You're letting emotion get in the way of common sense. Ash—you want to blame the shop keeper for putting that book outside for you to see, for buying that book from someone in the first place, for opening a book shop? Ilya—do you want to blame Daniel for refusing to let you take Natalia with you that day, for making him your best friend and not Mikhail? How far do you want to go back? To blame your mother's friend for being ill and lying in that hospital? Let it go."

Ilya stared at him and then flung open the door and stormed out.

Arkady sighed. "I knew he blamed himself, but I didn't know his mother had said that. How differently guilt affects us. It's left Ilya bitter. He won't allow himself to be happy. I wonder sometimes if he doesn't want Noah to be happy either, that he's angry because he couldn't blame Noah for any of it. Ilya worshipped his mother, which makes this even harder for him to bear. He brings joy to no one, least of all himself, but you—you brought my youngest son back to life. He told me you made him happy."

That should have made her happy too, but instead it upset her. "And now I've made him sad. I ran because I was afraid of what he'd say when he knew who I was. How could I tell him I was the reason Natalia was taken? No matter what you say, it was my behavior that day that triggered my mother to take your daughter."

Arkady shook his head. "You don't know that's true. This woman was cruel to you your entire life. Even when she's gone, she wants her hold on you to continue. Maybe the theft *did* trigger Natalia's murder. Maybe it didn't. But it's long past time to let it go."

He smiled at her. "I wanted to thank you for Noah. He was suffering and you helped him. Now that he's running again, I hoped you could catch him and make him understand. He doesn't have the burden of guilt and grief that engulfs you and Ilya."

Ash tensed. *Oh God, he does.*

"Ahhhh." Arkady exhaled the word. "What have I done? I see I'm wrong. Noah has always tried to do the right thing, and I bear responsibility for him going to Afghanistan."

"In what way?"

"My family made its money from armaments. The business was passed from my grandfather to my father to me. I sold it some time ago, but I suspect this might have been at the root of Noah's compulsion to show the world the bloody face of war. Of course it's not weapons that are evil, but those who use them with bad intent. Still, innocents get caught up and that's what concerned—concerns Noah. It would be easy to blame myself for what happened to my son."

He took Ash's hand and squeezed it gently. "We all have our crosses. Some are heavier than others, but life goes on and this is the only life we have. All I hope for is happiness for my sons and now for you too."

Ash swallowed hard.

"By the way." Arkady put his hand in his pocket, pulled out the butterfly necklace and let it dangle from his fingers.

"Oh God." Ash widened her eyes.

"The police told me you'd found it."

"Another reason not to like me much. I found it in the allotment and kept it. I thought it was pretty. I hid it in my teddy bear and it stayed there until...well."

"These are diamonds. Those are emeralds and rubies."

"Really?"

"You didn't see the name Faberge?"

Ash shook her head. *Bloody hell.*

"I feel like I have a piece of Natalia back when I hold this. It was my birthday gift to her and she loved it. Thank you for keeping it safe all these years. I hope one day to give it back to you, but I need to keep it in my pocket for a while. Now I must go back and join my guests. Will you dance with me later? Let's see if we can make Noah jealous."

Chapter Twenty-Five

Ronan had walked around the bustling room and not found Ash. He feared she'd gone home. On the way here in the taxi, he'd made her promise not to leave without telling him, but he'd known it wouldn't take much to flip her over the edge. While Ash was nowhere to be seen, Noah was all too visible, wandering among the guests, shaking hands, kissing cheeks, though judging by the short duration of his smiles, he wasn't happy. Ronan decided to watch him because if Ash was still around, sooner or later the pair would meet up.

When a tall, dark guy moved to Noah's side, put his hand on his back and guided him across the ballroom, Ronan guessed it was Noah's brother Ilya. They were unmistakably related, though Ilya's face was older, harder and...*ah shit*...more appealing. As the brothers crossed the room, they stopped to speak briefly to people, and Ronan didn't miss the fact that Ilya never let Noah shift from his side. When they slipped out into a darkened hallway, Ronan followed.

"What the fuck's the matter?" Noah tugged out of Ilya's grip.

"You need to spend more time with Sophia."

"Why?"

"Because you're going to propose to her."

Ronan tensed.

"What?" Noah gasped.

"Don't act so shocked. I already told you. It's all worked out."

Oh you fucking bastard, Ronan thought.

"I'm not proposing to Sophia. I love Ash."

"No you don't. You can't. Because she's just told Father that the day her mother killed Natalia, Ash had stolen some book. Denise North was pissed off she couldn't break Ash's arm and got her kicks in another way."

"Oh Christ," Noah leaned against the wall.

Ronan felt a muscle in his cheek start to twitch. His heart ached for Ash. How much more could she deal with? He wished he could look after her, hold her and make her forget all this, but he wasn't what she needed, Noah was. That devil, Ilya, needed something else entirely.

"Don't you see how impossible this is?" Ilya asked. "Bad enough it was her mother who killed our sister, but to know that her actions caused —"

"Shut up," Noah hissed. "She was seven years old. No one can possibly blame her. No more than I blame you for our mother killing herself."

Ilya stiffened.

"Don't you think I felt it too?" Noah asked. "Mama chose to leave me as well. Don't you think I didn't worry what it was I'd done that made her want to leave me? Yeah, you might have been supposed to be looking after Natalia, but our mother left me too. You're not the only one who got hurt." Noah blew out a long breath. "I've had enough of being miserable. Where's Ash?"

"Forget her."

Noah stepped right into his brother's face. "I'd sooner forget you."

Noah stalked off with Ilya in pursuit. Ronan followed. In the ballroom, Noah walked straight into the path of an older couple and a pretty blonde who looked like their daughter. Ronan spotted Ash smiling on the other side of the room and sighed with relief.

"Pyotr, Madena, Sophia." Ilya shook the older couple's hands and kissed Sophia on the cheek. Noah did the same.

"How are you, Noah?" the man asked.

"You look really well," Sophia said. "Did you get my card?"

"Yes, thank you," Noah mumbled.

"I'm sure Noah and Sophia have lots to talk about," Ilya said, and ushered the older couple toward a waiter carrying champagne.

Noah looked as though he'd rather be anywhere else. Ronan had intended to stay by Noah, but his instincts – and more to the point – his cock led him to shadow Ilya.

"Have you had chance to consider my business plan?" Ilya asked Sophia's father.

"I'm not sure –"

"It's a sound investment. We'll both make money. Now that our families are going to be..." Ilya's voice trailed away as his attention was drawn to Ronan closing in.

"Excuse me," Ronan said to the older couple before he turned to Ilya. "I have something urgent I need to talk to you about."

He settled his hand around Ilya's arm, gripped tight and pulled him away.

"Who are you?" Ilya tried to pull free. "What are you doing?"

Ronan put his mouth to his ear. "I'm taking you somewhere quiet to fuck you."

He let go of Ilya's arm and watched his face. Jaw-dropping shock jumped to confusion. Ilya's tongue slid over his lower lip and he glanced around. Ronan did nothing but stare directly at him and wait. Ilya blinked, his anxiety clear, and then slowly the expression on his face changed. His eyes darkened, his mouth tightened and his nostrils flared. Now he was looking at Ronan instead of wasting his time thinking.

"What did you say?" Ilya whispered, and Ronan laughed.

"Do you really think I'll say it twice? You know this house. Find a room."

Ilya nodded.

Bingo – compliance.

Ilya moved ahead and Ronan stayed close behind. He didn't often have the uncontrollable urge to fuck a stranger, but Ilya had ticked every box.

An arrogant, manipulative bastard who needed to be taken down a peg or two.

A dominant, controlling guy who hid his other side—one that Ronan recognized.

A man who needed dark secrets teased out of him.

Of course a punch in the face from Ilya would have told Ronan he was wrong, but instead Ilya was obeying him.

