

Beautiful Trouble Publishing

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For all the lucky girls who found love on the Internet.
You are not and never will be weird.

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CAVEAT

This work of erotica contains adult language and sexually explicit scenes, which are smoking hot. This book is intended only for adults, as it is defined by the laws of the country in which the purchase is made. Keep this book out of the hands of under-aged readers.

GLOSSARY

Bang tidy: Yorkshire, North of England compliment for “looking good.”

Bugger: a derogatory term for a person equivalent to bastard.

Chav: a derogatory term for a young lower-class person typified by brash and loutish behaviour and wearing real or imitation designer clothes.

Computer says no: contemporary phrase from a television programme called 'Little Britain.'

EastEnders: television soap opera based in the fictional area of Walford, East London.

Get done for: Charged with a criminal offence.

Innit: colloquialism for 'isn't it'.

M25: 188.298 km [117-miles]-long motorway that encircles Greater London.

Peggy Mitchell: matriarchal character in *EastEnders*.

Punching above your weight: colloquialism, phrase for 'out of your league.'

Rat-arsed: to get drunk or to be drunk.

Slagging [him] off: to be verbally abusive about a person

Specsavers: a reasonably priced optician.

The Sun: a tabloid newspaper, which famously features topless models on the third page.

Twiggled: to come to a realisation or understanding regarding a situation.

Katie Price: a glamour model.

Short shrift: tell someone off crossly.

Wanker: a jerk

Y'all right: colloquialism for 'are you all right.'

Chapter ONE

From: Ryan Klark rudejoker@h...
To: Courtney Phillips yapalot@g...
Date: 23 February 2010
Re: Little Miss Observant

Thank you for the compliment! Brightened an otherwise pointless day. Ta ta for now.

From: Courtney Phillips yapalot@g...
To: Ryan Klark rudejoker@h...
Date: 23 February 2010
Re: Er...

Who are you? Did you mean to send that email to me?

From: Ryan Klark rudejoker@h...
To: Courtney Phillips yapalot@g...
Date: 24 February 2010
Re: Sherlock Holmes type explanation

Of course that was for you! I'm Ryan. Chris forwarded that email you sent to him with the picture of all the teachers at my school. I quote: "Who is that seriously gorgeous guy standing next to you? Is he single? Is he from England? Please say he is..." Embarrassed yet? Good. Don't worry about balancing the tables. I've already seen a picture of you from Chris' collection, and you aren't too bad yourself. Actually, you're pretty hot. Did you know Chris has got a picture of you in a bikini floating around?

I wouldn't get too excited. It's something to keep Melissa on her toes when she thinks that no one else could possibly be interested in him. Don't grieve for him, Court. It won't last. He can't keep his hands off anything female around here. Sorry. Not helping, am I? But let's be honest, I live with the guy and I know for a fact that he's selfish, inconsiderate, tactless and vain. Fuck. Just got told to get out for smoking. I need to smoke when I write to you. I'll tell you why in—

From: Courtney Phillips yapalot@g...
To: Ryan Klark rudejoker@h...
Date: 27 February 2010
Re: You and your weirdness

You'll tell me... What? I'm guessing you got chucked out before you could finish the rest of that sentence? And wait, you need to smoke when you write to me? Forgive me for not finding that flattering. And if Chris is supposed to be your friend, it's hardly fair that you're slagging him off behind his back.

From: Ryan Klark rudejoker@h...
To: Courtney Phillips yapalot@g...
Date: 03 March 2010
Re: You and your touchiness

I spent time writing that email, so I thought you should have what I'd done if you couldn't have it all. Reward-like. I don't slag Chris off behind his back. I make sure I do it to his face. He laughs it off because who wouldn't love worship and adore him? 'Cept you. Even his girlfriend doesn't. You must have had a crush

on him for years to be still wearing those pink Specsavers. Yeah, I got that from your emails.

Now to the why I smoke when I write to you. No offence, but you take a lot of effort to entertain. A cigarette is a tension reliever to ensure I give you as much of the giggle as possible. Sometimes I have one after, like that post-coital puff. A reward for doing so damn well. Now for the love of God, what is happening in EastEnders? Who are all these new people? Where the hell have they come from? I don't have time to read through any rubbish on Twitter, I want an honest Londoner's opinion.

You'll be mad with me for a while, but when you've had enough of the rage, do us a favour, yeah? Take advice from an honest observer: he's absolutely not worth your energy, Miss Phillips.

From: Courtney Phillips yapalot@g...

To: Ryan Klark rudejoker@h...

Date: 12 March 2010

Re: You

So what, writing to me is like sex? You are really disturbing. Have you had mental help? Although you sound like my best mates. They have been telling me repeatedly to find someone else. All right for them. They have guys softening the path they tread. I just have my mum's foot spa. So Chris isn't worth my energy, but why are you? And I still don't know who you are, when you seem to know an awful lot about me. Again I am very, very, very scared.

From: Ryan Klark rudejoker@h...

To: Courtney Phillips yapalot@g...

Date: 13 March 2010

Re: Whatever you want to know

- a) Name: Ryan Edward Klark
- b) Age: 24, birthday 24th September
- c) Hair: brown, curly, my pulling point and hours of wasted time
- d) Eyes: green
- e) Height: six foot one
- f) Current city: Cape Town, South Africa. Home town: London.
- g) Distinguishing features: two tattoos (you want to know where, you'll have to ask me later) and one scar beneath my eye after walking into the corner of Gran's new dining table at two years of age.
- h) Place of Birth: rainy day at four in the morning outside the Ivy in the back of a taxi. Mother patently unimpressed by arrival.
- i) Mother's name: Lydia
- j) Father's name: Ryan (Yes, I'm junior.)
- k) First girlfriend: at five years old. She was a little brunette called Katie who married Thomas McKenzie the next week. It broke my little heart.
- l) Worst habit: smoking, and biting the skin around my thumb. Both disgusting. Trying to

give up the former, latter I have been doing since table trauma. Sorry.

- m) Favourite Author: Bret Easton Ellis
- n) Favourite Music: Kings of Leon, Arcade Fire, Jay-Z, Ghostface Killer. If I add Barry Manilow will you judge me?
- o) Favourite TV Shows: South Park, The Inbetweeners, 24, True Blood.
- p) Favourite Film: God knows. Pick anything and I've probably enjoyed it.
- q) Favourite thing to do with a free hour: write to you, get mildly pissed and drive absolutely nowhere with good music, and take pictures. I love photography. It's what I do when I'm not teaching.
- r) What am I missing? What else do you need to know? Are you going to email me ever? Or shall I expect further blanking for days on end?

Kiss kiss darling, bonsie bons, good day. Uh oh. New manager's going to chuck me out for having a beer in here. You know what? I'm having a new laptop shipped over, so I'll stop winding this café up.

From: Courtney Phillips yapalot@g...

To: Ryan Klark rudejoker@h...

Date: 13 March 2010

Re: The Madness

Did your mum drop you as a baby? She must have done, as you are quite insane. Why are you drinking at four in the afternoon? Just because you look like you should be on stage with a bass guitar in skinny jeans doesn't mean you should act like some rock diva. And that's not your birthday. That's mine. Well, two years later anyways.

You'll be glad to know that I like nutters, as long as they don't plan long and painful deaths for me. Look, I'll tell you what's going on in EastEnders as long as you don't do anything weird during my emails. You know exactly what I mean. And we don't argue about what I feel for Chris. Deal?

From: Ryan Klark rudejoker@h...
To: Courtney Phillips yapalot@g...
Date: 14 March 2010
Re: Madness is relative

You only like nutters, Miss Phillips, because you share qualities with them. I agree to your terms. However, I will talk about Chris. He is an endless source of amusement to me and everyone around. Isn't he emailing you anyway? He says you barely do, not that he has the time.

He's three timing Melissa. Fran and I (the other teacher, who's also our flatmate) have a bet she'll find out within the next three days or I'm cooking for a week. All week. Not bad really as I find cooking therapeutic. Like writing to you. I feel quite stressed at the moment, trying to mark a shitload of papers for

tomorrow and I just know that a Vietnam-type war is going to implode soon.

I'll just have to go to a bar and mark them. Please don't ever teach. Not even for a sabbatical to find your humanity. It'll suck the soul from that curvy little body of yours. I'm only doing this to get my parents off my back about my photography. They think I wasted three years of my life studying it.

From: Courtney Phillips yapalot@g...
To: Ryan Klark rudejoker@h...
Date: 15 March 2010
Re: How?

He's three timing? How does he even manage that and teach? Do I want to know how you even found out? Is this what's stressing you, Chris' manic soap opera love life? If you have to mark your papers in a bar, you can reward yourself every ten papers with a beer. Just don't go writing things like "Yo, what the fuck does this sentence mean?"

Disclaimer – Courtney Phillips takes no responsibility for drunk marking by Ryan Klark.

From: Ryan Klark rudejoker@h...
To: Courtney Phillips yapalot@g...
Date: 15 March 2010
Re: Durrr

He tells me about all his “free rides with willing victims.” Fran caught him out. Ergo, Melissa will twig soon. Fran and I will be running for cover very soon.

While you’re dealing with your friend’s lack of respect for his girlfriend, check this link. This photograph actually made it onto BBC News. Nearly wet myself with excitement. I’m doing an apprenticeship with Robert Matthews when I get back. I’m not into fashion but hey, whatever makes me look good. If I get any freebies, I’ll chuck them your way. Not like I’ll have any use for a Gucci bikini. Know you will though... Send us a photo when you do.

Disclaimer – Courtney Phillips is entirely responsible for making Ryan Klark space out his reward drinking with genius lines such as “Yo, what the fuck does this sentence mean?”

From: Courtney Phillips yapalot@g...

To: Ryan Klark rudejoker@h...

Date: 15 March 2010

Re: Complete cheek!

You are so cheeky! You have one photo of me in a bikini. Isn’t that enough?

That photograph is insane! It just looks like Westminster Bridge is on fire. It’s incredible. You’re really talented. I mean that.

I’ve heard of Robert Matthews, he is pretty sexy, obviously that’s not why you’re doing the apprenticeship with him. Duh, Courtney. When did you get the apprenticeship? Do you know someone

who knows someone who knows...Yeah, you get what I mean.

P.S. I do hope you're sober.

From: Ryan Klark rudejoker@h...
To: Courtney Phillips yapalot@g...
Date: 17 March 2010
Re: You love it

One photograph will never be enough. I'd like to have a catalogue. Or a calendar. I know it's March, but surely you can make pretend with sand and a fake backdrop.

You're not allowed to ever say Robert Matthews is sexy. The man is very much so married. With a kid. So cut that out.

By the way, the rock has hit the planet. Melissa knows all. Fran and I are wearing hard hats around the flat, drink in hand. How are you anyway, Court? Over Chris yet?

From: Courtney Phillips yapalot@g...
To: Ryan Klark rudejoker@h...
Re: Terms and Conditions
Date: 17 March 2010

Remember our deal? You just broke it. Bye, Ryan.

From: Ryan Klark rudejoker@h...
To: Courtney Phillips yapalot@g...
Date: 17 March 2010
Re: Loopholes

Come on, Court. You said “argue.” Not arguing, just asking.

From: Ryan Klark rudejoker@h...
To: Courtney Phillips yapalot@g...
Date: 19 March 2010
Re: Seriously...

I’ve attached a picture. Loopholes, Miss Phillips. I bet you’ve missed me...

From: Courtney Phillips yapalot@g...
To: Ryan Klark rudejoker@h...
Re: Irrepressible
Date: 21 March 2010

Are you going to do that every time you upset me? How much did you pay each person to hold up the cards?! How long did it take you to do? Or did you have it ready prepared?

Okay, you’re forgiven. But if you want us to be friends, there’s a line. I’ve drawn it. You don’t need to cross it. Okay?

Do you know what? For the first time in ages, I don’t care what Chris is doing. He’s not my boyfriend. The little time I’ve had from work, I’ve been thinking about you and your craziness! Still drunk marking?

From: Ryan Klark rudejoker@h...
To: Courtney Phillips yapalot@g...
Date: 21 March 2010
Re: Forgiveness is freedom!

I did it in one day, took the day off work and didn't pay anyone anything. Just told them I'd upset the most beautiful girl in the world and I wanted to make it up to her.

The line will not be crossed again. Cross my blackened pickled-in-Jack-Daniel's heart.

Now, what are you doing with yourself, why are you working so hard? Chris mentioned something about you wanting to do fashion. I've got links on that score. Stick with me, baby, I'll take you places!

From: Courtney Phillips yapalot@g...

To: Ryan Klark rudejoker@h...

Re: Irrepressible still

Date: 22 March 2010

You weren't kidding, were you? I've got a traineeship! How did you even? Oh Ryan! I'm so excited about it I can't tell you. I'm working with Selene Reyce, who is beautiful and funny and unbelievably sweet. She went through my portfolio and told me to bring her some evening wear designs. Is she kidding me?! And she wants me backstage for her show for London Fashion Week. I mean, sweet Mary hell! When I got home, I cried. I'm still teary now.

Definitely sticking with you after this! I'm making you a shirt. Something that will match your eyes. You just need to send me your measurements. Can Fran do it for you? I would make a mass declaration of love, but it's only been one day. So I'll chill out.

(Love you for doing this!)

From: Ryan Klark rudejoker@h...
To: Courtney Phillips yapalot@g...
Date: 25 March 2010
Re: Of course you do

Everyone should get to do what they want to. You are my direct line to EastEnders, so I owe you.
As you're happy in work, what else can the magician do for you?

You know what, we need to get on Skype. Before you ask why, I want to talk to you. It's been a month and I would like to have a proper conversation with you. I'll send you my account details, then if you need help figuring it out, well...well shit. You'll have to send me your mobile and I'll talk you through it. Work for you?

From: Courtney Phillips yapalot@g...
To: Ryan Klark rudejoker@h...
Re: Skype away
Date: 25 March 2010

Let's do it.

Chapter TWO

What was I doing? What on earth was I doing? I didn't know this guy from Adam, apart from the fact he said horribly flattering things like "the most beautiful girl in the world." I was becoming ever so slowly obsessed with him. The phone rang, and I jumped ten clear feet into the air.

It was Ryan! He sounded far away, I thought, my heart pounding madly in my throat. "Court?" he asked. "Can you hear me?"

"Yeah, yes! I can hear you. Hi!"

"Hey, how are you?" Oh God, he had the sexiest voice. His accent had the lightest hint of Afrikaans; it was deep and like sifted gravel.

"This is so weird!" I admitted with a nervous laugh.

"Why, because you haven't got time to think of something sarky to say?"

"Shut up!" I blushed, knowing it was true. "How are you?"

"Great, finally being able to put a voice to the words. You still sound like you're going to slap the back of my hand with a ruler."

"No I don't!" I squealed in protest as he laughed.

"You do, but it makes me happy. How are things with the job?"

"Fantastic. Selene's insisted my name goes on the website as a collaborative in the new collection.

She does it with all assistants and trainees. She wants them to know they're important to the process. And we all went out for dinner at this silly expensive place in Mayfair and she paid for all of us. I have a huge girl crush on her."

"Wait, wait, let me just enjoy that image for a second..."

"Stop it!" I admonished. "How do you even know her?"

"Her parents and mine go way back. She'd do a favour for anyone who knew her dad, and the rest you did yourself. I spoke to her after your interview, and she thought you were incredibly sweet."

"Oh," I breathed out, touched and embarrassed at the same time. "Really?"

"You know she likes you. Selene doesn't mess about. She hasn't got the time."

"Have I said thank you yet?"

"You have," he told me slowly, "but I'll think of something better." My whole body questioned what he meant by that statement. "What else is going on?"

I was silent, not sure how much he would want to know about stuff that had nothing to do with *EastEnders* or Chris or teaching.

"Well...I don't know. It's not that great."

"You can tell me," he prompted softly.

"You know I've got two best mates."

"Yeah, Summer and Andie."

I was a little shocked. "You actually listen to what I say?!"

"Every single word, babe. Come on, tell me."

Reeling from the intimacy of the word "babe," I brushed my hair out of my eyes and sighed.

“Well, Summer was going out with Andie’s brother Stephen. Until he did something silly.”

“Which was?”

“Sort of drunkenly stuck his tongue down my throat. And drunkenly, I sort of let him.”

“Shit, Court!” He half choked on his own amusement. “Is this how you keep your friends happy?”

“Stop it! I was practically comatose. Summer yelled at Stephen that I was so paralytic I could enter the Special Olympics.” I shuddered at the memory of it: Andie carrying me out into a cab, bellowing at her brother the whole time.

He laughed even harder. “Sorry, I don’t mean to laugh, but that was a good comeback. So they’re mad with you?”

“No, they’re okay with me, but raging at each other. And I’m the schmuck in the middle of it.”

“You guys have been friends since conception; it’s a bump. As long as you keep talking, it’ll work out.”

“Well, cheer me up and tell me a dirty joke.”

“Now we’re talking!” He paused for a minute. “There.”

“What was that?”

“I just gave you a virtual hug.”

I smiled. “Well, thank you very much, Mr. Klark. I appreciate the effort that went into that hug.”

“Behave, or no dirty joke. Ready?”

“Do it.”

*Miss Courtney Phillips
The Most Gorgeous Hotel Ever
Paris, France (Klark-free)*

*Mr Ryan Klark S. Preston, Esquire
Not anywhere near a gorgeous hotel
Definitely not in Paris, France
(Jealous yet?)*

21st April 2010

Dear Ryan,

'Ello, ma cherie! Ça va, bébé? I've gone all French, as we're in Paris! Selene's taken all the trainees for a little education and historical appreciation of the art of fashion. French Revolution, Champs-Élysées, shopping! Yes, I am shallow and I revel in my shallowness. Who really cares, anyway? I'm bringing you back a souvenir, something tacky and utterly touristy that you'll never dare to throw out because of loyalty to me. It'll sit on your mantelpiece for years and years, until your mother comes over one day and tells you to chuck it or you're banned from Christmas Day dinner. Ah, the fantasies.

Have you done the school portraits yet? Do you have to wear a suit?! Haaaaaa! That I do want to see. No more pictures of any day trips to the coast with surfboards. While I naturally appreciated you in a wetsuit, it's not the same glittering weather over here. Are you going to relocate to South Africa? When are you coming back? Are you ever coming back? Is Robert Matthews going to have to chase you there?

As fun as it was having you on speaker watching True Blood at the same time, it's not quite like being in the same room and having a drink every time Sookie gets her knockers out.

Can I tell you something I'm not supposed to tell anyone? Summer's birthday was last weekend, and she hired out a bar. It belongs to a friend of a friend of a friend, so he let her have the whole place to herself. There was a huge kerfuffle with a girl called Tara who has drug problems (something like crack, no lie). Anyway, after the whole buzzle calmed down, I noticed Summer and our mutual friend Iain had disappeared. They sooo did it. Iain calls me the next day as I'm trying to drown my hangover in as much grease as possible in my local café, and he comes over to have a coffee. He tells me that he and Summer definitely got it on. And I have to keep it quiet. Because Andie's had a thing for Iain for ages, but Iain's always been in love with Summer because he told me at yet another drunken party. I frequent them, don't I?

Ah, what can you do? Clearly our friendships are destined for Hell in a hand basket. Sorry, I was meant to write you something nice, as getting a letter in the post is so much better than getting something by email. Now it's full of crap about people you know nothing about. Never mind.

I loved your Rough Guide to Teacher's Quarters, by the way! I still don't believe you were listening to anything I said—multitasking is not a male-

accredited skill. Has your shirt turned up yet? I sent it by recorded post, so you would have had to sign for it. Tell me so I can stop worrying if it fits properly. And don't flatter me, if you hate it, say so.

Okay, one day I will write something more meaningful. Promise.

Speak soon, xx Court

From: Ryan Klark rudejoker@h...

To: Courtney Phillips yapalot@g...

Date: 26 April 2010

Re: Your Bible-length writing

I get kisses now? Excellent...

It was really nice to get something through the post, you were right. I would write a long involved letter about my friends' intrepid love lives but to be honest, I haven't really been paying attention. Apart from Fran, and I feel like a bastard for saying so, but I think she's stalking me. It's your fault. When Chris and Melissa paired up, she seemed to think that we were next, and you made it worse with your "get me your measurements." It's not like I can escape her, I live and work with her. With Chris and Melissa arguing all the damn time these days, Fran and I get banished to the kitchen to let them argue it out. I mean, for fuck's sake she pinched my arse yesterday! It's like Peggy Mitchell hitting on me.

I did get the shirt and it fits perfectly, no flattery, only can I get one in white, black and maybe a dark red? Please. Thank you. Get sewing, woman.

Enough—I'm starting to tense up again. I'm going surfing on the weekend. More beach pictures, sorry, must be done. So Summer and Iain. Why wouldn't I be interested? They are in the crazy world of you, so I want to know about it. Look, if things go really tits up, I'll fly over and protect you from the violence that will head your way because of you and your huge mouth. Why would I need tacky souvenirs when I can just stick you on my fireplace and wait for my mother to tell me to chuck you out? You're definitely more novelty.

Ryan xxx (one more coz you is special, innit?)

From: Courtney Phillips yapalot@g...

To: Ryan Klark rudejoker@h...

Re: Huzzah!

Date: 28 April 2010

Not back from Paris yet! Loving it, loving it, loving it!! Have you dealt with the Fran problem yet? Poor girl, running after you when you've probably spent more loving time with your camera. I'm so glad the shirt fits! I'll get on with the other colours for you. And hey, for the record:

- i) I am not a big mouth. I just talk a bit. Too much.
 - ii) Fran is probably only after you because you're in easy reach.
 - iii) I am not tacky! One is classy and elegant.
 - iv) Is I special? Den gimme all your cake. Now, boy!
- I'll Skype you when I come back. xx Court

From: Ryan Klark rudejoker@h...
To: Courtney Phillips yapalot@g...
Date: 30 April 2010
Re: Bored now

Aren't you back yet? Or have you met some random French bloke and you're staying in France. I won't be impressed if you have...

From: Courtney Phillips yapalot@g...
To: Ryan Klark rudejoker@h...
Date: 30 April 2010
Re: End of the world

I *am* back. Can you still come over and protect me? Everything blew up in the middle of our local pub. Druggy Tara told Andie that Iain and Summer had been banging away since Summer's birthday and obviously Summer couldn't deny it, then I copped it for not being as shocked as Summer... It were right horrible. People in the pub just watched us like it was an episode of EastEnders.

Summer was crying because Andie said Summer only slept with Iain to get back at her over the whole Stephen thing.

I started crying because Andie accused me of being a shit friend, and always backing Summer up, which isn't true. I tried to defend myself and got told that I deliberately wanted to break Summer and Stephen up! Andie gave up screaming at both of us to cry as well. It'll blow over soon. No, it won't. I just feel like a crap person and even worse friend. Are you still my friend? Have I screwed you over too? Sorry, I'm sorry, I'm

having a pity party for myself. Sorry. How are you?
Are you all right?

From: Ryan Klark rudejoker@h...
To: Courtney Phillips yapalot@g...
Date: 30 April 2010
Re: End of the world

Calling you in twenty minutes, babe. Okay? Ryan xxx

From: Ryan Klark rudejoker@h...
To: Courtney Phillips yapalot@g...
Date: 01 May 2010
Re: Chill

Just to reinforce the point, you're still my friend, do not apologise about being upset about this, it will get better, and where are my sodding shirts? Ryan xxx

From: Courtney Phillips yapalot@g...
To: Ryan Klark rudejoker@h...
Re: Chilling
Date: 01 May 2010

Thank you for listening to me. When are you going to let me return the favour? By the way, how is Fran? Interrupting your love life still? Hehehe... On your recommendation I am listening to Jay-Z v Linkin Park. Good to sew to. At the moment, you're the only friend I have! xx Court.

From: Ryan Klark rudejoker@h...
To: Courtney Phillips yapalot@g...
Date: 02 May 2010

Re: Nonsense

Your friend count will go up in the next few days, I believe. Ah, Fran has backed off in the understanding that I have been spending a lot of time alone with my iBook or on Skype in my room. Also given as every other word is your name, she is mourning the loss of me to you. So if anyone asks, we're in a deep committed relationship. All right?

From: Courtney Phillips yapalot@g...

To: Ryan Klark rudejoker@h...

Re: Deal or No Deal

Date: 03 May 2010

What do I get out of it? I'll call you later tonight and you can explain yourself.

* * *

3rd May 2010

"Phillips, what's up?" He sounded so playful I couldn't help my immediate smile.

"Hello, you. So... Fran thinks I'm your girlfriend."

"I talk to you more than anyone else on the planet. You kind of are."

"Ryan. That makes no sense."

"We either call each other, or email or chat almost every day. You're a girl. I think you're hot. The idea of you even talking to another guy really pisses me off. When you went to Paris and I didn't hear from

you, I had the idea in my head that some flash French wanker had seduced you.”

I started laughing; I couldn’t help it. “Ryan, I’m not like that!”

“Girls always say that,” he told me quietly. Note to self: Ryan has been screwed over by some girl.

“If I tell you something,” I said hesitantly, “you cannot mock me.”

“Go on.”

“That picture of you in your wetsuit, well, half a wetsuit with your surfboard under your arm? It’s my screensaver on my laptop and on my phone. My mum thinks you’re a very handsome young man, by the way.” I couldn’t hear anything, so I called his name.

“I’m still here, I’m just...wow.”

“Everyone thinks I’m having some intrepid long-distance affair with some dude in prison,” I said self-mockingly.

He really did laugh this time. “Doing twenty to life for bad surfing and encouraging Peggy Mitchell wannabes to feel me up.”

“When I say I’m not that type of girl, I mean it. Are you ready for a shock?”

“You found out where my tattoos are?”

“No, silly... I’m not that type of girl, because I don’t do that type of thing.”

“Not recently?”

“Not ever.”

“What? You...seriously? Court, you’re telling me, you’ve never had... The girl who’s ditched me in conversation to go and get waxed on a Saturday, you’ve never...”

“You sound so shocked.”

“Probably because I’ve just seen how much a flight back to London would cost me right now, but it’d be worth it.”

My stomach was doing funny turns. “Come to London and do what?”

“Take that V title off you.”

“You would?” Wasn’t this supposed to be the thing that made men run off into the immediate distance?

“With the highest honour. Gives me a chance to teach you some depraved things and call them normal. You won’t sit right for a month, but you’d enjoy it.”

“Not encouraging, Klark!” I admonished, touching my hand to my hot face.

“I’d kiss you first at least. I can tell how you’d like to be kissed.”

“From what, my sexual status?”

“No, from you. I’d like to press you against a wall, just so you won’t seem weak-kneed. I’d like to touch your face, just with the tips of my fingers, give you a few light kisses to see if you’re ready to open your mouth and when you do, you’d let me bite your top lip, not too hard. Then you’d let me pull you against me, let me slide my tongue against yours.”

Oh my God. “You, er...you sound like you’ve kissed me before.”

“In my head, every single day since seventeenth February. A lot more than kiss but, like I said, easing you in.”

“I wish I could kiss you now,” I admitted, shaking still from his melodious description of our fantasy kiss. “What does your face feel like?”

“Growing a bit of stubble.”

“Is it pretty new?”

“No, no, babe. It’s softened up.”

“So you wouldn’t give me beard burn.”

“I wouldn’t say that. You let me get my hands on you, and you’ll feel it. Not just on your face.”

I put a hand over my mouth; where was he going with this? “Really? Where else would I feel it?”

“I’d want to kiss your neck, but I don’t know if you’re wearing something that gets in the way.”

“I’m just wearing a vest top and shorts. For bed.”

“Appropriate...” he teased. “Are you wearing underwear?”

I shook my head, then realised he couldn’t see me. “No. I’m not. Before you ask, I’m a thirty-two F.”

“Oh God,” he groaned. “I feel pretty fucking lucky right now.”

“Why?”

“It’s just you and me—it doesn’t feel like anyone else in the world exists.” His breath caught. “Tell me what your skin feels like.”

“Umm...on my arms, a little goose-pimply, but smooth. Just above the neckline of my vest it’s really soft like silk, the fine-spun type, not the rough one... On my legs...umm...I had a shower before I called you and with oil on my legs, the skin’s a little slippery and just as soft as on my...my breasts.” I removed my sleeveless top and ran my hand over myself.

“Would you let me kiss you there?” Ryan asked in a low voice. “Tell me you’d let me pull that vest down so I could see you, properly, so I could touch your nipples with my mouth, let you feel my stubble over your skin.”

"I'd let you," I admitted on a soft intake of breath, "If...you were...if you weren't wearing anything on your chest."

I heard a rustle of movement and realised that Ryan was stripping. "T-shirt gone. Are you lying down for me, babe?"

"Yes. I took off my vest." I closed my eyes against the light in my room, calling up in my head how the weight of him next to me in my bed would feel.

"I've looked at that picture of you in a bikini so many times, I can trace your figure in my head. Your body is unreal with your beautiful dark skin." He breathed out deeply. "You've got the most perfect hourglass shape. What does that little tattoo say?"

I traced the raised flesh just above my hipbone, which had hurt like a bastard.

"All you need is love," I murmured, slightly embarrassed that I had marked myself with *The Beatles'* lyrics. I ran the tips of my fingers along the top of my pelvis, brushing the pad of my thumb over my navel piercing.

"I'd kiss that as well, give your piercing a little bite too. Talk to me, Court, tell me how you feel?"

"I wish you were here, right now. I think I want you...to...touch me."

"Reach into your shorts; what does it feel like inside?"

My heart thundered in my throat as I closed my eyes and slipped my hand inside my shorts, gasping to find my outer lips coated in wetness.

"Are you wet?" he demanded gruffly.

"Yes, I'm all swollen and you know I wax everything there, so..."

"Jesus," he whispered.

“I’m imagining it’s your hand, Ryan. That you’re rubbing my...”

“Say it, babe. Say it, you won’t shock me again, promise.”

“You’re rubbing my pussy. Ah, I’ve never been like this.” The tops of my thighs were nearly sticky, I was so wet.

“Taste it,” he insisted. “You need you to tell me what you taste like—I need to know until I can do it myself...”

I brought my hand to my face and was intoxicated by the smell of my own arousal. It was intense, musky. I drew my tongue over my damp fingers and gave another sigh of pleasure. “I’ve never tasted myself before. I taste sweet, a little like a floury, tangy cream with a hint of salt.”

“I’d lick that off your fingers, then I’d spread your legs and taste you right there. Can you feel me brushing my nose over your clit? Just before I’d slip my tongue inside you. You’d be so tight just on my tongue.”

He must have heard my gasp. My hand had delved back inside my shorts, my legs spread wide as I stroked my clit, to the near hypnotic rhythm of his words.

“You’d like that, my tongue deep inside your pussy.”

“It would feel so good,” I moaned. “Please, I want to touch you,” I begged. “I’ve never touched a penis before. I don’t know what it would feel like.”

“Fuck... Babe, tense your forearm, near your elbow. Put your hand around it. That’s kind of what it feels like, but just as hot as your pussy, and harder.”

“How long...”

“Don’t worry about that.” He gave the barest of laughs.

“Why? Will I freak out?”

“As far as first sights of dicks go, you probably would. I’d love for you to taste me, just lick the head.”

“What if I want to taste some more?” I asked. “Don’t you want me to see if I can take more than just a little lick? Can I touch you all over? Can I taste your...your balls?”

“No,” he growled, “I want to be inside you. I want to feel your pussy around my dick, I want to feel it all wet and tight on me, break your hymen so I could get all the way inside you, take you properly, with your legs around my waist. I want to fuck you slow and deep until you come.”

I slipped a finger into my pussy, and it almost protested at something invading it, but I wanted to imagine it was Ryan, pushing into me. “Please, yes... I want to come.”

“Babe, I’m going to come too.” He sounded strained. “Where shall I come?”

“Stay in me,” I offered, thinking of what that would feel like, his cum shooting into me. My body exploded, and I gave a strangled cry as my juices flowed over my fingers and dampened my shorts. I distantly heard him grunt my name, then another deep, rather manly sigh.

“Fuck,” he moaned. “Fucking hell. Court? Are you still there?”

“Sort of,” I murmured. “Well, physically...mentally is another matter.” I laughed. “That was one cherry popped, and you didn’t even have to get on a plane.”

He gave a gentle laugh. "Enjoy yourself?"

"Very much so. I feel quite naughty. Never done that before."

"You were just making it up to me. Using my photographs for blatant sexual purposes."

I giggled. "Well, you put it up on a plate, Klark."

He was quiet for a moment, while I simply enjoyed the dull throb of my body, the surface of my skin.

"Court?"

"Hey, you."

"If anyone asks, you are my girlfriend. Okay? What you told me, what we just did...that means a hell of a lot to me."

My heart gave a huge, crazy leap. "To me too."

"Good. Are you okay? Are you tired?"

"Feeling quite sleepy."

"It's late, it's one in the morning. Go to sleep. I'll call you tomorrow night."

"Okay. Night, Ryan. Thank you."

"No, thank *you*. Night, babe."