Ilya moved faster, out of the crowds, down corridors, past waiters, through a locked door and up a staircase. Ronan squashed his guilt over abandoning Ash. If she couldn't do this on her own, he wasn't going to do it for her. He was fairly certain all she needed to do was walk into Noah's arms for this to end happily ever after. If not, he'd make sure she left one of her shoes for Noah to find. Ronan was more than happy to remove Ilya from the equation as his contribution.

A door opened then closed, a dim light came on and they stood in a sumptuous bedroom with old-fashioned furniture and a wide bed. Ronan unfastened his tie and shrugged off his jacket. He laid them over the back of a gilded chair.

Ilya edged away. "What's your name?"

"Ronan. I'm a friend of Ash." Ronan unfastened his cufflinks and slipped them into his pocket.

"Ash," Ilya spat out the word.

"Careful," Ronan said. "I told you she's my friend. It's not wise to upset me." He pulled his shirt from his pants and began to unbutton it. "Take your clothes off."

"I-I..."

"Take. Your. Fucking. Clothes. Off." Ronan didn't raise his voice but the command in his tone was clear. Ilya just needed a little push.

Ronan bit back a smile as Ilya's fingers fumbled trying to unfasten his bow tie.

"Better," Ronan snapped. He had the mother of all hard-ons. He'd not felt this level of physical attraction for a long time. It made a change not to get turned-on solely by his sadistic tendencies. He laid his shirt over his jacket and unfastened the top button on his pants. It didn't much help the pressure on his cock.

Ilya pulled at the buttons of his shirt and let it fall to the floor. Ronan's gaze dropped to Ilya's chest and got stuck. The guy looked as if he'd been hewn from marble, the smooth, hard lines of his sculptured body almost a match for his own.

"Pick up the shirt," Ronan said.

Ilya's jaw tightened but he bent, gathered up the shirt and put it with his jacket. Ronan stood maybe an inch taller but their builds were similar, eyes equally dark, mouths equally hard. Mentally they were opposites. Ronan could keep the two halves of his life separate. He knew exactly what he was, what he was looking for and when he found it—provided it was willing—he took it. Ilya didn't yet know what he wanted. Ronan would show him.

He toed off his shoes and removed his socks. Ilya copied him. When Ronan pulled down the zipper on his pants a couple of inches and slid his hand inside to adjust his cock, Ilya let out a muffled groan.

"Take off your pants and shorts," Ronan said.

He fixed his gaze on the flex and play of the muscles of Ilya's arms and chest and followed the damp trail of dark hair to a heavily veined cock rising thick and hard out of a nest of black curls. Moisture filled Ronan's mouth and he swallowed. Ilya's shaft stuck out from his body, too weighty to stand straight up. His full balls cupped the base, and Ronan realized all of this guy was beautiful, a perfect body and damaged mind.

He liked that Ilya wasn't shy. Ronan was tired of masochistic guys who whimpered before they'd even removed an item of clothing and begged him to hurt them. Ilya stood there, hands by his sides, chin up, and let Ronan take his fill. There was plenty to admire—a cock head glistening with juice, hard abs, slim hips and that willful arrogance.

"Like what you see?" Ilya asked.

Cocky bastard. "I'd prefer you shaved."

Ilya snorted. Ronan didn't bother making the point that Ilya *would* shave if he wanted him to. If they had more time, he'd do it for him now. Ronan turned his back, shucked off his pants and boxers and laid them neatly with the rest of his clothes, letting Ilya get a good view of his ass. When he turned, Ilya gazed at his face and didn't let his eyes drop. For once, Ronan was thrown, and excitement lurched in his chest. Unpredictability could make this special.

When Ilya took a couple of paces forward and laid his warm hand on Ronan's chest, Ronan knew he should have stopped him but he waited. Ilya dragged his palm over Ronan's pecs, drawing the tips of his fingers tight around his nipples. Ronan watched Ilya's face as his hand moved down, fingers twisting in the line of dark hair. Ilya's face showed nothing, but his Adam's apple shifted twice. Before fingers reached his cock, Ronan grabbed Ilya's wrist and squeezed.

"Did I say you could touch me?"

Something dark flickered in Ilya's eyes, and Ronan's interest kicked up another gear. He blinked. *Get back on track.*

"I saw the way you pushed Sophia and your brother together. You want to do some deal with her father and you'd sacrifice your brother's happiness to make it happen."

"Sophia can make him happy. She's from a good family. Their children will be perfect."

Wanker. "Who made you God?"

"Someone has to take charge." Ilya stared straight at him.

"He likes Ash better."

"She's not suitable." Mr. Stubborn's mouth tightened.

"You're such a selfish shit," Ronan said in a quiet voice. "You use one of his friends to spy on him, you pay to make Ash's passport disappear. I wonder what you arranged in Paris to spoil things."

Ilya flinched, and Ronan had his answer. "What?" he snapped.

"The desk lost her message."

"You fucking bastard."

Ilya's shoulders sagged. "Are we going to fuck or not?"

"Oh, you're going to get fucked. The question is how much I'll hurt you."

Ilya's teeth worried his lower lip.

"Do you want to be hurt?" Ronan asked.

There was no answer.

Ronan narrowed his brows. "Do you want to be hurt?"

Ilya swallowed. "Yes."

The answer was quiet but there. Ronan hadn't lost sight of the fact that the best punishment was to walk away, but Ilya wasn't the only selfish one. Ronan wanted him.

One step to yank Ilya into his arms. Their lips connected, tongues tangling while hands pawed at each other's butts. Their cocks rubbed together as they rutted. The rough friction of Ilya's hair and rigid cock bruised the fragile skin of Ronan's balls and made him shiver with barely controlled lust. Ilya smelled of soap and expensive aftershave and he tasted of champagne. Ronan nipped the edge of his tongue and as Ilya gasped into his mouth, Ronan savored the coppery tang of blood.

Ilya moaned and bucked harder against him, and Ronan cupped and kneaded buttocks as firm as his, rocking his hips harder and faster against Ilya's. They panted into each other's mouths, breathing each other's air as Ronan edged him back toward the bed. He slid a hand between their bodies and wrapped his fingers around Ilya's cock, pumping up and down.

"Fuck, fuck," Ilya gasped.

Ronan shoved him onto the bed. "Lube, condom?"

Ilya scrambled back, stretching his long body to reach into a bedside table. He offered both, but Ronan only took the condom. "Lube yourself."

Ilya's hesitation was minimal. He squirted the gel onto his fingers and then brought his knees up and spread his legs.

Shhhhit. The sight of Ilya pressing slick fingers into his own asshole while he squeezed his cock with his other hand made Ronan's fingers fumble as he rolled on the condom. *That's a first.* Ilya's breathing grew choppy, and Ronan could see him shaking. The guy would make himself come, which was not the point, pretty as it might be to watch. He pulled Ilya's fingers away from his shaft and shoved his knees under Ilya's thighs as he positioned his cock against the puckered entrance. Ronan didn't wait,

didn't ask, just pushed straight inside, one long, hard, ramming thrust that buried him to the balls. The ensuing jolt raced up his spine and ignited a fire in his brain.

Ilya shuddered, tensed and then released a long groan as he gazed into Ronan's eyes. Ronan didn't move. He hoped Ilya thought he was giving him time to adjust to having a fat cock shoved up his ass, but Ronan was having problems controlling himself, which was very unusual.

"Forgotten what to do?" Ilya asked.

Ronan laughed. Not often a sub managed that.

Ilya moaned. "Shit, I felt that laugh all the way down your cock."

He squeezed his rectal muscles and Ronan gritted his teeth behind closed lips.

"Don't hurt me. Just fuck me," Ilya whispered.

"Why shouldn't I hurt you?"

Ilya's jaw twitched. "Yeah, why not? I deserve it. I broke my mother's heart, disappointed my father, pissed off my brother. Why not hurt me?"

"Miss anyone off that list?"

"She's your friend, but I'm sorry. I can't see how it could work out."

"Is that your problem?"

"It's my family."

Ronan withdrew his cock until just the tip remained inside Ilya. "Your family would be lucky to have Ash as part of it. She makes Noah happy. That's *all* that matters."

He thrust back hard, and Ilya cried out. The sound was one of pleasure not pain. Ronan pulled back again, drawing his cock slowly through the nerve-rich tissue. Ilya rocked up into his thrust and then they were moving together, each penetration met by a forward buck of Ilya's hips. Ronan plunged into him, in and out, faster and harder, his shunts growing more frantic. Ilya had his fingers wrapped around his cock, jerking off as he stared into Ronan's eyes. His gaze was so compelling, so intense Ronan felt it as a warm caress around his heart. *Oh God, no.*

"Fuck, fuck, I'm coming," Ilya gasped.

White flecks of cum exploded from Ilya's cock and he shot his seed over his belly in long, hard spurts. Ronan gave in to his own urgent request for release and let the switch flip in his head. His orgasm started in his lower back, raced up and then down his spine to ignite his balls. Ilya relaxed his hand on his spent cock and Ronan's cock took the baton and ran. Ronan gasped in ragged bursts, his body dripping sweat as he emptied himself. And when the last spasm had faded and he should have pulled out, stood up and walked away, he allowed Ilya to pull him close and kiss him.

Ronan lifted his mouth to say, "You're going to be missed downstairs."

"I don't give a fuck."

Ronan let himself be pulled back down.

* * * * *

Ash sighed as she looked around the ballroom. It was hard to keep smiling. Pointless searching for a plant to hide behind when she'd need an elephant to provide cover. Ronan had disappeared. Dalton was here, though she felt sure he was avoiding her. Arkady was circulating and talking to his guests, although every so often when he came near her, he smiled and nodded as if he was happy to see she hadn't run. Ilya had disappeared as well, and Noah hadn't seen her, though a little voice asked how that was possible when she was in a dress the size of a car. Ash couldn't help but conclude he didn't *want* to see her. Hence the need for an elephant.

"What a ridiculous dress."

Ash turned at the sound of Valentina's voice and put a smile on her face. "Thank you *so* much." That usually worked to confuse, and judging by Valentina's wrinkled brow it did this time too.

Valentina sniffed in disgust. "You've a lot of nerve turning up here. You've caused this family enough grief. You should..."

Her voice trailed away as she fixed her gaze over Ash's shoulder.

"I wish I had some duct tape," Noah said. He stepped to Ash's side and looked deep into her eyes, taking her hand with a worried smile. "Only a moron would fail to understand if it hadn't been for Ash, we'd never have known what happened to my sister." He took hold of both of Ash's hands and raised them to his lips. "And for your information, Valentina, I chose this dress, and Ash is the most beautiful woman here."

Valentina stalked away and Ash sighed.

"You look lovely," Noah whispered in her ear. "If only the dress was a little bigger, I could crawl under your skirts and do wicked things."

Her cheeks burned. Noah moved to stand in front of her, and Ash thought her heart might burst through her ribs it pounded so hard.

He took a deep breath. "I understand why you didn't want to speak to me, I really do, but I was worried about you. I imagined you under a bus, attacked by sharks, eaten by piranhas. From now on, you're not allowed to go anywhere without your phone. Even the bathroom. Sometimes I just need to hear your voice." He waited. "That was a hint."

Ash gulped.

"Are you going to apologize?" he asked. "Think carefully."

She smiled. "No. Are you?"

"No." He held out his hand and Ash put hers into his. As their fingers curled together, she heard him exhale. "Did you see me with a woman in a yellow dress?" He didn't wait for an answer. "That's Sophia. Ilya was plotting for me to propose. It's not going to happen, but I wanted to tell you in case the conniving shit tries to convince you otherwise. Ilya that is, not Sophia."

"Okay."

Noah scooped up a glass of champagne from a passing waiter, gave it to Ash and then took one for himself.

He tightened his grip on her hand. "Seeing your mother...was it very bad?"

Ash bit her lip and nodded.

"Was it the first time since you were a child?"

"Yes."

"What did she want in exchange for information about Natalia?"

Ash raised her eyebrows. "How did you know?"

"Because she could have spoken out long ago if she hadn't wanted to save it for a final bargaining tool."

"You're right. She saved it for something simple and yet impossible. She wanted me to tell her I loved her. I'd never said it to her before and she knew I wouldn't mean it, but she still wanted to make me say it. So I did. It was easier than I thought because I knew she hadn't really won and that was all that mattered. But then she gave me the name of your sister and I thought – the bitch has won after all."

"No, she hasn't."

Ash smiled.

"So you found him." Arkady slapped Noah on the back.

Noah started. "Father, this is –"

"Yes, I know. Ash and I have had a little talk. She's promised me a dance later. We're almost ready to go in to dinner and I can't find Ilya. I saw him slip away with Ash's companion."

"Ronan?" Ash asked in surprise.

"Would you go and retrieve him, Noah?" Arkady asked. "Try upstairs. Knock."

Noah sucked in his cheeks and nodded to Ash before he walked away.

Arkady turned to Ash. "I've made sure there's a place set for him at the table. I've never done that for a gatecrasher before. I hope your friend is a good man."

"Ronan is one of the kindest guys I know."

"Perhaps he can teach Ilya to be kind too."

Ash hesitated and they exchanged a look of understanding. "Does Noah know?"

"I think not. Ilya has hidden his sexual preferences by conducting occasional affairs with women. It's not something he'd talk to me about, though I wish he would. He'd find a sympathetic ear." He gave a little smile. "Has Noah told you what happened in Afghanistan?"

The question caught Ash by surprise. "Yes, but I won't –"

"No, no." Arkady shook his head. "I wouldn't wish you to. If Noah wanted me to know, he'd have told me. It's enough for me that he's spoken to you."

Oh God. It's going to be okay, Ash thought. Noah's sweet father didn't seem to hate her after all. Perhaps Ilya could be persuaded that she wasn't the devil incarnate.

Chapter Twenty-Six

Noah's steps slowed as he approached his brother's bedroom. He'd understood what his father had hinted at and wasn't sure what he thought. Ilya gay? It didn't make sense. He'd had loads of girlfriends. Though come to think of it, none had lasted, but then none of Noah's had either. Noah raised his fist to knock, but the door opened before he made contact.

He glanced between Ronan and Ilya and then at the rumpled bed behind them. Ronan smiled, but Ilya looked like he'd swallowed a rancid pig. Whole. Funny, Noah felt the same. He could almost see cogs whirling in his brother's head as he tried to think up an excuse before coming to the conclusion there was no point.

"Father sent me," Noah said. "Dinner's about to be served."

"And that's why we're on our way," Ilya snapped.

Ronan turned and put his hand on Ilya's arm. Noah couldn't see the look Ronan gave his brother, but the tension fell from Ilya's face. Noah was impressed. He hoped Ronan had threatened to beat the crap out of Ilya if he didn't lose the attitude.

They set off down the corridor, Ronan walking slightly behind.

Noah pinned his brother with a glare as he stalked beside him. "Why didn't you tell me? I feel like an idiot for not knowing."

"No one knows."

"Father does," Noah said.

Ilya stumbled to a halt. "Really?"

"He saw you leave with Ronan and sent me to find you. Guess he thought it was time I knew as well."

"I'm not gay." Ilya carried on walking down the corridor.

"You're just into S&M?" Noah had hardly uttered the last syllable before Ilya pinned him up against the wall, shoving his bow tie into his neck.

"What the fuck are you talking about?" Ilya barked.

Ronan grabbed Ilya's arm and yanked him away. "God, Noah. Don't ever volunteer as a spy."

Noah rubbed his throat and straightened the bow as he watched comprehension sweep over Ilya's face, and then his brother turned to Ronan. "Shit. You and Noah?"

"No," Ronan and Noah said at the same time.