Chapter THREE

From: Ryan Klark rudejoker@h...
To: Courtney Phillips yapalot@g...
Date: 15 May 2010
Re: You

We all went out tonight, and you'll have to forgive me if nothing makes sense about this email, but there was beer and someone had Jack Daniel's. I'm kinda pissed. No, I am pissed. And the whole night I was thinking, where's Court tonight? How is she? What's she wearing? Is she thinking about me? I want to be in your bed right now, I want to feel that juicy little arse of yours against my dick, your back against my chest, your beautiful breasts on my arm. God, you're so fucking incredible and fuck it, I'm in love with you. Completely and utterly bewitched by you. Going to be sick now. Call you later. xxx Ryan

From: Ryan Klark rudejoker@h...
To: Courtney Phillips yapalot@g...
Date: 15 May 2010
Re: Erase the email

If you care at all about me you will delete the drunken piece of nonsense I sent you at three this morning. Beg. Ging. You.

From: Courtney Phillips yapalot@g...
To: Ryan Klark rudejoker@h...

Re: Computer says no
Date: 15 May 2010

I'm not deleting that email for anything! I know you're embarrassed because you've given yourself away, but does it matter? You know it's mutual though, don't you? Although I thought we'd have the decency to not get rat arsed and say it in a badly typed email at three in the morning. I thought I'd wait until we were face to face. But that's just me, the responsible one.

From: Ryan Klark rudejoker@h...
To: Courtney Phillips yapalot@g...
Date: 15 May 2010
Re: You are in trouble

When I see you, the first thing you're getting is a spanking. Just for that email.

From: Courtney Phillips yapalot@g...
To: Ryan Klark rudejoker@h...
Re: Not sodding likely
Date: 16 May 2010

Stop being so mad. Call me later, please?
Xx Court the Sensible

* * *

16th May 2010

“Hello, George Best!” I said, feeling rather smug when Ryan identified himself.

"You know what," he warned, "if I was in your room right now, you'd be over my knee, skirt over your head, and your knickers around your ankles so I could spank you good and hard."

I burst out laughing. "I can't help it if you're a better writer when you're pissed!"

"You've just added a paddle to your instruments of punishment."

I tried not to laugh and failed miserably. "Oh come on! You'd be doing the dance of smug if I sent you an email like that at stupid o'clock before throwing up."

"No, you would have called me and said, *Ryan, I'm so horny for you!*"

"You know that would never happen," I said airily.

He gave a chuckle. "There's still time."

"Did you mean it?" I asked hesitantly. "What you said?"

He became immediately cagey. "Well, you know, gets late, you miss someone, you talk pony..."

I plucked at my duvet, crossing my legs. "I miss you when I don't hear from you. You know, like in the middle of the day."

"Oh, so when you should be creating *Vogue's* next big thing, you're in the toilet feeling yourself up?"

"Your mind goes to dark places, Mr. Klark," I told him off.

"You would though, if I asked you."

Good thing he couldn't see my face right now, because he was sooo right. "Ask me something now. And I'll consider it."

"Okay, tell me a fantasy."

"What?"

“A fantasy, like the milkman comes over, or you haven’t got enough money for the bus and you’re convincing a taxi driver to take you home. You’re a French maid in an expensive hotel...”

“You’ve put a lot of thought into this.”

“I have you running through my mind a lot.” He said it in such a careless, throwaway manner I couldn’t even begin to enjoy it. “So come on, what makes you flick the bean?”

“Ryan!” I gasped in indignation.

“I know you want to tell me.”

It took about ten minutes of him cajoling before I gave in. His reasoning? I’d email him about it anyway, so why not cut corners and tell him now.

“Okay, close your eyes.”

“Er... I’m in a different continent from you. On a telephone,” he reminded me.

I pouted. “Don’t be rude. I won’t do it otherwise.”

“Fine, fine, my controlling little darling. Eyes closed.”

I exhaled noisily. I closed my eyes myself and thought about the little fantasy that always crossed my mind whenever I did have time to myself.

“Okay, so I’m getting ready for a fashion show. I’ve been fitting models all day, and I’m finally on the last one. The work stations are just above the shop, on the main street. You can see people walking past from the windows.”

“Is this what you do all day? Take inside leg measurements from fake tanned models?”

“In my dream world, yes, I do,” I told him sternly. “It’s a fantasy, remember?”

“Got it. Please tell me you're wearing something completely impractical?” His question had such a naughty lilt to it, I found myself grinning.

“A little blue sundress that reaches halfway down my thighs, if not a little bit shorter.”

“If you bent over, would I see underwear?”

I giggled. “Definitely.”

“Like it, carry on.”

“I'm fitting the last model; everyone else has gone home. It's just the two of us in the workroom. I've got to make the trousers fit, around the thighs, so I'm eye level with his crotch.”

“Are you touching yourself?”

I released the tie on one side of my hips. “Wait. Now I am. I can see he's getting turned on, because his cock is pressing against the buttons.” In my head, the model is a slightly older version of Ryan, without the wetsuit on, but the trousers are low enough for me to see the “v” shape that cuts his lower torso and below the waist line. “I'm tempted, really tempted to lean forward and put my mouth on him, see what he'd feel like in my mouth. I stop myself because I don't know him. And I've got work to do. He tells me I'm far too stressed, and I should relax. I tell him I don't have time to relax. He starts taking the trousers off, forgetting that I've just pinned everything in place, but he doesn't seem to care. He says he wants to help me just calm down. He sits me on my work station, spreading my legs.” I can envision my workroom, dark in the evening light, the distant sound of traffic, scraps of material over the floor, the model's skin starkly pale against my open thighs...

“What can he see?” Ryan asked me in a low voice.

"I'm wearing white cotton underwear. It has a little pink trim, and he touches it, and I can see him laughing in his eyes. He knows I'm wet." I released another breath as my words sent a pulse straight to my pussy. I slid my fingers over myself and was slightly surprised by my own moistness.

"Don't stop," Ryan demanded. "Carry on."

My breath came out on a shake, while my eyes closed tighter. "He tells me to say out loud the letters he's going to draw over me. And he hooks my underwear to the side; his thumb brushes over my pussy as he spreads my lips and traces a letter right over my clit."

"Holy fuck," Ryan whispered.

"He has his hand on my thighs, keeping them apart so I can't close them against him. I can feel his mouth against me when he reminds me to say the letters out loud. He can't hear me, he says. I can't help myself. I like how his tongue feels on me, all wet and rough and hard. My pussy keeps pulling at empty air..."

Ryan growled, "It needs a cock, doesn't it?"

"Yes." I sighed, rubbing faster, my clit trapped between two fingers. "I don't even know what I'm spelling, because I start to come, I can feel myself wetting my own panties, covering the model's chin... He stands up, and with two fingers hooked into my panties, he shoves his cock deep into me. Ahhh, he starts fucking me, he has one hand on the work station so he can do it harder. He leans into me so I have to taste my pussy on his tongue... I'm being fucked so hard by him, like he owns my cunt..."

“Fuck, Court, I want to own your cunt. I could fuck it as hard and deep as I like, spread your pussy lips wide and come deep inside you.”

My body convulsed, and I breathed Ryan's name as I came on my own fingers, my pussy clenching where Ryan's dick should have been. Finally the shudders stopped, and I noticed that I was still clutching the phone in one hand. “Ry? Are you okay?”

He was breathing heavily, as if he'd just finished running. “Yeah, I think so. Finish the story, babe.”

“Once the model has come inside me, he, er...puts my underwear back on properly to hold the cum inside. He says he'll be happy to help me relax any time I like.”

I tucked the phone between my ear and my shoulder to fix my underwear. I really hoped no one heard me—I didn't seem to have a volume dial when it came to touching myself with Ryan on the phone.

“That was so fucking sexy, you'll give me a heart attack.”

I giggled, embarrassed and sort of proud as well. “Serves you right for being old.”

“Jesus Christ, I'm still hard.”

His exclamation made me laugh. “Sorry!”

“Don't be. You just lost another cherry.”

My body trembled at the thought of him taking the last one. “Just one more left?”

“Dreaming about that every damn night.”

I looked at the clock. It was one in the morning again. “I need to go to sleep, Ry.”

“Okay. I'll call you tomorrow. Night, babe.”

“Sleep well.”

“Believe me, after that I really will!”

From: Courtney Phillips yapalot@g...
To: Ryan Klark rudejoker@h...
Date: 17 May 2010
Re: Better now?

Did that make up for our little email spat?

From: Ryan Klark rudejoker@h...
To: Courtney Phillips yapalot@g...
Date: 17 May 2010
Re: So much better...

Distant memory, babe. You sure you're a virgin?
Virgins shouldn't know about stuff like that.

From: Courtney Phillips yapalot@g...
To: Ryan Klark rudejoker@h...
Date: 28 May 2010
Re: Implosion

Selene just picked one of my dresses for the
Autumn/Winter collection. AAAARRRRGGGGHHH!!
Love you! I've had champagne so I can say it! Squeal!!

From: Ryan Klark rudejoker@h...
To: Courtney Phillips yapalot@g...
Date: 29 May 2010
Re: Awesome

Really proud of you, Court. I know how hard you've
worked. Congratulations. I've put a present in the post
for you. Should turn up in a few days. Selene obviously
sees what I do. That you're incredibly talented and

have great musicality. Sorry, that's an X-Factor thing. She's lucky to have you. Like I'm lucky to know you. You know you're my best friend, don't you? And...well, I'm glad you didn't delete that email. Because it's all true. I thought you should get a handle on that before I turn up on your doorstep. Yep, I'm coming back. Breathe, Court, breathe. Call me later if you want. Ryan xxx.

From: Courtney Phillips yapalot@g...
To: Ryan Klark rudejoker@h...
Date: 30 May 2010
Re: SAY WHAT?!

What...you're...and you. What? So you. With the email. And. What? What do you mean you love me?

From: Ryan Klark rudejoker@h...
To: Courtney Phillips yapalot@g...
Date: 29 May 2010
Re: I love a simpleton

Flight lands this time in two weeks. It's all very simple, my dear Miss Phillips. It's that thing that normally happens to computer nerds, but it's happened to me. From your email, it looks like you can't cope. So I'll leave you be for a little bit. Fran will probably be sacrificed in the wake of a complete lack of communication, but I'll cope. Somehow.

From: Courtney Phillips yapalot@g...
To: Ryan Klark rudejoker@h...
Re: Who are you calling simple?
Date: 31 May 2010

What time's your flight? I'll come and meet you.

*Mr Ryan Klark S. Preston, Esquire
Camps Bay Apartments
Cape Town
South Africa (not for much longer)*

*Miss Courtney Phillips
31 Kings Palace Road
My Home Town
UK*

31st May 2010

Dear Court,

Still love you.

Ryan xxx (if you let me)

Chapter FOUR

I was so scared. I was vibrating, trembling so much. How I was able to drive to Heathrow airport, let alone have a shower, I have no idea. The idea of even shaving my legs was a no-no, because I would have scarred myself in ten different places. Ryan and I were going to meet. Face to face. We had been emailing each other for four months, talking on the phone for three and talking about what we would do to one another in the privacy of a bedroom for... Well, not long enough to make me feel less worried about seeing him. I didn't understand why he liked me so much. Other than my newly acquired skill in describing sex.

He had been true to his word about leaving me be. There was only that lone letter he'd posted to me, and his present, which had rocked up—a hefty book on Christian Dior. There was no way that man would know how much I loved Dior unless he paid attention to every single word I ever said to him. All I had was our emails, which I read over and over again obsessively. Then he sent a short one telling me his flight details and saying if I wasn't able to come to the airport, he would get a taxi. I told him off for that, then told him I had taken the day off work to meet him.

So there I was, wearing a pure white *broderie anglaise* summer dress that tied on my shoulders and

flat sandals (I couldn't drive in heels). Halfway to Heathrow, I realized I looked like a sacrificial virgin.

I checked the flight times again and again and everything was all right, nothing delayed, no horrible crashes. I had written a sign for him: "The Queen Vic is waiting for you." Our mutual adoration of *EastEnders* didn't really mean he'd actually step foot inside that pub. It was the scene of much carnage over the years. I'd be scared drinking in there.

I wish I had written something simpler, like "Welcome Home, Ryan." The mass of old wrinkly men who came up to me, staring hopefully at my chest, were turned away apologetically at first, then with irritation. My stomach started to twist itself into knots, and my foot beat a relentless tattoo against the floor. Then came a flood of passengers who had to be Ryan's plane compadres.

And I saw him. My sign nearly slipped from my hands, and my knees trembled. Wearing a worn hooded gray top and fitted jeans that showed just how long his legs were, he was pushing his case on a trolley. He caught sight of me; then he saw my sign and grinned, much to the bemusement of the people around him. I folded up the sign and tucked it into my bag. He pushed the hoodie from his head, his hair scattering wildly, catching the sheen of the electrical lights. It made him look almost angelic, one of God's haloed favourites, obviously before he was clearly arse kicked out of heaven for being a dirty-minded sex pest.

My eyes were round trying to take all of him into view. Ryan was looking me up and down lazily.

"Well," he said, "Courtney Phillips in the flesh, and not a machine in sight."

I gave a nervous chuckle. "Can you manage without? Or shall I go outside and call you on your mobile?"

"I'm not sure British Airways would condone such behaviour," he said primly, before laughing with me. He held out his arms toward me and I wrapped my arms around his neck, pulling him tightly to me.

"Hi," he whispered.

"Hey you," I whispered back. He pulled back a little and tucked a lock of my hair behind my ear.

I took in his staggeringly vivid green eyes, flecked with the smallest amount of gold around the pupils and surrounded by floor-sweeping lashes. Before I knew what I was doing, I was tracing the stark white scar beneath his right eye, shuddering helplessly at the thought of two-year-old Ryan being in pain.

"What? Scars are sexy," he defended, a small smile edging his firm, full lips. "You are so small!"

"Oi! I'm wearing flat shoes."

He laughed, his arms tightening around my waist. "You're perfect. Come here."

"What?" I blinked, suddenly nervous again. "Why?"

"Because, Miss Phillips, I want all those little x's you promised me at the end of your emails."

I tried to curb the immediate burn of excitement that flashed through my whole body. I eased myself closer, and he lifted me so I was eye level with him, hard against the length of his torso, his forearms braced just under my bottom. I caught the smile in his beautiful eyes as he leaned closer and brushed his mouth over mine, watching me the entire time. It was just a touch, but it set me on fire, and my hands tightened on his shoulders.

“Close your eyes, Court,” he commanded softly. I did as he asked, then gasped as his mouth collided with mine. His tongue traced the seam of my lips, and I again did as he silently asked and parted my lips. I moaned a little more loudly as his tongue stroked over mine, one hand at my back pressing me to him, soft stubble rubbing over my skin. I felt the tips of his fingers delve between the buttons at the back of my dress as he angled his head to take more of me, kissing me even deeper. Oh God, I thought, trailing my fingers through his soft curls, why weren’t we near a bedroom? What would we get done for if we just went to the toilets and just...

“Get a room!” someone yelled.

Ryan lifted his head and gave me one last kiss, then set me down on the ground. I just stared at him. Poor Fran. I would have chased him too. My skin felt as if there were electrodes running up and down it. What was I doing before he touched me? “Okay, umm, do you want to get going?”

“How about we stay and put on a show? Like *True Blood*, just a bit more explicit.”

I stared at him in horror, only to realise that he was joking. I couldn’t say a word. “You know,” he said as he hooked an arm around my shoulders, pushing his suitcase trolley with one broad hand, “you were more talkative with several thousand miles between us.”

The warm weight of his arm didn’t help with the breakdown of my vocal cords. “Well, that’s different. I mean, I had time to think and you hadn’t just...”

Ryan stroked his fingers through my loose hair. “Just what, babe?”

Kissed me like you were going to take my virginity on the floor of Terminal Five. “Arrived,” I finished lamely.

Ryan stopped the trolley and gathered me into another hug. “You’re still you.” He kissed me again, then released me. “Okay, where’d you park your car? Do you mind playing chauffeur for a bit?”

“Yes sir.” I saluted. We walked toward the car together as I asked him how the flight was and how weird it felt being in England.

“Not bad, weather’s pretty much the same.”

We reached my little golf, and he bundled his cases into the back. He returned the trolley, then folded his big body into the car. He pulled my seatbelt across me, his knuckles brushing over the swell of my breast, before he did his own. He leaned his head back against the seat.

“Jet lag,” he explained before I could even start to complain. *I love him*, I thought dreamily, then nearly backed into another car because of the shock of such a thought.

“Phillips, it does help to look in the rear-view mirror.”

“Kiss my arse,” I snapped. I hated backseat drivers.

“Whenever you like.” He grinned, closing his eyes. I sent him a matronly look of disapproval, which he completely missed. I caught him up on recent events, political, environmental, and most importantly, *EastEnders*. I realised I had been talking for ages. “I watch too much TV,” I added apologetically.

“You’ve got to find something to keep you occupied,” he suggested with a quirk of his dark eyebrows.

“Ladies and gentlemen, we have a winner!”

He chuckled, giving me such a bright smile, all sensation in my body went into overdrive. How on earth was I in a car with this guy? How did I even know him? I couldn’t believe or understand my luck, but something told me to stop complaining and enjoy.