"Not like that anyway," Noah added.

"Then what?" Ilya choked out.

"Noah and I have played a few games, but sex was a step too far for him."

Noah faced Ilya. "Are you gay or bi?"

"Bi, and so is Ronan."

Oh fuck. Noah hadn't expected that. "Does Ash know?"

"That I like women as well? No. I watched and waited, thought at one time about making a move, but decided she needs one guy who wants only her. It was better for her to think I'm gay."

"I can't get my head around this," Noah muttered.

"Yeah you can," Ronan said. "You can get your head around anything if you want it enough."

"So, this is why you didn't want Sophia?" Noah asked his brother.

Ilya gave a slight nod. "One of us has to marry, and marry well for the sake of the family. What are the chances of finding a woman who's prepared to share me with a guy?"

"You selfish fucker," Noah snarled and stepped in front of Ilya. "Fine if I marry a woman I don't love just so you can have what you want? You've no right to—"

Ronan caught Noah's arm. "I'll make him see sense. It will be easier with him than it was with you."

Ilya *harrumphed* and strode on.

Noah grinned and looked at Ronan. "Don't hold back with him, will you?"

Ronan laughed.

"It's not fucking funny," Ilya snapped.

"Ilya." Ronan barked out his name.

Ilya turned and walked back, his gaze on Ronan.

"Look forward not back," Ronan said. "You're going to trip up. I might not be able to catch you."

Ilya nodded and turned again.

When Noah reached the ballroom, he saw his father with Ash, her arm tucked into his as he talked to one of his friends. Noah thought he'd never loved his father more. Ash's face lit up when Noah approached. His father handed her over and beckoned to Ilya.

Noah spun Ash into his arms. "I love you," he whispered.

The wide smile on Noah's face warmed Ash's heart. "You're growing on me," she whispered back.

A bang on a gong silenced the chattering crowd. "Your highnesses, my lords, ladies and gentlemen, please take your seats in the dining room."

Noah let go of Ash's hand. "I have to surrender you to Ronan now. I'm not happy about it, but protocol reigns at these stuffy events." He sighed. "I have to enter with my idiot brother after everyone else has gone in."

Ronan offered his arm with a smile, and Ash banished thoughts of asking him about Ilya. Yet. Ronan escorted Ash into a long, glittering room lit by a line of crystal chandeliers. The table was laid with sparkling glasses, silver cutlery and white porcelain. Down the length of the table lay a decoration made of what looked like sand. In front of the seats they were led to, created in fine-colored grains was a picture of two boys flying kites on a beach. That scene was divided from the next by flowers. Beyond the blossoms, a dog romped in water.

"Wow, that's amazing," Ash whispered.

"It's called table decking," Ronan said. "In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries the royal courts in Europe employed deckers to make their dining tables exceptionally beautiful. I think this is mostly sand, but they used to use sugar and rock dust, anything to give color and texture."

All along the table, guests were admiring the artwork in front of them. Ash looked to her left and saw a girl standing on a lawn with butterflies fluttering around her head. *Oh God, Natalia.*

She tugged on Ronan's sleeve. "This is Arkady's life," she whispered. "His family, his memories."

Ronan nodded. "It's well done."

"Your highnesses, lords, ladies and gentlemen. Please be upstanding for their highnesses Prince Noah, Prince Ilya and Prince Arkady Golitsin."

Without Ronan's grip on her arm, Ash wouldn't have been upstanding at all.

"Oh fuck," Ash whispered.

"Didn't you know?" Ronan asked. "Well, obviously not. On the invitation it said *Knyaz* which means prince in Russian. They're not royalty in the way we know it, but titled nonetheless. Looks like you found the prince you deserve, Ash."

Ash hated the expression gobsmacked, but now understood it. *A prince?*

Everyone applauded as Arkady moved to the head of the table, about ten seats away from Ash and Ronan. Ilya and Noah sat at either side of their father. Noah was on the opposite side of the table to Ash, so she could see him smiling at her. Did he think she'd known he was a prince? No wonder Ilya didn't consider her good enough for the family. She wasn't. *Damn.*

Ash tucked her dress under her thighs as she sat. Good thing there was plenty of room at the table.

Arkady was the only person still standing and gradually the room quieted.

"Thank you all for coming tonight. I asked for no gifts, but if you so wished you could make a donation to the charity of my choice. I'm delighted to tell you a hundred

thousand pounds will be given to All Our Heroes, the charity my son Noah recently worked for. A sum that I'll match."

Applause filled the room again and Ash watched Noah shift uncomfortably on his seat. She wished she was close and could hold his hand.

"You're all aware of the drama of this week." Arkady's voice broke at the end and he paused to pull himself together. "But not all of you will be aware of the role a young woman here tonight has played in bringing Natalia back to us. For what she has done, I will be eternally grateful."

Oh God, no. Ash's heart pounded. Ronan's hand gripped hers under the cover of the tablecloth.

"I'd like to propose the first toast to Ash Elleston, whose determination and courage should be an inspiration to us all. To Ash."

Everyone stood. Ronan kept his hand on her shoulder to keep her down. Every face turned toward her and Ash looked at Noah to see him mouthing, "I love you." She melted.

"The second toast is to my sons." Arkady turned to Ilya and then to Noah. "Men now, but I still see the boys you once were. Boys who continually taught me how much patience I had, how there was as much joy picnicking under a pirates' flag in the nursery as there was in dining at the Ritz. Boys who indignantly excused their bad habits as inherited from me, boys who'd remain taciturn all day yet would strike up complex conversations at bedtime, boys who'd spend hours being uncooperative and yet offer to run any errand when it was time for a bath."

There were chuckles around the table. Noah stared intently at his father. Ilya's jaw was twitching.

"My sons are the best things in my life," Arkady said. "And I am proud of them. From the moment my children were born, their potential gave me hope for the future and still does. We've been through tragedy, but I never surrendered the belief that no matter how bad things became, life would one day be happy again."

Oh God, he believes the same as me. Ash couldn't shift her gaze from Arkady.

"I have sons who are strong enough to know when they are weak and courageous enough to face that weakness and fight it. I have never loved my sons more than I do today. That will be true tomorrow and the day after that. They've given me gifts of joy and of hope—as well as the chance to gaze at the stars. If I had only one gift to give to them, it would be happiness. My message to you all is when you find happiness, don't let it go. Wrap your arms around it and cherish it as the greatest gift. To my boys, my wonderful sons Ilya and Noah."

Ash blinked back tears. Arkady embraced Ilya and then Noah, and everyone raised their glasses.

Ronan leaned to put his mouth by her ear. "I wish that for you too, Ash."

"I *am* happy."

He smiled. "Don't let the past spoil the future."

Easier said than done, but Ash would try, just as she always did.

"What about you and Ilya then?" she whispered as the first course was served, some sort of smoked salmon dish and more champagne. "Do you like him?"

"Like?" Ronan forked up a mouthful of food and chewed. "No, I don't think I do at the moment, but I don't need to like him to want him."

"How did you know he preferred guys?" Ash asked quietly.

"I'm good at reading people, whereas sometimes you're too busy trying to make them happy to see what they're really like."

Ash sighed. "Kay was a big mistake."

"And James?" Ronan raised his eyebrows.

"And James." Ash smiled. "But I know you, right?"

"Yep, you know me." His gaze shifted.

Ah, so she didn't. "You never told me what it was that stopped you from speaking to your parents for all those years."

"No."

"Will you?"

Ronan brought his fork back from his mouth. "They saw something they didn't understand. They told me to leave and I did. What I should have done was go back. No point in trying to explain something they could never accept, but I should have tried harder to put things right."

"What—?"

"No, I won't tell you."

Ash frowned. "Why not?"

"Because I'm afraid you won't like me anymore."

She heard the vulnerability in his voice and let it drop. The loss of Ronan's friendship would be devastating. Some secrets had to stay hidden. Ash understood that. She had a few of her own no one would ever know.

* * * * *

The meal was fantastic—so many courses Ash lost count, though the tightness of the dress, coupled with her excitement, stopped her from eating too much. As everyone gradually filed out, Ilya came over.

"Ash, Ronan, would you both stay? There's something I want to do."

A band started up in the other room and Ilya signaled to a waiter to close the doors behind the last guest. Finally, only Arkady, Noah, Ilya, Ronan, Dalton and Ash were left. Noah was heading for Ash when Ilya cleared his throat. *Oh God, what now?* Ilya worried Ash. He wasn't just going to suddenly think she deserved Noah.

"I wanted to announce this in front of everyone," Ilya said. "But I realized it might not be what Noah wanted. In fact, I'm sure it's not, but if I say nothing, that wouldn't be right either. I think this is the time and place, for my father's sake, if no one else's."

Ash glanced between Ilya and Noah. Did he know what Ilya was talking about? Noah stared intently at his brother, nothing showing on his face. Anxiety bubbled in Ash's stomach.

"We all know Afghanistan took its toll on my brother and subsequently on this family. But something good has come of it." Ilya took a step closer to his father. "Noah has been awarded the Queen's Gallantry Medal for outstanding bravery whilst on photographic assignment in Afghanistan."

Noah's eyes closed for a moment and he clenched his fists. Then he opened his eyes and gave Dalton a questioning stare. Ash swallowed hard. She had no idea what Noah would do.

"Sorry," Dalton muttered.

"Noah?" his father asked. "My God. Why didn't you tell me?"

Ash moved behind Noah and slid her hands over his clenched fists.

"The letter said Noah saved several lives when his own was at serious risk," Ilya said.

"I didn't... I wasn't thinking." Noah groaned. "I d-don't deserve it."

"I went to see Dave," Ash said, and he spun round. "He said you could have run for the helicopter or kept your head down and hidden, and you didn't."

Noah winced as if he were in pain then drew himself up and glared at everyone. "What the f-fucking hell is this? Some sort of conspiracy? I don't want the f-fucking thing." He frowned at Ash. "I wish you hadn't gone to see Dave. I wasn't ready." Then he turned on Dalton. "I presume you found the letter. Thanks a lot, pal. Why the hell do you think I s-screwed the damn thing up? And you..." He strode over to Ilya. "What right did you have to tell Father? I chose n-not to. You have no idea what went on out there. I w-won't accept the medal and you can go to hell."

Noah stormed out of the room through the door used by the waiting staff and everyone stood in stunned silence.

"I told you," Dalton mumbled.

"Shut up," Ilya barked. "I'll go and talk to him."

"No, I will," Ash said, and headed for the door.

She saw Arkady catch Ilya's sleeve and shot him a grateful glance.

Ash found Noah sitting on the back stairs, his head in his hands.

"Ash, don't," he said hoarsely. "Leave me alone."

"No, your highness." Ash sat awkwardly on the step next to his feet.

He snorted.

"I went to see Dave because you need to face your demons and I was afraid you'd run away again. I hoped Dave would reach out to you, but I needed to be sure he wasn't going to make things worse. You were doing a good-enough job filling yourself with misery, I didn't want him to agree with your convoluted logic. He didn't. He told me what happened and how he feels about it, and the sooner you see him, the better."

"I'm going on Wednesday," Noah muttered.

Ash risked putting her hand on his knee and was relieved when he didn't shrug it off.

"I don't deserve the medal," Noah whispered. He raised his head and pinned her with his dark gaze. "I don't want it."

"Dave and other soldiers put your name forward. They gave their accounts of what happened, and it's what they saw in you that's important and not what you see in yourself. Whether you reacted out of blind fury, complete panic or suffocating guilt doesn't matter. If you don't feel you deserve the medal, that doesn't matter either. They think you do. Life isn't always about what you want."

His hand slid over Ash's where it rested on his knee and his fingers curled over hers.

"Now do something for me," Ash said. "Go back in there and apologize to Ilya."

Noah bristled.

"Everything he's done has been because he loves you. He just doesn't always get it right. Don't you realize how proud he is of you?"

"She's right." Ilya stepped out of the shadows. "I am proud of you. I'm also envious."

Noah looked straight at him. "What? Of the fucking mess I've made of everything?"

Ilya laughed. "The mess *you* made? It was *my* selfishness that pushed me to disappear before Mama could pass over responsibility for Natalia. She told me it was my fault our sister died and I've heard her words in my head every day since."

Noah rose to his feet and Ash struggled to hers.

"Christ, Ilya," Noah whispered.

Ilya drew in a ragged breath. "I don't know what's come over me today. First I tell Father and now you."

Noah pulled Ilya into his arms, and as Ash slipped away, she heard choked sobs.

She'd barely walked into the ballroom before Arkady swept her into his arms and onto the dance floor.

"Mission accomplished?" he asked.

Ash sighed. "Hopefully. Noah and Ilya are in each other's arms and not exchanging punches."

"You're a miracle worker," he said. "And you can waltz. I'm in heaven. You really are the most extraordinary girl."

He twirled her around under the glittering lights, and Ash dared to hope that everything really would be all right.

As the set ended, Ilya tapped his father on the shoulder and asked to cut in. Ash felt nervous. She wasn't sure she much liked Ilya, but she'd give him a chance because he was Noah's brother. They waited for the music to begin, and Ash spotted Noah in the arms of a woman in a yellow dress.

"Sophia," Ilya said. "I see now she's wrong for Noah. He needs someone who understands shadows. My life seems to have been one of making entirely bad decisions."

He took Ash's hand in his, placed his other on her back and they began to dance.

"Forgive me?" Ilya asked.

"Yes."

He laughed. "That was quick."

"Being hurt is nothing unless you continue to remember it. I need to forgive myself and others. Only look forward not back."

"Thank you," Ilya whispered.

"We can be friends, can't we?" Ash asked.

"I'd like nothing more."

"My turn." Noah took his place and pulled Ash close. He lowered his head until his mouth hovered just above hers. "One dance and I'm dragging you upstairs to bed."

"No way," Ash said. "I'm in an incredible ball gown and dancing with a prince. We're not going anywhere until midnight."

Noah growled and gave her a slow, open-mouthed kiss that stopped her feet moving. Only Noah's tug got her dancing again, but he still kissed her, his hands around her waist, thumbs stroking the bottom of her bodice. He pressed his tongue against hers, dipped and teased until Ash kissed him back as hard as he was kissing her. It was only when she heard laughter that Ash registered the music had stopped and they were still dancing and kissing. She danced again with Arkady, with Ilya, with Ronan and once with an apologetic Dalton. And every time, Noah cut in before the dance had finished and pleaded with her to go upstairs.

They danced the final waltz together and Noah stared straight into her eyes for every second of it. As the last note faded away, he made a deep bow and Ash curtsied.

Noah took her hand. "Now can we go upstairs?"

"I need the bathroom."

He gave her a pained look. "There's one upstairs."

"I won't be long."

"I'll come with you."

When she came out of the cloakroom, there was no sign of Noah until she turned a corner. Noah and Ronan were walking away from her. Ash hurried to join them until she heard what Ronan was saying and stopped in her tracks.

"If you ever hurt her again, I'll come visit with my whip and I won't be playing," Ronan said.

"Yeah, well, back at you," Noah snapped. "I doubt your whip is what my brother needs."

"You needed it."

Oh God.

"No, I didn't."

"Then why did you keep coming back?"

Ash swallowed her whimper. She felt as though she'd dropped through a crack in the ice into freezing cold water. Ronan had whipped Noah? When had that started? *Oh fuck.* Noah had wanted Ronan to whip him? She began to breathe more rapidly. The thought of deliberately wanting to be hurt was anathema to her. Ilya appeared at her elbow.

"Stop it," Ilya whispered. "Don't make this out to be more than it is."