Ryan fell asleep about twenty minutes later, but I had to wake him up to know where the hell to go. I stroked the back of my hand over his cheek. “Ry, I need to know where to go. Chauffeur needs direction.”

He struggled through layers of sleep to rub his fist over his eyes. God, that was way too gorgeous to tally.

“Know where you are?”

“Hmm. You need to turn left here, then go straight through.”

“To Knightsbridge?”

“Yeah.”

“You live in Knightsbridge?”

“Fraid so.”

My eyebrows left the stratosphere. “You live with your parents?” I stated on a questioning note. I felt silly for asking; it made me realise just how much I still didn’t know about Ryan. He had no go areas.

“No,” he said slowly, then yawned.

“So wait, you live alone in one of the most expensive areas of an already ridiculously expensive city?”

Ryan looked at me with those jade eyes, and another yawn. "Yeah, I do." He turned his gaze toward the window. "Guilt gift from said parents."

I swore as I missed my turning. Ryan quickly directed me through a shortcut to put me back on track. I turned down the radio. "Can I ask why they bought it for you?"

Ryan made a sound in his throat, which vibrated annoyance. "Court, I don't want to have this conversation with you. Turn here."

"Why not? I mean it's come up, so let's talk about it. I like to think that we've been pretty blunt with each other, and I don't see why that should stop because it's a little awkward." I glanced at him briefly.

"I get your point," he admitted quietly, then started chewing on his thumb. "Okay, look, my parents have been pretty absent most of my life. I've spent more time with friends and relatives than with them. A couple of years ago, I was trying to finish my degree when my granddad died. He didn't agree with the method of parenting my folks went with, and he was always my backup. When I got a first, to my immense surprise, my parents celebrated on a job well done and bought me the flat in an area they rarely go to."

"That could have been somewhere crappy, like Acton," I muttered.

Ryan's smile was weak. "Yeah, but not as fancy. It's big enough to have decent parties in. Makes up for a complete lack of parental support."

He was waiting for me to apologise, but I didn't work like that. "Why didn't you tell them what you wanted?"

"To get more guilt gifts?"

“No, to get the attention you obviously needed. Was it that hard to ask?”

“Ask them for something? Fuck that.”

“You know you wouldn’t have degraded yourself by doing that. Asking for something isn’t that difficult, really.”

His eyes narrowed. “Really.” He drawled, “Then why didn’t you ask Chris out?”

I so knew that was coming to bitch slap me. It was Ryan’s only defence mechanism against me. “I didn’t want him to say no to me.”

“He might not have,” he replied carefully.

“He would have,” I insisted. “And I would have lost his friendship, and I would never have met you. And despite being a secretive bugger, I quite like you.”

His face brightened with a smile that should have taken all strength from my legs. “Only because you know I’d say yes to you for anything.”

I lifted my chin regally, until Ryan nodded to a door. “That one.”

I parked, and Ryan said he would go upstairs and check that the residence permit had arrived so I wouldn’t get a ticket. Clever boy, I thought. He jogged down the stairs and stuck the permit on my window. He then gave me the keys and the smallest case so I could go in ahead of him. I walked inside and tried to keep my jaw level with the rest of my face.

The flooring was black painted wood, matched with monochromatic furniture and bright white walls. He had a real fireplace in the living room—who needed a real fireplace? I put down the small case and wandered into the kitchen, which carried on the mono theme with dark marble on the counters and cream

wood cabinets. I opened his huge fridge to beer and the end slice of a loaf of bread. I figured one of his mates had regularly checked on the place. Or used it to impress girls.

Ryan came out of his bedroom and flopped down onto his sofa.

“Umm, all you have is beer.”

He sighed. “I asked those guys for one thing... Stay here. Don’t go anywhere, okay?”

“Not even to sleep?”

Ryan winked at me. “Especially not that.”

He was gone and back in two minutes. Female neighbours, I thought sourly. He had tea bags, sugar and milk. He made me a cup of tea, then flopped down onto the sofa. He cuddled up to me, and within minutes he had been sucked in by advertising of his own making. I took the throw from the back of the sofa and tucked it over both of us. He turned over and draped his arm over my waist. His arm felt extremely heavy, and I wanted to shift it somewhere else, but I was getting quite turned on by the weight of him. I was scared witless by the phone ringing. I slipped away from Ryan and took the cordless phone into the kitchen to answer it.

“Hello?”

“Hello? To whom am I speaking?”

“Did I call you?” I asked sarcastically.

“No, but as I am calling my son’s home, it would be nice to know exactly who is answering his phone.”

Crap! His mother. “Hello, Mrs. Klark. My name’s Courtney.”

“Oh!” Her voice turned warm with rich laughter. “You’re Courtney. How wonderful. Did you meet Ryan at the airport?”

“Yes,” I said, wanting to say more, but shyness blocked anything else sensible from emerging from my throat.

“That is sweet of you. And where is Ryan?”

“He’s asleep. Shall I get him?”

“No darling, don’t wake him. Just tell him that we’re glad he’s arrived safely and we’ll be back from Copenhagen in a fortnight, all right?”

“Yes, thank you.”

“Good. Well done for looking after my son, Courtney. Bye for now.”

“Bye bye, Mrs. Klark.”

Once I turned the phone off, I screamed silently at the set. To stop myself from waking up Ryan, I called my mother.

“Mmm,” she grunted.

“Mum, it’s me!”

“Ah,” came the early morning croak. “Met your handsome young man, did you?”

“Yes, Mum. He’s on his own for a few weeks, so I thought I’d stay and help him out. I just called to say that I’m fine and he hasn’t dumped me in the Thames. I’ll text you his address.”

“God, Courtney,” she groaned. “You do think of the most horrible things. Be good, and don’t do anything silly.”

“Course not!” I was all warranted indignation. Did having sex with Ryan count as silly? No. “Bye, Ma!”

“Hmm.”

She wasn’t a morning person at all. But as I still lived at home, I thought I’d be respectful by not making her chase me. I curled back against Ryan,

snuggling into his toasty warm body. I didn't know I'd fallen asleep until I realised that I was sitting on a surfboard, on a beach. Ryan was stroking my hip and kissing me briefly on the mouth. He then offered me food in that deep, sexy voice of his which was when I prised my eyes open to see Ryan waving a plate of ravioli under my nose.

"Ah! Greedy girl. I knew if a kiss wouldn't work, food definitely would."

"Where did this come from?"

"I went to Marks and got some grub. Eat up before it gets cold."

I saluted and took the plate. A glass of fruit juice was sitting on the coffee table as Ryan brought his own plate and some garlic bread too. I was quite hungry and noticed that it was already one in the afternoon. "Where've you been all my life?" I mumbled around the tomato sauce and chorizo-stuffed ravioli.

"Erm, banging my head on a table, falling out of several trees, setting fire to a biology lab—completely by accident, mind you—playing the randy parts in school plays, getting my first camera and taking pictures of everything that moves, understanding my alcoholic limits, getting on planes back and forth and staying far away from sex-mad women, present company excluded. Stop laughing and eat."

"Mm," I swallowed the last bite of garlic bread, "Your mum called."

We had been eating in a comfortable quiet, like we'd been together for years. *Get that thought out... Okay, far too late, I've designed my wedding dress.*

"Really?" Ryan said disinterestedly.

“Yes really. She said she and your dad will be back from Copenhagen in two weeks, and she’s glad you’re back.”

“Okay.”

“You don’t want to call her back?”

“God no. She only called because she had an idea you’d be here. Nosy old cow.”

“What do you mean?”

“Well, it would help if I shut up about you.”

“Nice to know I’m a good source of conversation,” I said dryly.

“I should win awards,” he added. “Are you finished? Good, I can take you home.”

I choked on my glass of juice. “Excuse me?”

“Yeah, so you and I can have a proper date.”

“A what now?”

“Date, you know, dinner, drink, and I try to get my hand under your dress.” He hesitated. “I mean if you can’t...”

I laughed. “No, it’s okay, I really like that idea.”

He brushed his nose over my cheek. “Fantastic.”

He was lucky I was already prepared.

“Court, you’ve got this look on your face like you’re plotting something...”

Chapter FIVE

My dress was awesome. I had told Selene that I was going to meet Ryan for the first time, and she gave me a dress without batting an eyelid.

“Think of it as a thank you for the hard work you’ve done, and a thank you to Ryan for introducing you to me.”

It was like I was in *Bugsy Malone*, and I was about to do the Charleston. The dress was all draping silk in the most beautiful vivid, green. I wondered if Selene realised how close the colour was to Ryan’s eyes. I was much calmer than yesterday, so I was able to do all my scrimping and shaving. I barely managed to get ready within an hour, pinning my chin-length hair up with little diamante slides and slipping on four-inch gold heels. I had no idea where we were going. I wouldn’t be happy if we ended up at KFC, though.

I skipped down the stairs to where Ryan was waiting for me, or waiting with my male relations. He was sitting in the living room in a dark blue shirt and a suit a shade darker than the shirt, arguing with the other four males.

I saw *Sky Sports* was on in the background, which explained the row. “Why shouldn’t they sack him? He’s a shit manager.”

“It’s not his fault—it’s the team that’s shit and the chairman who won’t dig into his fat pockets to buy some decent players.”

“So why not sack the chairman?”

“Because he’s the one with the money, fool.” The last derisive comment came from Adam, my oldest brother.

“Can I have Ryan back, please?” I asked. “He did come here for me, if you don’t mind.”

All five men gawked at me.

Dave was the first one to speak. “Why are you going out in a nightie?”

Dad said in awe, “What have you done with my daughter?”

Adam went a little nuts. “Mum!” he exploded. “MUM! You can’t let her go out like that! And where the hell is your coat?”

“It’s twenty-two degrees outside. I’ll be fine.”

Mum gave my hand a squeeze. “Don’t be silly, Adam, she looks lovely. Let me take a picture...”

Oh God. “NOO!” I squeaked.

Ryan stood up and curled me into his side. “Thank you, Mrs. Phillips, but we really need to get going. The table’s booked for eight thirty.”

Mum positively swooned and trilled to our departing backs, “Enjoy yourselves.”

I shut the door behind us, and once we were around the corner, out of sight, I turned to Ryan. “Oh God, that was so embarrassing, I’m so sorry. Really, I just...”

Ryan wrapped his arms around my waist and caught me in a kiss that should have thrown the pins from my hair. “You look so beautiful,” he murmured against my mouth.

"Thank you," I said, my face hot with pleasure. "Did you shave for me?" I touched a hand to his smooth jaw.

He looked younger without the stubble. "Well, you and the restaurant."

We stopped next to an Audi. "This isn't yours?"

"Fraid so. Another guilt gift for missing my graduation. Getting in?"

"You know what, I am going to give you a gift completely unconnected with guilt," I announced, then wished I had kept my mouth shut.

Ryan leaned down to brush his mouth over my cheekbone.

"That would be lovely."

He opened the door for me and eased himself into the car. We pulled away and headed toward Knightsbridge. "Where are we off to?"

"This little French place near mine. You can't go there alone, you have to go with a woman, or they give you looks of deep disgust at your lack of sexual prowess. Then if you fancy a drink, London's our oyster."

"Cool. Can I pick some music?"

"Sure, my iPod's there. Just flick through whatever you want."

I flicked through and found my favourite band. "You know Skunk Anansie?"

"If you even mention *Cruel Intentions*, I will kick you out of this car while it's still moving."

"No, from when they started." I selected "Get Off," and we head banged for a good five minutes. Probably not the best idea, as I was quite concerned that our love of a good tune would get us into an accident. The shuffle took us to "Secretly," my

favourite track by the band. I wanted to sing for Ryan. It wasn't something I did often, as my brothers would always tell me that I needed to shut up, or do karaoke. Since that was never happening, I stuck to singing in the shower.

"Court..." he said in awe. "Your voice!"

"Cheers!" I said lightly. "Makes a change from 'Shut up!'"

"Don't let them," he said seriously. "Simon Cowell would have pound signs rolling in his eyes if he saw you coming."

"Singing is just something I enjoy. Fashion is my love."

He gave me a strange glance. "You've never mentioned the singing once."

"Coz it's personal. Or we should have had a chat when I was in the shower."

Ryan grinned. "If that's still an option, I'd like to take you up on that."

"Behave!"

The little French restaurant happened to be Tom Aikens' restaurant, Mr. Michelin star. Ryan did that slick money exchange thing to ensure our table was a really good one, then he was even more Prince Charming once we were seated. The waiter was so in love with Ryan, he barely left us alone. We spent the meal falling back into old banter, then taking the piss out of the snooty customers on either side of us. One had a load of Sloane girls braying loudly about their Harvey Nichols horrors: "Oh God, ya, I'm sure the girl was retarded. When I asked for the size four, she told me that they won't have any more until next week."

Don't they have what they need in the stockroom? It's Prada. It shouldn't be that hard to find."

On our other side sat a load of suits: "He really shouldn't be working there if he can't keep a hold on the figures. Useless, man, where did he go to school? South Bank?"

Ryan beckoned me closer. "Do you need to use the ladies'?"

"Why?"

"When you do, tell the waiter to do something for you."

As we left, we heard the shrieks from both tables at the inclusion of five bottles of Dom Perignon to their bill. Ryan danced me down the road, delighted with our little plan. "They can afford it," he assured me, dipping me then pressing lingering kisses to my neck.

"Let's go somewhere really trashy."

"Oh no."

"Yes, Leicester Square side. Come on, I haven't been there since I was seventeen."

"And you'll see why!"

We left the car by the restaurant and took a taxi into the West End. We landed in an awful bar that was packed with oily older men who kept approaching me. What was it with me and older men? Ryan was fending off women's propositions with, "Ask my wife if she minds."

I gave him a dirty look for that. Obviously that wasn't going to work on some of the more determined women, who thought he was too beautiful to pass up. I used lines like, "I'm glad you're not worried about STDs."

A short, pudgy man seemed to have wax in his ears, as he ignored me to run his sweaty palms over my dress. Ryan told him with a short shove to his chest, "Oi, fuck off and leave my diseased wife alone." He swept me out of there.

"I feel dirty," I mumbled. "Can we go somewhere nice?"

"Please God, yes," he agreed grimly.

We hailed a taxi and ended up in a rather sexy bar in Soho. Between us, we drank the yearly production in Bordeaux, then cocktails, then shots, made an awful lot of noise, made friends then lost them just as fast for being incomprehensible. I couldn't sit up properly, and every time I tried to lean on the table, I would miss it by inches and end up on the floor underneath it. Ryan just howled with laughter, and on his last attempt at trying to pull me up, he ended up on the floor with a broken chair leg. We got thrown out by the bouncers for being drunk and disorderly. We were both way too drunk to even care.

"I've got you under my skin," I sang, swaying to the music in my head. "I've got you...deep in the heart of me. Sing with me, babe!"

Ryan buried his face in my neck. "You are freakin' hilarious. Wanna go home?"

"What are you talking about, it's only...okay, it's going three." I wrapped my arms around his neck, trailing my fingers through his soft hair.

"We have got to calm down your drinking."

"I don't...no...I'm fine." I grinned at him. "You wanna have sex with me."

“Maybe when you’re not about to die of alcohol poisoning,” he said dryly.

Well, that stung. Ryan lifted my chin for a slow kiss. “I did not fly nearly six thousand miles for you to pass out before I even get your dress off. Okay?”

“Okay.” I gave him a bright smile. “You’re pretty.”

“Oh good God.” He laughed. “Home time.”

He hailed a taxi and all but chucked me into it, then ordered the cab driver to his flat. If my being drunk didn’t help him sober up, he stuck his head out of the window to make sure he was wide awake. Once we arrived, everything was blurry. The cab driver said, “You won’t get anything out of that one.”

“She’ll be fine,” he assured the driver, scooping me into his arms. How he managed to get his doors opened and closed with me being no help, I had no idea. I was far too busy singing Kings of Leon’s “Sex on Fire” which made him laugh, at least. He kicked the door to his flat closed, then carried me into his bedroom. He placed me carefully in the middle of the bed and told me to stay there. A minute later, he came back with a plastic bowl and a pint glass full of water.

“Let’s get you undressed,” he said. “Don’t worry about your mum, I sent her a text about midnight.”

“She thinks you’re candy for eyes,” I mumbled.

“Right.”

He managed to undo the buttons that ran along the side of my dress, then tugged it over my head.

“Christ!” he growled. I peeled back my eyelids. Oh yeah. My underwear: a purple leopard-print push-up bra with matching shorts that had “Diva” stitched on the seam of the left leg.

“Still don’t wanna?”

“God,” Ryan groaned, staring up at the ceiling. “Why are you testing me like this!”

“Night, Ry.” I yawned, turning onto my side. He somehow managed to tug a t-shirt over me and tucked me under his duvet. “Love you,” I added before completely giving in to darkness.

* * *

Everything hurt. My hangover should have killed someone weaker. I rubbed at my hair and tried four times to sit up. When I finally succeeded, I swallowed to keep the urge to retch down. I rubbed a hand under my eyes and realised that my eyeliner and mascara had just congealed into my skin. Disgusting. I tried to stand up then sat back down again, because it still hurt.

I looked down and noticed a few things. One, I had a t-shirt on but my bra and knickers were still in place. I was alone in Ryan’s bedroom, but there was no sign of male activity. My dress was hanging up outside his glossy black wardrobe, my shoes neatly beneath it.

If I headed to the bathroom, Ryan might be in there. He should not see me before I had sorted myself out. I wandered into the living room and came to a grinding halt. It was filled with Ryan’s mates. His male friends. I would like to remind you that I hadn’t seen a hair or toothbrush since yesterday evening. There was still probably a good amount of alcohol running through my veins.

“Hi,” I croaked.

The room was pretty silent. Ryan smiled. “You know when I said I wouldn’t be shocked anymore, I

lied.” He turned to the other people in the room. “This is Courtney.”

At which they all went, “Aah.”

“Courtney, this is Tom.” A brown-haired guy with a nest of a beard waved at me. “Oliver.” A divinely cute blond gave me a grin. “Rich.” A man who looked quiet in the dark-haired manner of a serial killer nodded to me. “And this is Jay.” Jay’s big blue eyes ate me up with a welcoming twinkle, so I decided I liked him the best.

“Hi guys!” I waved at them all with both hands, my voice still raw from the laughing and drinking. I forgot that the t-shirt skimmed my bottom, so when I lifted my arms I exposed the leopard print. I tugged the t-shirt down, but it was far too late.

They looked from my crotch to Ryan and back again.

“I’m going to get dressed.”

“There’s a bag in the bathroom for you,” Ryan advised me, his tone light with amusement. I decided to stay in the corridor for a moment to hear what they said.

“Fucking sexy little thing there, mate.”

“Very. What does her bra say?”

“Fuck this,” Ryan drawled. I gasped in indignation until he added, “Don’t look at my girlfriend’s underwear again.”

“Come on! It was on display. Sure you can’t let me have a look?”

“No.”

“You would, Tom—you could donate yourself to scientific research you haven’t shagged for so long.”

“Piss off!”

“The wit of that comeback.”

“She’s strange.”

“And what about her showing her underwear gave you that idea, Rich?”

“She just is, Jay. And when you’re crying into your beer in a few weeks’ time, Ryan, don’t say I didn’t warn you.”

“Thanks,” came Ryan’s droll response. “Nice to know you’re here for me.”

“It’s all right.”

“I meant that sarcastically.”

“Oh, right.”

That was in turns utterly insulting and rather flattering. I disappeared into the bathroom and tried to make a better impression. In the bag was my facial wash and face cream, a change of underwear, a brand new pair of denim shorts, some flip-flops and an off-the-shoulder top. He must have run into H&M this morning. My boyfriend has good taste, I thought. I scrubbed my face clean, showered, cleaned my teeth, and deodorised like there was no tomorrow.

Feeling more human, I wandered back into the living room and they all shut up once more. Clearly talking about me again. “Hi again. What’s to eat?”

“Er...beer?”

I sighed and eased my bag onto my shoulder. “How’s the weather, boys?”

“You’ll be fine in that little getup,” Jay assured me. “You’d get chucked out of Harrods, though.”

“Thanks. I’ll be back in a bit.”

Ryan got up and came over to me. “And you’re going where?”

“To get something that will make me feel less like committing suicide?” I suggested.

“Do you want me to come with you?”

“No, look, you’ve been away for ages. Stay here, I’ll be back. With bacon. And probably chips. And bread.” I gave a little gasp. “Tattoo number one!” I pointed at the mermaid in tribal strokes that ran along his forearm. It suited him.

“I’ll show you where the other one is if you’re really good.” He gave me a light kiss, then tucked his keys into my denim shorts.

“Are you copping a feel?” I demanded.

Ryan’s grin turned devilish. “If I were going to cop a feel, I’d do this...” He slipped both hands inside the denim shorts and gave both buttocks a gentle squeeze. He gave my shocked mouth another kiss, then said mildly, “Don’t get lost.”

Quite enjoying the after-effects of his molestation, I skipped off to Marks & Spencer for food. Knowing men, what I bought would feed all of us breakfast and that would be about it. Never mind. I came back with several bags, much to the boys’ surprise, and hustled into the kitchen.

“Got her well trained,” Tom said under his breath.

“I’m going to spit in your food now,” I threatened. The others chortled, then helped me prepare a fry up of sausages, tomatoes, mushrooms, eggs, beans and lots and lots of toast. We had a roaring time in the kitchen, and it was amazing watching the boys rib Ryan. Mainly about me, though.

“Just one step down from ordering a Russian bride, Ry.”

“What are you talking about?” I asked. “He taught at the same school as my friend.”

“Ah, the blond wanker.”

“Excuse me?”

“Shut up,” Ryan growled.

The boys went quiet, so I changed the subject. “Good to have Ryan back then?”

“It’s like he never left,” Jay assured me with a wink, topping up my glass with more fruit juice. When they’d finished, they were ushered out by Ryan. I was pretty much assaulted with hugs and kisses, except for Rich, who gave me a very regal nod before he left.

Ryan scooped me up and cuddled me into the sofa. “They like you.”

I noticed the stubble was growing back. “What, should they not?”

“Well, they don’t like anyone. Me included.”

“As long as you like me.” I gave a small shrug, very aware that my bare legs were over Ryan’s denim-covered thighs.

“Like you,” he murmured, “a lot.”

I slid my arms around his neck and pressed my lips against his. He made me feel so good. I eased closer to him, and weirdly, he pulled back.

“I was good last night,” he explained.

“Because I was wasted.”

He turned toward me, his expression serious. “Let me make it special for you. Even though a rough session of hard fucking will get rid of both our hangovers, I want to do the whole candles, flowers, champagne and strawberries thing for you.”

I fiddled with the neckline of his t-shirt. “I’m not made of glass, you know.”

“I know. Just let me feel my masculinity a little. K?”

“Okay,” I sighed.

He gave me a sweet, short kiss. "I'll drive you home then. I hope you remembered where we parked, as I have no fucking clue."

I have never felt so strongly about anything, but I was determined to get rid of that V title, and hand it to Ryan in a lovely little lace-wrapped package for him to take over and over again.

Chapter SIX

From: Courtney Phillips yapalot@g...
To: Ryan Klark rudejoker@h...
Date: 02 July 2010
Re: Doom

You'd better read this...

From: Christopher Wilkinson christheman@g...
To: Courtney Phillips yapalot@g...
Date: 01 July 2010
Re: What the hell

What the serious hell is going on between you and my so-called mate Ryan Klark? I know he's spoken to Fran about you, and she said you're his girlfriend! I want an explanation. Now.

From: Ryan Klark rudejoker@h...
To: Courtney Phillips yapalot@g...
Date: 02 July 2010
Re: Doom

I got one too. I know what I want to say to him, but he's your friend, it's up to you.

From: Christopher Wilkinson christheman@g...
To: Ryan Klark rudejoker@h...
Date: 01 July 2010
Re: What the proper fuck

Look, yeah, Courtney's been my friend for a long time. So when someone tells me that you two are fucking, I want to know what the hell you're playing at. Call me.

From: Courtney Phillips yapalot@g...
To: Ryan Klark rudejoker@h...
Date: 02 July 2010
Re: What?

How dare he! I'm sending him short shrift right now, and you definitely do the same. What I do is none of his business. What you and I do together is absolutely none of his business. 99 Problems but a Wilkinson ain't one. You feel me?

From: Ryan Klark rudejoker@h...
To: Courtney Phillips yapalot@g...
Date: 02 July 2010
Re: Oh yeah...?

Girls who quote Jay-Z are super hot. Will you be my girlfriend?

From: Courtney Phillips yapalot@g...
To: Christopher Wilkinson christheman@g...
Date: 03 July 2010
Re: Re: What the hell

You do not ever get to write or speak to me like that ever again. My private life is none of your business. Given the things I know about you that your parents don't, you'd be wise to keep me on side, wouldn't you? Are we on the same page? Good.

From: Ryan Klark rudejoker@h...
To: Christopher Wilkinson christheman@g...

Date: 03 July 2010

Re: Re: What the proper fuck

Now you know what this feels like. Game on you, cunt.

* * *

His bedroom was decorated with candles, the faintest scent of sandalwood in the air. Now I felt nervous. A week after Chris' horrible email, Ryan had sent me a text saying simply, *Tonight*. I had gone out on my lunch break and spent stupid money on a lingerie set that a girl should be proud to take off in front of any man. All black, all sheer, all not very much of it.

Channelling Betty Boop, I had on a short-sleeved fifties-style cardigan with polka dot navy high-waisted shorts and killer heels. I had gone straight to Ryan's flat, where he'd cooked for me. Well, he'd grilled some steaks and put some frozen chips in the oven, but he'd made the effort to make sure my steak was charred within an inch of its life before putting it anywhere near me. We'd laughed and gotten a little tipsy on a very smooth bottle of red. Then he'd taken my hand and tugged me to my feet, murmuring that he wanted to show me something. He showed me that his room now looked like something out of a Sarah Walters novel. If he brought out a dildo, I was running.

"Do you like it?" he asked, his mouth against my neck.

"It's gorgeous," I said honestly. His hands rubbed my arms in soothing strokes.

"Are you cold? You've got goose bumps."

A tremor went through my body. Now we were here, I wasn't so sure I could do this. No, I definitely couldn't do this. I'd take virginity forever. Ryan turned me around and cupped my face.

"As slow as you want, okay?"

I nodded a bit maniacally before taking a few deep breaths. "Can I just say sorry now in case I disappoint you?"

"No," he told me, leaning down to kiss me. I instantly felt better. I was comfortable with this, the feel of his stubble on my face, his tongue searching carefully in my mouth before his mouth trailed away, down to my neck. I giggled. I couldn't help it—I had a sensitive part there.

He nipped me with his teeth. "Still?"

"Yes, you don't stop being...argh! Ticklish because...stop it STOP IT!" I squealed as he kept rubbing his jaw into my neck, cramping my stomach with laughter. He wrapped his arms around my waist and kissed me with intent. It felt immediately different. He wasn't playing around with me anymore. My arms encircled his neck, my fingers tangling in his curls. I felt his hands at the buttons on my cardigan. Once he'd slid the material down my arms, he worked on the buttons of my shorts, then they landed in a pile at my feet.

I had my hands on his chest, feeling the rise and fall of his skin beneath my touch. I looked up at him as if asking if it was okay for me to touch him. He stroked the back of his hand over my cheek and let me explore. I undid the buttons of his shirt and pulled it from him. There was his tattoo. A huge black dragon that looked as if Ryan had been initiated as a man by some ancient Mayan tribe that inked the skin with such strong

angled slashes and arcs over his skin. It ran all the way from his hip to his nipple along his ribs. I traced the raised skin where the needle had filled with colour. I looked up at him with an amazed smile, "That is...wow... When did you?"

"Last year. Just before I went to South Africa." His eyes crinkled. "We probably did ours at the same time."

"It's probably that weird same birthday psychic link," I suggested, unable to stop my palm moving over his tattoo. I leaned back a little from him to take my top off, a lace confection that ended up on the floor.

"You want to leave your shoes on?" he asked in a rather delighted little mutter, his mouth gliding over my shoulder.

"Okay," I agreed, feeling my inner Dita von Teese. His hands cupped my barely covered bottom, roving in slow, almost reverent circles. His hands skimmed around my waist to frame my breasts. I took in a shocked breath. This was as far as I'd ever gone with a guy.

"Let me touch you here," he whispered, his hands delving around my back to unhook my bra. The bra went flying somewhere across the room. I couldn't breathe properly at the feel of his hand on my naked breast. My nipples tightened with the sensation of his thumbs rubbing over the points.

He lifted me by the waist and placed me on the bed, then removed his cargo pants and boxers. I didn't know where to look; I caught the briefest flash of his dick. My face was the same temperature as the oven right now from embarrassment.

“Court, it's okay. Look at me.”

Was the bastard laughing at me? “I don't spend all day looking at porn, you know.”

He lay down beside me, shifting onto his side, so he could stroke the curve of my hip. “I know. But I want to spend a lot of time with you without any clothes on.” He took my hand and placed it firmly on his dick. Instinctively, my fingers curled around him. I could feel the blood rushing inside it, stiffening it slowly. I stared at the blue vein that ran along the side, pressed the pulse that nudged at my thumb to the sound of Ryan's intake of breath. I stroked him slowly. I thought the feel of his dick was amazing. It was so hot, the softest skin wrapped around what looked like a good eight inches of steel. I wrapped both hands around him and allowed him to push through my encircling thumbs, his flesh paler against my skin. I gave him a grin of deep joy.

“Enjoying yourself?” he stated with a flick of his brows.

“How do you not play with yourself all the time?” I asked, dragging my nails through the neatly trimmed dark hair surrounding his sex.

“I do. Now you're doing it for me.”

I lowered my head and took a long, slow lick. He tasted salty, clean. Why did girls have such an issue with giving head? This seemed more fun than anything else. I swirled my tongue around the swollen head; something sweet and hot leaked out onto my tongue.

“Fuck, fuck, okay, stop that,” he gasped, pulling my up by the arms. “Carry on and you won't lose anything. Maybe your eyesight...”

I opened my arms to him and was given slow, sweet kisses. His fingers firmly pinched at my nipples, sending shocked little jets of need between my legs. I squeezed my thighs together and felt the moistness damping my gossamer panties. Ryan caught both sides and pulled them in a long motion down my legs and over my shoes. He cupped my pussy, slipping his thumb between my damp lips. I gave a strangled cry as he touched my clit; then my whole body arced as he dipped inside me.

His lips found my breasts at the same time, the heat of his mouth surrounding my nipples. My body writhed underneath his influence, my legs closing against his hand, pulling him closer. He leaned up, using his thigh to open my legs wider. His hand returned to my pussy, and this time his finger glided into me.

“You feel so wet. Jesus, it's like you're going to break my finger you're so tight,” he said against my ear, his finger drawing relentless moans from me.

“Sexy bugger,” I murmured, turning my head to kiss him, my tongue curling under his top lip. I bit down accidentally as he added another finger.

He smiled under my mouth. “I'll remind you you did that later.”

I felt suddenly pressed down by the tension of his fingers stretching me, edging me toward a climax. My hand fisted into his hair, as I pushed against his hand. He chased light kisses down the length of my body before he brushed his lips over my own tattoo. “Very true,” he agreed.

I smiled up at the ceiling. “Love and champagne.”

“Drunk,” he admonished. He breathed out slowly, hooking my thigh onto his shoulder. I felt horribly exposed. He glanced up at me with a wink. “Just fit me for a pair of trousers afterwards.”

“Ryan, no!”

The feel of his breath against my wet pussy made me shudder to my scalp. “Out loud, Miss Phillips.”

I yelped at the heat of his tongue on my clit, my body buckling as he firmly traced a letter between my legs. “O.”

His tongue moved left, and my fingers tightened in his hair. “Mmmm.”

“What was that?”

“M.” I gripped the bed with my other hand, clenching under his touch. I let go of the bed to rub an unconscious hand between my breasts, gathering the sweat beading there. My whole body felt as if I was burning with fever. It was too much; I wanted him to stop.

He wrote the next letter and I could sense it building, that wonderful arc toward an orgasm. “F.” I stuttered the last letter as I came. “Oh God!” I wailed, my thighs tightening on Ryan's head; I pulled his mouth from my clit and half curled in on myself. “Oh my fucking God,” I gasped.

“Well done.” He laughed, rubbing my cream from his chin. My pussy was still trembling with the aftershock.

“Ready?” he asked.

I gave a murmur of dreamy assent. He could do what he liked with me; I was somewhere in the earth's orbit. I heard the crinkle of a foil wrapper, and opened my eyes to see him smoothing on a condom. I became nervous again.

“Come here,” he said gently, pulling me into his arms, firmly beneath the weight of his body. He used his hand to guide himself to me, and I felt him press at my pussy. My body was slowly giving way to him, but this felt really weird.

“No babe, relax,” Ryan insisted, spreading my legs farther apart. He kissed me until I became used to the sensation of his dick at my entrance. I glanced down and started to panic; only the head was inside me. Even through the condom, the burning heat of him slowly opened me wider. My body started to tighten against him. I winced as he pushed a little deeper.

“It hurts, Ryan. I think you’re too big,” I said, biting on my lip. I glanced up and saw he was trying to hide a smile. “Don’t you dare laugh!”