Ash gaped at him. "What? Isn't it bad enough? Turns out my housemate's into whips? And Noah kept going back to him. And you're involved too." She sagged against the wall and Ilya held her up. "I don't want Noah to be hurt. Why would – Oh Christ."

"You want people to be happy but only in ways of which you approve. I'd guess S&M wasn't Noah's scene. He was looking for answers but didn't find them with Ronan. Maybe I will."

She couldn't stop the gasp escaping, and Noah and Ronan turned to look at her, their eyes wide in shock.

"Don't let this spoil things," Ilya said.

"Spoil what?" Noah asked. "Why have you pinned Ash against the wall?" He pushed Ilya aside. "Do I need to pin you against a fucking wall?"

"She heard you talking about whips."

Ronan's mouth tightened and Noah gave a little moan.

"It's not what you think," Noah said. "I can explain."

Ash stared at him.

Noah opened and closed his mouth as he dragged his fingers through his hair. "No, I can't explain."

"Try," Ash said.

Noah cast a pleading look at Ronan, who hadn't moved a muscle.

"You try," Ash said to Ronan.

"It's a control thing," Ronan said.

Ash glared at Noah. "Linked to sex?"

He shook his head. "No, not for me. I didn't... It wasn't like that for me. Well, it was — No, not really. We never — Shit."

Ash sighed. "Try again."

"I thought the pain might help me deal with what happened in Afghanistan," Noah said. "Ronan kept telling me it wouldn't, but I didn't listen. I didn't hear what he was saying until I met you."

"I only play games with those who are willing," Ronan said. "It's difficult to explain, which is part of the reason I keep the two halves of my life separate."

It might not make sense to her, but Ash knew better than to harshly judge things she didn't understand.

"I'm still the Ronan you know."

"Yep, you are." Ash stepped forward, wrapped her arms around Ronan and kissed him. "Weirdo," she said.

He laughed and she saw the relief sweep over him.

Ash took hold of Noah's hand. "No more whips. I'm going to drive you crazy in a much less painful way."

Noah pulled her into his arms. "Please. Soon."

"On second thought, it will be painful," Ash whispered. "Because I'm going to make you wait."

"No chance," Noah whispered back, his honey-soaked voice making her knees tremble. "I'm going to take you upstairs and lick you all over."

Chapter Twenty-Seven

Noah nodded to his brother as Ilya and Ronan went into the bedroom on the left. He nudged Ash toward the room opposite.

"I've not stayed the night for months," he said. "I hope the bed's— Oh." Noah chuckled. The lamps were on, the curtains closed, the bed turned down and a bucket containing champagne stood on the side table. *Father.*

He closed the door, and Ash leapt at him. In a slow, staggering dance of buttons popping, zipper sliding and acres of material rustling, she divested him of his clothes as they kissed and laughed and stumbled around the room. The only things Ash appeared to have lost were her shoes. The buttons on that ball gown were a nightmare. Noah stood before her panting, his cock twitching with excitement.

"Aren't you going to take your dress off?" he asked.

"Not yet." His bow tie dangled from her fingers.

Noah looked from the tie to the innocent expression on her face. *Shit.* "What are you going to do with that?"

"Make you wait."

His idiotic cock went harder.

Ash nudged him back, one finger on his chest, until his legs hit the bed and he sat. She dropped to the carpet in front of him, surrounded by a sea of magenta froth and then trailed the black silk tie 'round and 'round the head of his cock.

"I'm not sure I *can* wait," he whispered.

He considered making an excuse and nipping to the bathroom to jack off, but then she'd guess what he'd done and... *Oh Christ. Forget it.* The combination of warm fingers and silky material tickling his cock made his balls jump like puppies. He'd be lucky to last a minute at this rate. Anticipation raced around his blood like a virus. Then she wrapped the strip of silk around the base of his cock, looped one end under the other and gently pulled until he felt it bite.

"I intend to have some answers. Tight enough?" she whispered.

"Tighter."

She tugged harder at the ends and Noah shuddered with pleasure, shivered with need. He spread his legs and the ends of the tie dropped to brush his inner thighs. Even that felt good.

"Want to show me how to tie it into a bow?" she asked.

"Cross the long end over the shorter. Push the long end through the loop. Double—No." Noah laughed. She'd already gone wrong. "I might need it taken off quickly. Leave it as it is."

Ash stroked the pearl of pre-cum from the rounded head of his cock and Noah hissed as the slit widened. She rubbed the moisture between her fingers and then pushed up on her knees to offer him a finger while she sucked her thumb. Noah tasted himself, wondered at the salty-sweet tang and how she could make something he wouldn't do, hadn't done, didn't think to do—feel so erotic.

"You sorry you kept this side of you a secret from me?" she asked.

"Yes," he gasped.

"Why did you keep it a secret?"

She moved her mouth to his balls, and Noah tensed. Too much play there and only a proper cock ring would stand a chance of stopping him from coming.

"I didn't think you'd understand. It was over before I met you."

Ash teased him down the line separating his balls and then pulled them into her mouth, pushing them from one cheek to the other with her tongue. Heat flashed through him and every one of his cells tensed as he tried to clamp down on his need to come. The relief when she let him go evaporated in a flash when she wrapped her lips around his cock head and sucked hard.

"Christ. That's... Oh God...that feels good." *Hot, wet, tight, perfect.*

Her hand joined the bow tie and she gripped tight around his root. Noah was lust-drunk and mesmerized. He watched her dark head bob up and down and groaned at the occasional flash of laughing green eyes before she went back to driving him insane. The sounds she made—the slurps, the moans, everything added to his desire until it teetered like an untidy pile of bricks—pop on another and he'd fall. She pumped, twisted, sucked and nibbled while Noah gasped as if he'd run a mile—was still running, toward her, away from her.

Oh shhhhit.

The tie tightened as his cock swelled. When he caught a glimpse of the head of his dick, it looked about to burst—dark red with blood, swollen, shining. The discomfort was good and bad in equal measures. Even breathing on him became unbearable and yet exquisitely addictive. His hips bucked, driving his cock deeper into the wet heat of her mouth. He couldn't help it.

Noah stroked her face with his thumbs, felt the tip of his cock in the hollow of her cheeks and another pulse of need ricocheted through him—head to balls to cock and back to head, zooming all over his body. She let him loose from her mouth, blew on him and his buttocks clenched.

No, no, no, no, no.

Ash ringed her fingers below the head of his cock and loosened the tie with her other hand until it fell away.

Do not come yet. You're capable of hanging on a little longer.

Oh look, a flying pig.

He held her face so he wasn't tempted to push her head down and force her take more.

Christ, that doesn't help. He could still make her move to his tune, though he retained enough sense not to push too far.

His crest was slick with pre-cum. Ash danced her tongue over it, brushed it with her teeth, and Noah jolted as if he'd touched a live wire. Everything she did wore down his ability to resist the tide rising inside him. One final series of hard, tight sucks and his eyes closed. Like a flash flood sweeping everything before it, orgasm overwhelmed his body, seized every sense and commandeered his brain.

"Ash," he gasped.

His cock leapt in her mouth, and Noah let out a deep groan as he emptied himself. Bright pins of light exploded behind his eyes and he opened them to see his cum leaking between her lips as she tried to swallow. *Christ, that's hot.* His cock jerked again and she let him loose and gulped air.

"Can't breathe," she gasped. "This dress is too tight... Salmon, beef and dessert...left no room for a pint of you."

Noah laughed. He dropped down behind her and tackled the tiny buttons.

"It hurt my chest when I came," she whispered.

She'd come from doing that to him? He felt bad he hadn't realized, though he'd been distracted. She'd never know.

"You didn't notice, did you?"

"Yes, I...no."

Ash let out a pained laugh. "I need to stand."

Noah helped her up.

"How the hell...did they do anything...in these gowns?" she panted.

Noah finished extricating Ash from her dress and matched her sigh of relief with a deep, rumbling groan. She stood before him in the tiniest of white lace panties.

"I missed you," he whispered.

"I need to lie down."

Noah helped her onto the bed and Ash sprawled flat. He ran his fingers over the creases in her skin where the bodice had cut into her.

"You're not to wear that again," he said.

"Oh yes I am. It's fine, just not intended for blowjobs."

Noah lay on his side and propped himself up on his elbow as he looked at her.

"We're okay, aren't we?" he asked in a quiet voice.

Ash slipped her hand into his and nodded.

"I do love you," Noah whispered.

"And I love you."

He kissed her, saying her name and smiling at the same time, dipping into her mouth in more and more greedy lunges while Ash kissed him back.

"I love you, I love you, I love you," he mumbled into her.

"You're stealing all my lines."

Noah pulled away and laid his hand on the side of her face. "I'm more scared now than I was in Afghanistan. I'm scared of fucking this up, of losing you. I'm scared of wanting you too much. You're going to have to develop some annoying habits to keep me sane. Christ, I want to do everything with you, explore the world, climb the highest mountain, dive into the deepest lake as well as sit and watch TV and cook dinner together. I want the ordinary and the extraordinary. And I want it all with you."

Her eyes glistened with tears as she stared straight at him.

"I know you said you never wanted children and I understand why, but give me the chance to change your mind. I want our home to be full of kids getting under our feet and making us laugh. I want to show you what it's like to jump into puddles, to build sandcastles and fly kites. I want to give you what you never had. We can make a happy family together."

Ash let out a shaky breath.

Noah swallowed hard. "You don't have to say anything. I don't want to ask you...that question now. I'm still not well, but I'm getting there. I think we should go away for a while, spread our wings together and learn to live again. We can decide later what we want to do with our lives."

"Oh God, Noah."

"What do you think?" He licked a tear from her cheek.

"Are you sure you want to open a knitting shop with me?"

He froze. *Shit.*

"Oh, you don't know how happy that makes me," Ash said. "I've dreamed of doing that all my life. Shelves of different colored wool, packets of knitting needles. Mmm, boxes of patterns."

For a brief moment, she had him, and then he caught her smirk and growled. "You're in trouble."

Ash yelped, rolled off the bed and ran. Noah went after her, though he'd been momentarily distracted by her microscopic lace panties.

"Come here, you little monster."

Ash scooted round the table in front of the fireplace. The room was too small for her to escape. He let her think she might get away and then grabbed her. Noah stroked a hand up her ribs to cup the lower curve of her breast. Her nipples were already tight

little beads, and when he brushed them with his thumb, he heard the breath catch in her throat.

She raised her hands and fluttered her fingers over his abs, his pecs and along his collarbone to his chin and up to his mouth. Her thumbs brushed his lips and Noah caught them between his teeth and sucked hard.

"Oh God." Ash's eyes closed only to flash open when he danced his hands to the hollow of her thighs and slipped his fingers inside her panties.

"Wet," he whispered. "And so hot."

When he rubbed his fingers over her slick folds, she grew wetter and his cock twitched. Ash wrapped her arms around his neck and her noisy, little gasps hit his face. Wanting only flesh on flesh, Noah pushed her pants down her hips until they slithered to the floor.

Ash flicked her tongue over his mouth. "You have such delicious, sexy lips," she whispered.

"So do you." He grinned and dropped to his knees in front of her.

As Noah wrapped his hands around her thighs, he pressed his mouth against her sex, pushing his tongue inside her. Ash sank her fingers into his hair and moaned as he licked, her flesh trembling under his fingers. She tasted so sweet, Noah's head spun. He shifted his hands higher onto her butt and squeezed and kneaded as he licked and sucked her clit. Ash's breathing changed and he sighed into her. Noah fluttered the tip of his tongue over the swollen bud and Ash cried out. He pushed his face harder against her, kissing and circling his tongue around her sensitive flesh, and her muscles contracted against his mouth as she came.

"Oh God, oh God, oh God," she panted.

Noah swallowed her cream and held her up as she shook. He could do this forever and drown in the velvety feel of her. He kept his head between her legs and ate at her, kissing and lapping her tangy sweetness while she pulled harder and harder at his hair. Too hard. He jerked his head up.

"I want you inside me." Ash sucked in large gulps of air. "Hurry."

The perfect word for a guy with a cock about to explode. Noah let her go and she fell backward onto the bed. He crawled after her, and as Ash wriggled back and spread her legs, Noah was forced to grab the root of his cock and push down hard on his overexcited balls to stop himself from coming.

This was desire at its most deadly, at its most breath-stealing, at its most brain-numbing because he could only think of one thing—to bury himself inside her as deep as he could, as fast as he could, as hard as he could. He pleaded with his balls not to disgrace him and released the pressure. Noah couldn't wait. He slid straight into her and the sensation of her satin-soft tissue gripping his cock tightened his chest and made his toes curl.

As Noah sank inside her, enveloped in that first rush of core-deep pleasure, the world disappeared. With no hope of delaying this, maybe he could impress her with the speed of his thrusts. He rocketed into her in long, hard, driving shunts that pushed the air from her lungs so she gasped into his face. Noah couldn't breathe, he could only fuck. He could barely think. Resting his forearms on either side of her head, his sweat-slick skin rubbed against her nipples as he powered into her and he wondered in a haze of bewilderment if his cock could catch fire.

The muscles of Ash's sex contracted around him as she slipped over the edge into orgasm, and his balls' response was to pull up tight to the base of his cock and harden. The clenching sensation in Noah's chest intensified. The sweet ache in his head bordered on pain, edged him toward delirium and he began to shake with the effort of restraint.

"Noah," Ash gasped. "Oh fuck."

She spasmed around him, her hot pussy kissing the tip of his cock and the gathering, swelling flood inside him burst through the final barrier and he exploded into her. His body shook as he filled her with jet after jet of his cum, each blast shooting out of him with the intensity of lightning.

"Ashhhh." He exhaled the word. "Oh fuck, fuck."

Ash wrapped her hands around his back, hooked her heels around his thighs and held him tight. Noah kept thrusting gently, savoring the rippling aftershocks. It wasn't just the physical sensations that brought so much pleasure but the emotional connection also. He couldn't let her go and it frightened him that he'd almost lost her.

"I love you," he whispered. "I love your eyes." *Kiss.* "Your nose." *Kiss.* "Your lips." *Kiss.* "You make me feel like I can accomplish anything."

"Don't leap off a building because you think you can fly."

Noah laughed.

"I don't want you to do anything silly like walk to the North Pole or water-ski down the Amazon either," she said. "Well, not unless I'm with you."

"Whatever I do, I want to do it with you." He licked her lips.

"That's good because I think you're stuck. We'll be like this forever, you getting hard and then soft and then hard again, and I'll just have to lie here and cope with it." She sighed.

"Cope with it?" Noah rolled so she lay on top of him.

"I suppose I might enjoy it." She wriggled her hips, and Noah felt his cock wake up.

"I'm beginning to think you're insatiable," he said with a groan. "Am I right?"

"Yes." Ash gave him the widest, most heart-stopping smile ever.

"Good," Noah said, and gave her the widest, most heart-stopping smile in return. "Because I think you're going to enjoy every moment of the forever I have planned for us."

Epilogue

Four months later

Noah rapped on his father's door. "Wake up, Papa." He smiled at Ash and went into the room.

Ash stood in her pink dressing gown, watching from the doorway as Noah shook his father awake.

"What time is it?" Arkady raised his head from the pillow.

"Time to get up." Noah fidgeted with excitement.

His father glared at the alarm clock. "It's five thirty. Assuming I'm not totally senile yet, you're not five years old. Go back to sleep." He pulled the covers tighter around his chin.

Ash heard a door open, turned and watched Ronan and Ilya come up behind her. Ronan wore a t-shirt and shorts. Ilya was in sleep pants and a gray vest like Noah. They looked content, settled. Ronan was taking Ilya to dinner with his mother and father tomorrow.