“I’m not laughing, babe.” His eyes were bright with amusement. I wriggled underneath him, trying to find a point where it didn’t feel like he was tearing me. He wrapped his arms tightly around me and took slow, shallow thrusts into me, his mouth on mine, telling me how good I felt on his dick, how he’d dreamed about this, how I was going to make him come so hard...

He suddenly surged all the way inside me, using his knees to push as deep as possible until I felt the hair of his balls rubbing over my bare pussy lips. I bit down on his shoulder to stop myself crying out, but my vocal cords had a mind of their own. He gave me long, deep strokes with his hips, and I gave a moan with each one, not sure if I was simply tolerating it or waiting for it to get better. I gripped him tighter as the pain began to wane a little. My thighs were really

starting to ache now. Ryan turned onto his back, taking me with him.

“What are you doing?”

“Come here,” he ordered, pulling my down so my breasts were braced against his chest. “Don't make that face—you do want to be on top, trust me. Lean back a little.”

The pressure on my pussy lessened immediately. I looked down and saw blood on the condom. “Ry, I'm bleeding!”

“Hmm.” Ryan's hands were back at my bottom, his knees drawing up behind me. “You're an ex-virgin. God, your arse is something else.” He thrust upwards and grazed a spot inside me that sent a shudder through my body, so intense I thought I was going to come again right then.

“See, that's better, isn't it—you control how much of my dick you take.” He groaned, his hands tightly at my waist. I followed the movement of his hands and pushed down onto him, levering myself up and down, the tips of my fingers braced on his stomach. Now this felt good, I thought, my eyes closing dreamily. Really good. I circled my hips and savored the tug on my lower body.

Ryan put his arms around my waist, pulling me against his chest. “Do you need to put your arms around my waist?” I asked, disconcerted by this position.

“Yes, because you're going to get tired, and I like this view of you.”

He pounded fiercely up into me, his arms anchoring me into his body. I started to fall apart, my pussy triggering around him. My breasts shook with

the force of him fucking me; then he pressed his thumb to my clit again.

“Ry... I’m close, I’m close,” I wailed.

“You’re going to come, aren’t you? With my dick deep inside you. Yes, babe, come for me. You need to come for me, babe. Come, come now.”

I gave a wild little scream as I came, the pleasure ripping through me so unexpectedly that I visibly shook with it.

Yes,” he hissed, his dick pulsing inside me. “Uh, uh. Fuck.” He pushed into me slowly a few more times before he stayed still. I felt him softening inside me. Holy hell on a stick, I thought, quite unable to close my mouth. I got it now. I knew now why this made people go so absolutely mental.

He allowed me to slide from his lap and stick myself to his side. He wrapped an arm behind my head, breathing heavily.

“Cherry popper,” I accused. He laughed, kissing me. “Are you okay?”

I gazed at him, damp curls sticking to his forehead, his eyes bright. I wanted to say thank you, to say that I loved him, but I couldn’t really form speech. It was far too hard. “Good. Good, yeah, what?”

He laughed harder as he kissed me again. “Let’s do it again. Make sure it’s really gone.”

I was totally on that plan.

* * *

I woke up and found that my whole body was having a protest against me over a tiny bit of skin I didn’t need. I reached out for Ryan and found him

gone. I pulled on my discarded underwear and went searching for him, finger combing my hair into a semblance of normality.

I padded into the kitchen and saw Ryan sitting at the dining table, his forearms braced on either side of a white china coffee cup, his curls falling over his forehead. He glanced up and gave me a warm smile.

“What are you doing up so early?” he asked. “It’s five something stupid.”

I sat opposite him, crossing my legs nervously. I winced at the ache of closing my legs. “You give a girl a complex if you disappear in the morning.”

He sighed, his lashes floating downwards. “I couldn’t sleep, but I didn’t want to wake you. You looked really peaceful. Do you want some coffee?”

I shook my head, curling my hands around the edge of the table to stop myself from going over to touch him. I felt as if there were a ten-foot barrier between me and him, and I didn’t know where it had come from—besides the fact I was the worst lay in the world. “Why can’t you sleep?”

He cracked a grin. “Other than the fact that you snore more when you’re sober than when you’re drunk?”

“Shush!”

His smile melted from his face, and he rubbed his stubbly jawline with a broad palm. “Just feel...pretty intense.”

My heart caught in my throat. “Because of me?” I whispered.

He didn’t look at me, only moved the handle of the cup from left to right. “Lot of responsibility being a girl’s first.”

I shrugged. "It's a way to make sure I never forget your name. But you know, for me, it was beyond amazing."

He reached across the table, catching my hand suddenly to squeeze my fingers tightly. "You are so fucking sweet. I don't get what I did to deserve you."

Why did I feel like I was about to get dumped? "You think you don't deserve me?"

"Not in the slightest." He swept his thumb over my knuckles before releasing me.

"Why's that then?"

He speared his hand through his hair. "You...you are Galliano talented, you sing like Skin, you're incredibly generous...and you've got knockers that a man can only dream about."

"You're being utterly silly," I admonished.

"But mainly, I feel like I don't deserve you because you haven't let any dirty old codger touch you. Except me."

"You're not old," I teased, but caught on that he was weirdly upset about this. "You know why that is, though."

He took his bottom lip into his mouth, thinking. "Yeah, I do."

Okay, he was clearly dumping me. I shouldn't have said anything; I knew I should have just kept it to myself. "You want to back off, don't you?"

He looked up sharply. "Court..."

"No, no. I get it. It's too much for a man to take. You know, the virginity thing, the other thing, you know, that 'I' word thing. I'd run a mile too."

"Babe, you're not..."

I tried to force the lump from my throat. First day of being an ex-virgin was really starting to suck. And not in a good way. "What?"

His gaze locked to mine, and my heart jolted. "You have got to have some perspective about me."

I looked away, folding my arms around my waist. I really should have put on more clothes. I felt ridiculously exposed in my bra and pants, in the stark light, my newfound muscles protesting at any movement that wasn't tantamount to rigor mortis. "That's a mean thing to say."

"It's true."

"You're playing this all wrong, you know," I said, distancing myself from the possibility that he didn't love me anymore. He was just being stupid. "I'm a girl who thinks the sun shines out of your arse. Embrace it and don't question it."

"You were doing the same thing!" he mocked. "From about three emails in, you were thinking that."

Well hell on a breadstick, he knew me too well. "But I stopped, didn't I?" I tilted my head so I was in his eye line. "Ryan, I'm starry eyed about you for good reason."

"It's nothing to do with you," he started, stroking a hand over my forearm. "It's me."

"Oh my God. I am going to hit you!" I threatened at such utter nonsense emerging from my boyfriend's throat.

"Don't start with the violence. Look, everything's working out for me, for both of us. I just want to be ready in case it goes Pete Tong."

"You're being ridiculous," I warned him. "And if you ever say 'it's not you, it's me' ever again, your luck will end because you will be dead."

He chuckled. "Okay, I'm sorry. Can you come over here?"

I circled the table and he wrapped his arms around my waist, pulling me down onto his lap. He sighed deeply, resting his forehead against mine. "I'm not perfect," he told me, caution in his eyes.

"I know," I admitted, drawing the back of my hands over his face. "I know now, anyway! We'll be okay."

He gripped me tighter. "Let's go air guitar before you have to go to work."

He carried me off into the living room, where he put on *American Anthems*, and we did air guitar like we were playing for U2. There was a point where we looked at each other while I was bellowing to Heart's "Alone," and it occurred to me that he had a point. Usually when things were this good, something came along to destroy it.

Chapter SEVEN

We got into a pretty tight routine. I would stay with him every other day, as Selene's studio was closer to Ryan's home. He gave me my own set of keys. I nearly had a heart attack when he did that. Wasn't that a step down from an engagement ring?! It did help that the weather turned incredible, so we would meet up with the guys and go to either one of their favourite pubs or Jay's gigs. He was a fantastic DJ; watching people's reaction when he dropped killer hits was sick. I loved it. Jay and I became quite good friends, I liked to think. I liked the others too—well, Rich thought I was going to throw his friend under the bus at the first opportunity, but I made the effort to prod him into talking to me.

Ryan and I would then weave our way back to his flat, and I would pretty much pounce on him. Now I'd had sex, I couldn't get enough. I wanted him all the time. There was an evening when we were watching a film together on TV, and my hand of its own accord drifted along his thigh then underneath the hem of his t-shirt, dragging my nails along his tummy.

"If you carry on, you're not allowed to ask me what happens at the end," he told me lightly. I leaned closer and traced my mouth over his jawline, then slipped my hand into his jeans, feeling the heat of him against my palm.

"You'll tell me."

He sucked in a breath as my fingers curled around him, and I was still quite shocked to feel his dick growing instantly hard under my touch. It always surprised me that I made him react that way.

“What if I’m busy?” he asked with difficulty, his hips arching into my hand.

I gave a careless shrug. “What else are you planning on doing?”

“When did you turn into such a fucking little tease?” he hissed, and before I knew it I was on my back on the carpet with my cropped jeans flying across the living room. Ryan’s hands roved along my ribs, his mouth moving hard over mine. He leaned up suddenly and yanked one of the drawers of the coffee table onto the floor.

“There are some in my bag...” I murmured, stunned by the mess he was making. He gave a deliberate thrust of his hips into mine.

“Your bag is too far away.” He tugged his jeans and boxers down and smoothed the condom on. “Lift your hips a little for me, babe,” he commanded against my lips as he edged my panties to the side.

I felt the blunt hardness of him pressing against my pussy, before he pushed firmly and deeply into me. I couldn’t help my wince at the pressure of him inside me, as if my body didn’t want him there. But he kissed me then, both his hands on my face, running into my hair. He began to move roughly against me, rubbing my skin raw against the rug on the floor.

“Babe, your pussy feels so good,” he groaned. “You like my cock inside you? You like being fucked?”

I raised my hips even further, tightening my arms around his neck, and he hit a spot inside me that

sent my body into complete spasms. “Yes, yes, I love how you fuck me. Oh God...”

My nails dug into his neck, and I tightened my thighs around his waist, sending him deeper into me. He suddenly pulled out of me completely, leaving a shiny wet trail along my inner thigh. God, I was so wet. He yanked my panties along my legs, then tugged my thighs along his torso, my calves over his shoulders. He plunged into me, and within three punches of his hips, I came really hard, shaking as I wailed, drenching him in my cream. As I was coming he moved faster, and the sound that was ripped from him vibrated through my legs as he pressed into me, holding my hips against him. After a few minutes, he eased my trembling limbs from his shoulders and pulled me onto his lap.

I gave him several long kisses. “Much better than some independent film.”

He arched his eyebrows. “Well, you’re not coming for film night again.”

I realised something. “That was my first quickie!”

Ryan rubbed his forehead against my cheek. “I’ve taught you well if you appreciate speed.”

“No, you’re just lucky.”

And he looked after me! How lovely it was being kissed in the morning with a cup of tea and near burnt toast (that’s how I like it), or being picked up from work to go to dinner or just stay at his flat. He wasn’t due to start his apprenticeship with Robert Matthews for another week, so he was just adding to his portfolio with random photographs. I had to talk him out of taking them of me. I told him that I didn’t want to

have pictures of me without any clothes on landing on the Internet.

He gave me a look over the viewer of the camera and grinned. "How would you know?"

That scared me, enough to want to wait to meet his parents, who apparently returned to London eager to see who was keeping their son so occupied. "Chicken," Ryan taunted as he got ready to meet them for dinner.

"It's for your own good. I don't want them to tell you that you're punching above your weight with me."

He leaned down to give me a brief kiss. "Too late."

I was really careful about broadcasting just how happy I was. Chris' vitriolic demand had put me on edge. The first Sunday in three weeks that I was at home, and not recovering from a night partying with Ryan and the guys, Mum and I sat on my bed watching *27 Dresses* together.

"Are you and Ryan very serious then?"

James Marsden has the best smile, and distractedly I said, "Serious enough. He's my boyfriend."

She nudged me. "Are you in love?"

"I love chocolate," I dismissed her, not wanting her to get overexcited and buy a hat for the wedding she'd planned in the last twenty minutes in her mind. Something crossed my own mind; it wasn't something I'd ever even thought about. Well, I would have had to have been in a relationship to do so.

"Mum?"

"Yes, Courtney?"

"Do you mind? Me going out with Ryan?"

"Of course not! What a silly thing to say. You could be at home more, but if he makes you happy..."

"He does," I said with a half-smile. "Really happy."

"Then that's all that matters."

"And you don't mind that he's..."

"White? No. Why would I? Your surname is Phillips—you don't think you've got some white floating in you somewhere?"

I told myself off for the extremely dirty thought that hit my mind, and shrugged. "I know, but Andie's parents were really odd when she started seeing her first boyfriend."

"It wasn't because he was white," my mum mocked, "it was because he was a chav."

I laughed. "Okay!" I cuddled into her. "Thank you."

The next big hurdle was Andie and Summer. We hadn't at all been great since the whole Summer/Iain debacle, more so now that the two were a proper couple. I called Andie first, only to hear, "What da fuck, man! What's wrong with you? Hello?"

"Who are you swearing at?"

"Some fool who tried to run me over, innit? Y'all right?"

I felt tears prickle my eyes. Andie was such a hard nut on the outside, but she was all bloody marshmallow. She'd never admit it though. "I miss you."

She paused. "Yeah?"

"I could have done with your advice."

"What for?"

"Sex."

“What?!” she fairly screamed. “You’ve been penetrated?”

“Andie!” I said, disgusted.

“Boy! I thought Jesus would come back to earth before that happened. How was it? Did you have fun?”

“I found out I still had a hymen. Who knew? But Ryan made it all romantic, and he made sure I was comfortable and relaxed and...as far as the horror stories of a girl’s first time goes, it was pretty sweet.”

“Rah, Court, man. Good for you, yeah? I’m glad you waited for someone you love. Makes all the difference. Not like that cunt-o-phile Pedro. Soon as he took off the condom, zoom, boy was on next pussy like he was about to die!”

I laughed so hard my stomach hurt. “Do you want to come out for a drink? After work—I know you’re busy.”

“Nah, I can come.” She hesitated. “What about Summer?”

“I’m going to ask her to come too.”

“All right,” she drew out. “We’ll see, yeah? Look, I gotta jet. I’ll see you in where?”

“Usual! Down south, baby!”

Andie laughed. “Done! Court?”

“Yep?”

“Missed you too.”

Buoyed by such a reception, I called Summer, only for Iain to answer her phone. “Hey little mate, you all right?”

“Where’s your woman?”

“Bringing me a beer. We’re at the local. Can you come after work?”

“I was going to with Andie.”

He halted. I loved Iain, but Andie would have broken him in half in about ten seconds. "Really? Are you guys friends?"

"We've been friends since...since conception," I stated, using Ryan's words. "So we need to sort it out."

"Isn't it your boss's party thing tonight?"

Oh yes! Selene had a refit of the entire Bond Street store, and there were going to be paparazzi and free champagne, then we were going to this super swanky, super exclusive club afterwards. Ryan was going to meet me with Jay and the other boys at the club. In case things worked out, I had added Summer, Iain and Andie to the list.

"Yeah, but I want you all there, and talking to one another, so... I wanted to get it over with."

"Okay, well here's Summer."

"Courtney! Has Ryan deflowered you yet?"

"A million times over," I said dryly. "Can you stay in the pub? I'm coming down with Andie. I really want us to talk."

"Wait, I want to talk about the sex thing!"

"It hurt, then it didn't hurt, then it was bloody fantastic, I still ache now thinking about it and I love him to bits. K?"

Summer chuckled. "Trust you to not take it seriously."

"I made it very serious for a very long time, and now I don't need to. All the mystery goes when your boyfriend doesn't tie the condom properly and you step on it in the morning."

"And you're being careful." She sighed happily. "My little girl's all grown up. Come to the pub. I promise Andie and I will make nice."

I got to the pub first—our favourite pub, right on the Thames—and saw that Summer had banished Iain and was perched in a booth. She had on a floral dress and cowboy boots. Summer was tall enough and Kate Moss enough to pull off that look, her dark blonde hair rippling down her back. She saw me and gave a squeal of delight. “Are you okay? Do you want something to sit on?”

“Shut up!” I admonished, accepting her hug warmly.

Andie walked in about twenty minutes later in denim shorts and a silky green top. Andie was sporting a high ponytail, most of it bought from our local Afro hair shop, but it worked for her. Andie gave Summer a wary look, her hazel eyes narrowing in her creamy walnut face. “You all right? Any other men you want to take from behind my back?”

“How about David Hale?” Summer teased, knowing Andie was obsessed with the boxer.

“You touch him, bitch, and you die—I ain’t even lyin’.”

Summer giggled, then got to her feet and hugged her. “I’m sorry,” Summer whispered. “But I love him.”

“You’re lucky he’s too tall and too fucking skinny. Like Skreech from...”

“*Saved by the Bell!*” we all shrieked.