"It is time," Noah insisted.

"He did this when he was a kid," Ilya said at Ash's ear. "Banged on my door and then banged on this one. Papa removed everything from his room that told the hour, and Noah still managed to wake at the same time. Did you see the trail of chocolate coins down the corridor? Family tradition."

Ash looked behind her. Had Arkady done that? Maybe Christmas meant more to Noah's father than he'd let on.

"Fine. I give in," Arkady said. "I'll get up. I expect a drink when I get downstairs."

"Champagne?" Noah asked.

"Tea."

Noah whooped and ran back to the door. "Happy Christmas," he said to Ilya and Ronan, and grabbing Ash's hand, propelled her down the corridor.

Ash's pulse raced with excitement. Christmas was something she'd learned not to expect much from even after she'd escaped her parents, but for the past few weeks, since they'd returned from a trip exploring the United States, Noah had been enthusiastic and affectionate, dragging her to the shops, taking her to see a bemused Santa in a mall and being very secretive about his plans.

They'd decorated a tree in his apartment. Ash had moved in and Dalton went to live in Greenwich with Mike, joined by two lovely women who worked at the university. But the enormous tree at Floriton Hall had been decorated by all of them,

Ronan and Ilya, Ash and Noah and Arkady. There had been both tears and laughter because some of the decorations had been made by Natalia, and when Ash saw how much Arkady adored them, she'd been unable to speak for a while. They'd eaten mince pies, listened to silly Christmas songs, and Ash's heart had hurt because she was so happy. Properly happy, not pretending anymore.

The trail of golden coins led to the drawing room. Noah demanded that Ronan and Ilya make tea and then hesitated with his fingers on the door handle.

"Happy Christmas, Ash," Noah said, and pushed open the door.

One foot inside the room and the air rushed out of Ash's lungs. The lights twinkled on the tree, and lying beneath were oceans of presents. A fire blazed, and Ash guessed Noah had been down earlier to light it. Five bulging stockings lay on the rug in front of the hearth. Ash had never had a Christmas stocking.

She edged into the room. A half-empty glass of sherry, crumbs from a mince pie and the top of a carrot sat on the coffee table. Noah had insisted a full glass, a mince pie and a carrot were left for Father Christmas and Rudolph. Ash gulped. Noah was making happy memories for her.

Ash pulled him into her arms and kissed him. Warm hands slipped around her throat as he angled her head to kiss her deeper. They surfaced at the sound of Ilya's cough. But one look at her and Noah lowered his head again, sliding his tongue into her mouth.

"Presents first, breakfast later," Arkady said, and settled in his chair next to the fire.

"I'd like Ash to open hers first," Noah said. "Well, some of them."

He set her down by the tree and sat in front of her. Taking a deep breath, he handed her a parcel labeled *One*.

The moment Ash opened it she knew what Noah had done. Her eyes filled with tears as she held a doll that could open and close its eyes. She opened parcel after parcel and found roller blades, paint by numbers, a jigsaw. He'd bought her all the things she'd asked for over the years. The others sat and watched without saying anything and Ash guessed he'd told them what he planned.

"Thank you," she whispered, and kissed him.

"You're welcome."

Ronan had painted presents. One of Ilya and Noah standing back to back for Arkady. One of Noah and Ash kissing, and one of Ilya staring straight ahead, looking so dark and dangerous, Ash shivered. Amid a sea of paper, they exclaimed and laughed and groaned, and Ash knew she'd never forget this morning as long as she lived.

As Noah, Ilya and Ronan played a noisy racing game on the TV, a present from Ash, Arkady moved to the couch and beckoned her to join him.

"Happy?" he asked.

"Yes." Truly, madly, deeply.

"How's Noah?"

"Getting there. He has some dark moments, but he comes out of them quickly. He's almost completed the research on the Green Piece sites. His book will be published to coincide with Channel 4's documentary. He's really excited about that. Oh did I tell you Martin found Roman artifacts in Dave's garden? He and Dave have caught the archeology bug. They think they're going to dig up a Roman villa."

Arkady smiled. "Has Noah stopped trying to do everything for Dave?"

Ash laughed. "Yes, after Dave threatened to kick the cr – well, it worked."

"And are you going to appear in this documentary?"

Ash squirmed. "I'd prefer not to." She still felt uncomfortable her identity as the North's daughter had been revealed to the British public. Once the press had discovered she'd given money to the victims' families and that she ran Green Piece, there had been kind articles in most of the daily papers. She worried for a time that people would point to her on the street but no one had. Yesterday's news.

Arkady took her hand and squeezed her fingers. "No one blames you, Ash. Only you. What you've done with your life is an inspiration to us all. Be proud of Green Piece and what you've achieved. I know that Noah is proud of you. I couldn't have wished for a more perfect partner for my son."

The bickering of Noah and Ilya grew more strident as the race neared its conclusion.

"Get out of my way," Ilya snapped.

"Woohoo," Noah yelled. "Hey, that was mine."

"Mine," Ilya retorted.

"Although I'm not sure you were wise to buy them that game," Arkady said. "They're both desperate to win."

There was a loud groan from Noah as he spun off. Another from Ilya as he followed. Ash bent her head to Arkady's ear. "Neither of them have a chance. Ronan is brilliant at this and so am I. That's why I bought it."

Noah tossed down the controller and flopped back on the couch next to her. "That was a fluke, Ronan," he muttered. "Ilya distracted me."

"Want to play with me?" Ash asked. "Loser washes the dishes?"

Noah's eyes lit up. "How can I say no to a beautiful, fantastic, incredible woman?"

Ash raised her eyebrows.

Noah sighed and tugged her to her feet. "Fine, Miss Ordinary Girl, game on."

They sat in front of the TV and Noah put his arm around her. "You like your presents?"

"Loved them."

The best had been the one he didn't buy. Ash looked around and saw Ronan tussling with Ilya on the couch. Arkady had his head buried in a book she'd bought him about the moon, but he looked up as if he sensed her gaze and smiled.

A family.

"Concentrate," Noah said. "Though it won't make a difference. I'm going to whoop your ass."

The smile on Ash's face came straight from her heart.

Afterword

I based *An Ordinary Girl* on the story of Fred and Rosemary West, notorious British serial killers. I wondered about the children of murderers and thought how hard their lives must be. So Ash came into being.

In 1994 Fred and Rosemary West were charged with murdering twelve young girls and women, two their own children, over a sixteen-year period. The victims were stripped, abused, sexually tortured and killed before being dismembered and buried under the house and garden in Gloucester, UK. There could be many more victims.

Fred and Rosemary claimed their parents were abusive. As a couple, they fed off each other's vices, but it's not understood why they gained so much pleasure from their acts. Female serial killers are rare. Fortunately. Fred West confessed and killed himself before trial, but his wife is still in prison for life. She never confessed.

The five youngest West children were taken into the care of the local authority in 1992 after their father was accused of sexual assault. Three older children were abused and left emotionally damaged by their experiences.

The Wests' house was demolished and made into a garden and pathway. Every brick was crushed and all timber burned to deter souvenir hunters.

About the Author

Barbara Elsborg lives in West Yorkshire in the north of England. She always wanted to be a spy, but having confessed to everyone without them even resorting to torture, she decided it was not for her. Vulcanology scorched her feet. A morbid fear of sharks put paid to marine biology. So instead, she spent several years successfully selling cyanide.

After dragging up two rotten, ungrateful children and frustrating her sexy, devoted, wonderful husband (who can now stop twisting her arm), she finally has time to conduct an affair with an electrifying, plugged-in male – her laptop.

Her books feature quirky heroines and bad boys, and she hopes they are as much fun to read as they are to write.

Barbara welcomes comments from readers. You can find her website and email address on her [author bio page](#) at www.ellorascave.com.

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