For the first time in ages, we just chatted absolute rubbish. I missed a call from my mother, and one from Ryan. The next call was from Selene, telling me that I shouldn’t worry about something to wear, that I would need to wear one of the shop lines for promotion.

"I'm going to be late," I realised. I handed them both the invites for the shop and the club. "Oh yeah, Andie, Jay's going to be there."

"Who be Jay, and why the fuck should I care?"

"Trust me." I winked, not at all fazed by her imperious rant. "You'll care."

I raced off, clutching the gift I had bought for Ryan during my lunch break, and went straight to the store. I really hoped that Selene couldn't smell the cider on me, but she was too busy to notice. She pulled a vintage-inspired lace dress over my head and told me to stand by the front and look pretty.

"Actually, talk some people into buying stuff. Not the famous ones, they won't do it. Go for the women on their second husbands. You'll spot them."

We all worked pretty hard until about ten. We shifted a lot of clothes, and Selene was right—I did learn to spot the women on their second husbands, and they were the ones who bought so much stuff. We sold out on the lace dress I wore, especially after Selene gave me a hug just as her sexy-as-hell husband turned up and kissed her over my head.

"And you must be Courtney." He turned golden eyes on me. Damn, the man was dangerous. Ryan was lucky I was loyal.

"Hello, Mr. Woolfe. What's the time, please?"

He chuckled. "That one never gets old. Selene, Courtney probably wants to get ready for the club."

"Of course, of course. You've got your ticket, haven't you? There are cars outside for all staff, just tell them your name and they'll wait for you. That's what they're paid for."

"Thank you so much." I gave her another hug and found myself on the receiving end of a kiss.

“Don’t tell anyone, but you’re my favourite,” she whispered affectionately. I felt warm all over. “Go get changed quick—my husband’s paying for the champagne.”

“News to me,” he drawled.

I leapt into the town car and was sped to Knightsbridge. I texted the boys and told them to come to the flat and we’d take them to the club. Ryan was waiting for me when I rolled up, dress in a bag for me to put back on again once I had a much-needed shower.

“Late, late, late, late! I know! I won’t be a moment!”

“The lies, woman, stop the lies!” He was sprawled out on his sofa, wearing one of the shirts I had made him. His curls looked dark at the end, clearly from a wash. I stopped and removed my gift from my bag.

“This is for you. Just you. For being you. And no one else.”

He stared at it, in shock.

“What?” I smiled. “I told you I was going to do this.”

He looked down at the bag, “I know. I know... Thank you,” he murmured, staring up at me disbelievingly. He removed a Homer Simpson bottle opener. He was forever using the counter to open bottles of beer, and I’d told him a million and one times that he would ruin his work surfaces if he wasn’t careful.

“I know, it’s a bit trashy but...”

He tugged me into his lap and kissed me soundly for a minute. I couldn’t breathe properly when he

lifted his head. "Thank you. I love it. Go have your shower."

I scuttled off to the bathroom for a shower done at the speed of light. On his bed was a box... Oh sweet lord, it was Dior. It was the little gold clutch, the *minaudière* I had eyed in Paris. With a towel tied at a knot over my breasts I padded into the kitchen, staring at the bag. "I can't believe you got me this!"

I glanced up as a voice said sharply, "Courtney!"

I nearly dropped the clutch. Christopher Wilkinson stood there looking absolutely mutinous. He had cropped his hair to about a few millimetres all over. Crap, he knew I had a weird weakness for shaved-headed guys. No joke—I had wandered up to men in bars and asked if they minded if I stroked their hair. He looked horribly smart in a buttoned-up short-sleeved black shirt. Ryan had changed, looking more indie kid than ever, in a waist coat and t-shirt with Ghostface Killer on the design.

This was so surreal.

I cleared my throat. "Chris! Hi! How are you? How come you're back, I mean... Welcome back!"

"You can tell me why you're wearing nothing but a fucking towel?"

My brows lifted at his tone. "What time's your flight back?"

Ryan winked at me, and I smiled back. Not seeing Ryan's expression, Chris thought I was joking. "Sorry, Court, but you've been really weird. Both of you. None of you answered my questions..."

"Demands," Ryan corrected under his breath.

"So you flew back from Cape Town, to find that out? Are you mental? What did you tell the school?"

“Family emergency. Told them that my Aunt Mavis died and I needed to be with family.”

“Mavis died seven years ago, and that was your gerbil.”

“Why d’you care?” his face slowly came into focus, as if I was seeing him, really seeing him for the first time since I turned ten and I thought I was going to spend the rest of my life with him. Deluded at an early age.

“Because I thought you went to South Africa to find your humanity, give back to the world, the future. The kids. You know, learn a little responsibility.”

Chris tutted in impatience. “Who gives a shit! Why aren’t you answering me? You’re in a towel like you live here. There’s something going on, and I want to know what. Is there something going on between you two or what?”

I decided that Chris had the right to absolute zero, so I said “no,” just as Ryan said “yes.”

“Which is it?” Chris snapped.

“Yes.”

“No.”

Ryan and I caught each other’s gaze and started laughing, much to Chris’ fury. “This isn’t funny, you know. You’re fucking a guy you know nothing about.”

I shook my head once at Ryan, who looked like he was about to remove Chris’ head from his body. “Why do you care?”

“Because you’re my friend, Court,” he said, sounding almost desperate. “And I don’t want him to fuck you over.”

“You know what, piss off!” Ryan growled. “You haven’t been touched by the fucking pope, so leave it

out. Want an answer? Fine, Courtney's my *amiga*, girlfriend, comrade, soul mate. Tick any one you like."

"How's Melissa?" I asked suddenly, with a veneer of innocence. Ryan just called me his soul mate, so I felt I had to show my loyalty. You know, piss Chris off.

"What the hell does that have to do with anything?"

"Well, if I were her, I wouldn't appreciate my boyfriend flying all the way back home to find out if an old friend was going out with his ex-flat mate or not."

"We're not together anymore, so what I do is none of her business."

Ryan looked startled. "You broke up?"

Chris pulled a sly face. "You tell me your sad little tale, and I'll tell you mine."

"How about we don't?" Ryan said drolly, yanking at the fridge handle and removing a bottle of beer from the fridge. He hooked the lid on the edge of his work counter and slammed off the lid with the heel of his palm. His eyes then narrowed darkly on the Homer opener. *Oh God...*

"How about I call Fran?" Ryan offered. "She seems to be Google for everyone at the moment."

Chris' mouth went white with irritation, and then he turned to me, switching on the coaxing smile. "You haven't said hello to me properly yet."

Because you're behaving like a twat! He came up to me and pulled me into a hug so tight my towel started to release in protest. "I've missed you, Court."

"You haven't been gone long enough," I reminded him sharply. He merely laughed and kissed me on the shoulder. I pushed him away for Chris to say on a faux sigh, "Are you flashing me again?"

Why was he intent on winding Ryan up? He'd put his fist through Chris' head in a moment. "I did not flash you, I lost my bikini top in the swimming pool. You did not need to take a photograph."

"Yes I did. I felt like Hugh Hefner."

Ryan's expression gave me clear warning someone was going to die. "Ryan, would you help me on with the dress, please?"

He followed me into his bedroom, and once I shut the door, Ryan exploded. "Who the fuck does he think he is, walking in here, throwing orders around, expecting everyone to jump? It's my fucking flat. You're my fucking girlfriend. He kissed you on the fucking shoulder, for fuck's sake."

I laughed, placing the bag inside the tissue paper. "You should open a fucking fair. Show off your amazing fucking flat, and your fucking girlfriend with her fucking shoulder."

Ryan's head bobbed as he ducked to hide his own amusement.

"I know you're fuming, but he knows now, and honestly, who cares? It's nothing to do with him; it's not costing us anything to ignore him. And if he keeps bugging us, we'll spray him with repellent and throw him outside to twitch. Plan?" I traced my fingers through his hair, rubbing the back of his head affectionately. "I promise you," I said with complete honesty. "Whatever crush I had on him, it's completely gone. It's just you and me."

He breathed out softly, his large palms warm on either side of my waist. "Does that mean you're going to flash me as well?"

On cue the towel had enough molestation and started to give way. "Well timed," he snorted. The back of his fingers brushed over my naked skin as he knotted the towel for me. "Although I would have no problem making you scream with that cunt next door."

I know my inner feminist should have slapped him for that, but as his mouth ran along my neck to my jawline, I wouldn't have minded at all. "Courtney!" Chris yelled. "Are you taking that dress off or putting it on!"

"I will beat him to death. With that bottle opener. Nice and slow," Ryan muttered, his eyes glowing like a cat's waiting on prey.

"Don't waste your energy on him. Waste it all on me."

He looked thoughtful. "I don't know. You have a worrying flashing fixation."

I gave him a brief flash of my naked body beneath the towel, and he laughed. "Please get dressed, woman! And don't get drunk tonight. I want to take advantage."

"Did I say thank you for the bag?"

"You can show me your thank you later."

Chapter EIGHT

The town car picked the boys up, and I couldn't really just leave Chris there, so we took him along. They were all unimpressed by our timekeeping, and as there were too many of us, Ryan took Rich, Tom and Oliver in a taxi, leaving me with Chris and Jay.

Jay had his DJ equipment with him and loaded the boot of the town car. He flopped down beside me and gave me a kiss on the cheek. "Next time you tell me to turn up at eleven, I'm turning up at midnight. My set starts in half an hour, you know."

"So you'll make an entrance."

Jay caught Chris' moody expression. "So yeah, who are you?"

"Chris, mate of Courtney's."

Jay turned towards me and mouthed, "*The* Chris?"

I gave the barest of nods only for Jay to pull a face and cough over the words, "Poor taste."

I smacked him on the thigh, and we rabbited on about how exciting it was that he was playing such an exclusive club. Then I dropped the bomb. "Andie's coming tonight."

He turned to me slowly. "What did you say to her?"

"Only that she needs to meet you."

"Fuck, it's like Judge Jules is going to be watching me. Why'd you tell me?"

“Because you need to name your first child after me,” I said smugly. Jay could handle Andie, no problem. Chris looked sulkier with each minute that passed with him being ignored.

“Let me out,” Jay insisted, pulling at the handle of the car.

“Trust me,” I assured him with a motherly pat on his shoulder. We arrived at the club, and the bouncers recognised me and hustled us inside. Ryan and the boys came in a few minutes later. Ryan gave me a kiss on the eyebrow and went to get us some drinks. I leaned over to Chris. “Look, either cheer up or go home. No one likes a misery guts.”

Summer and Iain drifted in and covered me in hugs and kisses. “This place is amazing!” Summer squealed. “That dress!”

“From the boss lady! We sold out. I’ll have to ask her if she can take it out of my salary. For the next two years.”

Summer glanced down at my bag. “What the hell! Is that...?”

“I know. I’ll tell you about it later. Where’s the rest of your outfit?”

Summer was wearing a sequined backless dress that just about covered her arse. I thought she looked like a footballer’s wife. Iain chuckled. “That’s what I said.”

“Don’t worry about drinks—Selene’s husband’s footing the bill.”

The boys returned with drinks, and we all relaxed. On the walls of the club pictures of Selene’s collection flashed. All of a sudden Summer gave a scream as a picture of me and Selene flashed up from tonight. Selene had a hand in her curling dark hair,

looking Megan Fox hot, and I looked like her little adopted sister grinning up at her.

Jay started setting up on the decks, and we catcalled and whooped to take him off his stride, but any man who starts a set with Swedish House Mafia is going to do good.

Andie rolled up wearing a rouched bandeau dress that wrapped around her body in a few inches of white satin. "Courtney!" she yelled, making several people turn their heads toward her. She looked me up and down then nodded approvingly.

"Looking good, girl. Bang tidy. So where's this Jay boy, then?"

I nodded toward the DJ booth and watched as Andie's jaw dropped. DJs were her ultimate weakness. I couldn't have done better if I'd wrapped David Hale in a bow for her. "That would be Jay."

She pointed at him in disbelief. "And my man knows grime?"

"He's a DJ he knows everything."

She shook her head. "Never mind. Where's Ryan, then?"

"Hi, Andie." Ryan leaned over my shoulder to give Andie a kiss.

"So, New Man." She narrowed her eyes intimidatingly at him. "What gwan?"

Ryan laughed it off. "We're getting you a drink, then you'll need to say hello to Jay so he doesn't fuck up his set."

"He's playing Skepta, he's doing fine," Andie said admiringly. "But yeah, wouldn't say no to champagne."

He took Andie's hand and led her off to the bar. Andie turned her head at me and mouthed, "Boy is fit as fuck!"

I talked with a few of my colleagues, who were utterly drunk by this point. I was simply happy that everything was going so well. Eventually, Ryan returned without Andie.

"What..."

"I thought it was better if they didn't have an audience to their epic romance."

I patted Ryan's thigh in excitement. "It's all coming together!"

I saw Chris out of the corner of my eye, talking to Iain and giving us evils. Well, I knew two people who did that better than anyone.

* * *

I threw Summer and Andie into the cubicle of the toilet and shut the door.

"Court, Jay's going to be looking for me."

"Hello!" I blinked at her to remind her of where her loyalty should lie. She sighed, crossing her arms as Summer perched on her lap.

"What's the matter?" Summer asked.

"You know Chris is here."

Summer and Andie exchanged looks of deep disgust. "Yes, we noticed."

"He's been bugging me and Ryan about what's going on with us as a couple, and I swear Ryan is going to kill him. Like every slasher horror movie combined kill him. But Chris isn't getting it and keeps making snide remarks and God, Ryan is going to Mount

something or other and explode. Volcanic ash, no one flying anywhere, panic, panic, panic, panic!”

“So what if Chris dies?” Andie shrugged. “No loss to the world. Are we bothered?”

Summer shook her head.

“I know, but I don’t want to die in the battle of trying to stop my boyfriend going to jail. He’ll get violated in prison because he’s pretty. Plus, he bought me a Dior clutch and I want him to think I’m worth a few grand.”

“Shut the fuck up!” Andie whispered. “Nah... Chris going to be under manners when I’m done. Two grand on a handbag?”

“I know. Please keep Chris away from us?”

“How?” Summer asked blankly.

“Oh come on. The two of you are the most persuasive women in the world. You’ve got powers that people can only dream of.”

“All right, enough wailing, we’ll do it.”

Ryan and I finally got to enjoy the party without glowering looks, and it was rather blissful. There was a quieter area upstairs, and we had a contented little kissing session there before Summer legged it inside and said, “Andie went a bit too far. She’s now having a fight with Jay.”

I gave Ryan an apologetic look and leapt down the stairs, where Jay was asking, “Why would the bum fluff on his head turn you on?”

“What you getting so mad for? Are we going out? Are we going out? Nah, what did I just say? Are we going out?”

Jay’s eyes darted around in confusion. “Are you filming some sort of comedy sketch for Sky?”

"I'm doing Courtney a favour, yeah..."

I opened my mouth to interrupt them when Jay simply picked all five foot ten inches of Andie up, growling, "I'm not having a screaming match with you like we're outside a kebab shop in Clapham." He whisked her upstairs and I burst out laughing, only to have Chris face me.

"What are you doing?"

I feigned complete innocence. "What are you talking about?"

"I mean your mates tag teaming me."

"They're just protecting their flock. Me."

"I just don't like what he's doing."

His pout was starting to get on my wits. How had I not figured just how irritating this guy was? "What?"

"Ryan! He's going to chew you up and spit you out!"

I cocked an eyebrow. "Really? That's all you've got? Based on what?"

"Melissa. Listen—you don't know how screwed up he is about her."

"Okay, I'm bored with this *Days of Our Lives* rubbish. I'm going to get a drink. Go home."

He caught me by the arms, "You don't understand..."

"What the hell are you doing?" Ryan demanded, putting a brick of an arm between me and Chris. "You don't get to touch her."

"So you can keep things quiet? No, she's my friend. I'm not letting you fuck her over."

"Chris..." I started.

"Tell her, go on. About you and Melissa."

“Chris, fuck off now. I’m not saying it again, you understand me?”

“Courtney,” Chris announced just as the music faded away, leaving the sudden quiet throb of the bass for absolutely everyone to hear his broadcast. “He fucked her. And he wants her back. He’s just using you to make her jealous. And it worked. Shame you had to give up the cherry to do it.”

I slapped him so hard the force of it would jangle my arm for minutes afterwards. People turned and stared at us in horror. I didn’t have anything else to say to him, so I turned away, intending to head for the chill-out area when I bumped into the most beautiful girl.

“Ryan?” she asked gently, in the kind of melodious voice that’s about to announce what a naughty girl she’s been.

He stared at her in shock. “Mel. What are you...”

She gave him a smile that exposed teeth orthodontists dream of creating and threw herself into his arms. “So good to see you!” She laughed. Ryan’s arms stuck out at awkward angles.

“What are you doing back?”

“Daddy knows the owner of this place, and my school run is finished, so... Haven’t you missed me?”

Ryan’s face was like stone. “Did Chris tell you we were here?”

Her smile wavered ever so slightly. “He wanted to talk to me earlier, but I assumed it was all to do with the break-up stuff.”

She turned her head, sleek dark hair with a mirror gloss sweeping over her bare shoulder. “And who are you, little person?”

I eyed the place for the nearest champagne bottle to gut her with when Ryan pushed Melissa away and took my hand. "This is Courtney."

"*The Courtney.*" She sounded distant, almost disapproving. She looked me up and down disparagingly. "Nice to meet you," she said disingenuously. "I've heard so much about you, I naturally assumed that you'd be taller."

"I thought you'd be prettier. All in the advertising, I guess." Her mouth fell open, so I took the opportunity to take Ryan upstairs and away from her and her poison.

I sat down and looked at him. "What the hell is going on? Okay, so you slept with Melissa, although I'm worried about your taste... What's the big deal?"

Ryan was staring at the ceiling.

"I mean...it wasn't like it happened when she and Chris were seeing each other, right?"

"No," he said abruptly.

"Then what?"

"I did not just fuck her, Court. She was my girlfriend. For two years. Then Chris the man showed up and started fucking up everything."

"So he stole her off you?"

"Let's just say I didn't know she was gone until I found her in his back pocket, to be metaphoric."

"You caught them?"

"Bare arsed. There was annoyance, pain, suffering, yadda, yadda. I got over it."

"*Oh my God,*" I whispered. "Coincidentally, during all this pain and suffering and having to live with the cheating bastards...when did you...when did you...decide to pick out my email address and start writing to me?"

“There was a sufficient grieving period.”

“Of how long?”

“Seven, eight weeks.”

“And out of all the girls in his group email, why did you pick me?”

“You don’t believe it, but he likes you. He’s always liked you. He would talk about you to wind Melissa up on the perfect level of adoration from a woman. When he got that email from you asking about me, he didn’t acknowledge me for two days straight.”

“Oh God...”

Ryan was talking as if on automatic. “I emailed you, told him about it, and he and Melissa had one of their many rows about his feelings for you that night. I had a celebratory beer in your name.”

“Thank you,” I said dully. “I hope you enjoyed it. I hope it was all worth this feeling right now, this minute. I really hope you feel like you’ve achieved something. At my expense.”

“Court, it may have started out like that...”

“Until what,” I asked, “you felt obligated to fuck me? Give me a little reward for being such a massive part in the get-one-over-on-Chris scheme?”

“It’s not like that at all. You know that!”

“I know exactly sod all, mate. Thank you; you seem to be giving out lessons all over the place today.” I started shaking really badly. “So what was the end result supposed to be? Chris dumps Melissa for me and she cries on your shoulder? What?”

“Court...” He started to curve his arm around my shoulders.

“Don’t. You. Dare. Touch. Me.” I warned.

“Listen to me—I was in a pretty dark place. All right? Probably not the best time to tell you this, but I thought I was going to marry Mel, and I caught her cheating with that prick. Then I had to live with them for months on end. You would have done some pretty inexcusable things too.”

“Not to someone who didn’t deserve it,” I murmured. “I feel so utterly stupid. All those girls in there thinking what the hell is she doing with him. I should tell them it’s a grand master plan.”

“Please don’t say things like that.”

“I need to get out of here...”

“No, talk to me. Listen. When that email from you turned up, I was flattered. Of course I was—you’re gorgeous. And then I got to know you. I stopped messing around when you didn’t want to email anymore and I spent the day taking that photograph for you. And then you wrote that mental, rambling letter to me and I was completely hooked. I carried that silly letter with me everywhere. I mean for fuck’s sake, I still do.”

“You’re a liar,” I choked. I needed to get out of here; I couldn’t breathe.

“Here, look!” He fumbled in his trouser pocket and handed it to me, French postmark and all. “I’d see your name on my inbox and I’d be grinning at everyone the whole day. I’d get a call from you and I wouldn’t sleep as well as when I heard your voice...”

“I don’t want to hear this,” I told him, thrusting the letter into his chest and struggling to get past him. But he held me still, tucking the letter back to safety in his jacket.

“Whatever it started out as, I fell in love with you, I swear.”

“NO!” I screamed at him. “Let me go, leave me alone. I can’t be around you...”

His arms went around me so fast, pulling me tightly to him. I fell against him and burst into tears. He kept whispering to me that he was sorry, so sorry and that he loved me.

From over Ryan’s shoulder I saw Chris standing there. “Courtney, are you all right?”

“Will you fucking disappear?” Ryan roared at him.

“I’m not going anywhere until I know that Courtney’s all right.”

“Like you give a shit,” I croaked.

“More than he does!” Chris threw at us. It was a red rag to Ryan who grabbed him by the collar. I couldn’t help the scream that emerged from my throat.

“Ryan, stop it!”

“You fucking cretin. You do not get to do this to me twice, and you definitely do not get to do this to Courtney.”

I tried to prise his hand from Chris’ throat. “Ryan, let him go.”

“Why?” he demanded, his eyes lasering into mine. “You were happy, we were happy, and he ruined it for fucking nothing!”

Chris was turning purple. “Ryan, please,” I begged.

Ryan threw him to one side in disgust, only for Chris to land at Melissa’s feet. “God, why are you acting like such a caveman? Stop upsetting Courtney—I mean, look at her poor face.”

“You know what? You can just shut up,” I snapped. “This is all your fault. If your cunt wasn’t the

M25 for every bloke in South Africa to use, none of us would be here.”

I looked around at all three of them and gave a nasal snort of disgust. “If I ever see any of you in the next millennium, we’re going to have problems. Like you won’t have heads on your neck problems. Yeah?”

I pushed past Melissa so hard she fell over and cracked her bony arse on the floor. I vaguely saw Jay and Andie together in an alcove recreating *9½ Weeks*. I didn’t want to think about how far up Andie’s dress his hand was, or that the top had slipped down under her breasts. It made me smile until I felt tears threatening to spill down my cheeks. *Hold it together, please, woman, just for a little bit*. I saw Summer and Iain by the exit and I couldn’t help myself; a sound came from me I didn’t at all recognise. But the horror in Summer’s face told me she understood immediately.

“Iain, get a taxi, now!” She curled her arms around me as I collapsed on her. “Courtney?”

“He used me!” I cried. Summer held me tighter, cradling me to her. Her body tensed immediately. “Leave her alone,” she warned, and I knew she was addressing Ryan.

Iain was inside the cab as Summer all but dragged me inside. “Court, please, you need to understand.”

“She doesn’t need to do anything but be away from you.” Summer directed him so sharply he almost stopped.

Summer put me in the cab and turned to him. “I’m not telling you again—back off.”

She sat next to me and Iain said impatiently to the driver, “Use the force, man, and let’s go!”

Ryan slammed his hand against the window in frustration, and for some reason, I stopped crying right about then.

Chapter NINE

“We’ll drop you home,” Summer insisted.

I looked through the Dior clutch and realised that it was three in the morning, and my keys, my own house keys were in Ryan’s flat. My parents were visiting family in Leeds as well. No telling if my brothers were at home. I’d have to go to Ryan’s and get my stuff.

“You’ll have to drop me at Knightsbridge.”

“Bad idea,” Summer announced immediately. “Stay with me.”

“I still can’t get home. Even my mobile is at his place. Just drop me there and I’ll get home myself.”

Summer looked as if she was about to argue with me, but Iain put a hand across her lap. “Stop it,” he murmured. “Okay, little mate, we’ll wait for you.”

“No, seriously, go. I’ll be fine—I know all the cab drivers in this area now. I’ll get a discount for being foxy.”

“Call us when you get home.”

I opened the door to Ryan’s flat and collected most of my things. I stripped off the dress in favour of a denim miniskirt and t-shirt, stuffing it and all the crap I had managed to leave here in the last month into a bag. I was a girl who knew how to move in. I could hear my mobile ringing, but I couldn’t find it anywhere. Finally I saw it under the bed, and when I emerged, I noticed Ryan sitting on the bed.

“Hell on a fish cake,” I muttered, acknowledging his presence.

“Found it?” he asked conversationally.

“Yep, and now I’m off.”

He stood up and blocked my path. “Don’t go.” He looked drawn, pale. Good, I thought. I hope this hurts just a tenth of how much I’m bleeding. “We should talk about this.”

“Talk?” I spluttered. “You are joking. What else do you need to talk to me about? Were Summer and Andie involved in the scheme? Was Christopher Nolan supposed to direct you for another scene? What, what the hell else is there for you to say? What?”

“Court, I promise you, if I wanted Melissa I wouldn’t be here. I’d be back at the club trying to reassure her that her cunt is not at all like the M25.”

My mouth twitched involuntarily, as did Ryan’s. Then I got angry with myself. My own stupidity had put me here. I was the one who had been laughed at. “So go comfort her. I don’t want you to be here at all. The only reason you are is because it’s ruined the nice guy act you’ve put on with everyone.”

“That’s not true. I feel shitty about dragging you into the middle of the whole me-Chris-Melissa thing, but I can’t say sorry for it because I met you.”

“Stop smarming,” I ordered. “Why use me to get back at Chris? Why not hurt Melissa? She was the one who cheated on you. Chris didn’t know you; he didn’t have a shred of loyalty for you.”

“But you had loyalty for him,” he admitted slowly. “Melissa couldn’t see the wood for the trees with him, and the only way...fuck, this sounds so goddamn petty now, but...the only way I could make

her see what he was, was to let her know about you. I told you this before, but he has always liked you. But you're a good girl. You're the daughter of his parents' best friends. If he fucked around with you, he'd probably be disowned. But you had this view of him, like he couldn't do anything wrong. So if I changed your mind, if I showed Melissa just how much he did think of you..."

"Abracadabra," I mocked.

"That's how it started. Look, I may have wound him up into coming back here."

"Why?"

"When he sent those fucking emails, I sent one back saying that now he knows how this feels. To have someone take the person you care about away from you."

"Mission accomplished. If you've finished, I need to call the taxi company."

"No...you still..."

"Don't!" I warned as his hand came toward me.

"The first few emails were my cards. And I played them. Then I wanted to know why a girl who was obviously smarter than me and a hell of a lot prettier than she gave herself credit for was waiting around for such a dickhead. Then it was why you weren't in a relationship. Then if you could like me for me. Not because of my parents, or money, or where I live... I loved that you talked to me like I had been your friend for years, you asked me for advice, for dirty jokes, for company. I wanted to tell you about Melissa, but then... It didn't seem that important. Because there was a point where it wasn't about getting back at either of them, but being with you."

“Sounds like bullshit. I’d swallow, but good girls don’t do that,” I sneered.

“I haven’t lied to you!” he insisted. “I just...just didn’t tell you something.”

“Something sort of vital, you bastard!” I reminded him on a rising scream.

“If you knew how much I love you, it wouldn’t matter.”

“Of course it matters! And you don’t love me. You do not do this to people you love.”

Ryan took a breath and sighed. “I know. I’m sorry. I wish I could take it all back, but I can’t. And if I could it means I wouldn’t have met you. And I can’t wish that.”

“I do,” I stuttered over my tears. “Because I’ve given you something I can’t get back. You can take that bag back to Dior and get your money back. I can’t do the same.”

He knew what I was talking about. “That was not part of any of it. You know when it got serious between us.”

“But it’s part of why you were upset the next morning. Because you knew you shouldn’t have.”

“I am not apologising for sleeping with you! For fuck’s sake, that bastard comes back for all of a few hours, spins his version of the truth and you rewrite our whole fucking history. Did anything about that first time together seem forced or fake? No, and you can’t argue with me on that—you know that was genuine from beginning to end.”

“No, you don’t get to tell me what to believe, you do not get to manipulate me any more.”

“Do you know why you’re mad? Because if you’d had the foresight to use another guy to make Chris jealous, you’d be crying about the waste of your virginity to Summer or Andie within five minutes, I guarantee.”

“Shut up, just shut up!” I screamed. “Just accept for once in your fucking life that you’ve done something wrong and you do not get instant forgiveness, you don’t deserve it.”

“I know,” he whispered eventually, his voice breaking. “I know, I know. But you’re the most important person in the world to me, and I hate that I’ve done this to you.”

My chest was heaving with sobs again. I knew why I hadn’t left. Ryan would give up and go back to Melissa. And I would have nothing. Everything was tainted with him. Even my job now was courtesy of his introduction. “I’m sorry, babe.”

“You’re not. And don’t call me babe.”

“I am sorry. I don’t know what else to say.”

We both sat down on his bed, facing opposite directions, which said just everything about our relationship. Ryan tried to catch my hand a few times, but I wouldn’t let him. Finally he left the room. I emptied the clutch and put the bag back inside the box. Ryan came back into the bedroom. He handed me a glass of whiskey and some tissues. I didn’t want to accept anything from him, but sense took over. Even though the whiskey burned, it soothed me and my aching throat. My eyes watered for chucking it down so fast. He then handed me a strawberry mousse and teaspoon. I’d been eyeing that strawberry mousse earlier. Courtney Phillips twenty-four hours ago. She’d

been a lucky cow, I thought derisively. It didn't stop me from wanting to be her again.

Ryan sat down on the bed and leaned forward, his elbows on his thighs. "I used to think that Melissa was perfect. My mates never really liked her. They thought she was superficial and just stayed with me because of all the benefit she got from being my girlfriend. I couldn't see it, though. Not until she... Then she told me everything she hated about me. Hard to hear. But you, with your terms and conditions and your prodding and your teasing, and your random ideas... I'm just me when I'm with you. Apart from Melissa, I've told you everything. She doesn't even know about my parents."

"Does any of this make a difference?" I asked. "I'm going." I put the untouched mousse on the bedside table and put on my flip-flops. I dialled Anderson Lee from my mobile and they said they'd be ten minutes.

"How the hell am I supposed to live here now?" Ryan said so quietly I barely heard him. "Tell me, what did you do? Rub yourself on the walls, roll around on the carpet? Everything in here smells like you. My fucking underwear smells like you!"

"I borrowed a pair of boxer shorts, washed them at home and put them back," I admitted guiltily. "Maybe a few t-shirts. And some towels. Look, if you did washing more regularly, I wouldn't have to take it home to do it."

"One more of my many failings, right?"

"It's a growing list," I said through my teeth.

"I'm sorry," he said again.

"Live with it." I shrugged.

“If I didn’t care, why would this bother me?”

“I don’t know. I don’t care.”

“There’s no need for this, Court. You don’t need to put yourself through it.”

“I didn’t put me through this, you did!” I yelled. “You did this! You did this to us, not me!”

Ryan caught me around the waist and kissed me hard. I didn’t want to kiss him back, I didn’t want to need him, but it was as if my body clicked into gear despite myself, a fizzing sensation burning between my thighs as he removed my t-shirt. For the first time, he didn’t say anything.

“No, stop it, get off me.” I tried to push him away, knowing why it was so different.

He cupped my face and tasted me again. How could he still want to kiss me? All I could taste was my own disappointment and sadness. He stopped kissing me to remove his clothing stitch by stitch. My palms traced over the raised flesh of his dragon tattoo as he pressed me against the full naked length of him. He turned so when he lay down, with an arm hooked around my waist, I was on top of him. I felt the width of his fingers against my bare pussy lips, spreading them open as his thumb traced over my clit. He smeared some of my cream over his dick before he thrust into me determinedly. A million shivers ran from my scalp down to my toes.

We’d never fucked without a condom before. He knew I was on the pill but it was for medical reasons, not for sex. Ryan’s hand slid into my hair, his arm anchoring me to his hot body before he started to thrust up into me, rapidly pounding. It was too intense, my breasts tightening all over, and I was moaning louder than I ever had before.

Ryan suddenly moved so I was beneath him, his mouth locked on mine, his hands tight on my hips, pressing me into the mattress as he rammed into me. He gave an intense groan and pressed even harder and faster into me. He reached between us and rubbed firmly at my clit, and I gave a scream as my climax ripped through me. I felt a flush of wetness inside me as he came, his balls pressed tightly against me.

I held on to him, feeling tears stinging my eyes again.

“Oh God, Court,” he muttered into my mouth, kissing me once more. He slipped out of me, then cradled me against his chest. I tried to catch my breath, thinking how I could get dressed and leave as soon as possible.

I felt his breathing slow as he fell gradually asleep, and the muscled arms relaxed. I tucked my breasts back into the cups of the bra and wriggled out of his arms, then found my t-shirt underneath his clothes and pulled down the denim mini skirt. I didn’t know where I could find some underwear; I would just have to cross my legs and hope it was dark enough for the cab driver to not realise I had cum running down my thighs. Ryan sat up. “Where are you going?”

“Home,” I said abruptly, running my fingers through my hair and checking my phone. There was a text from the cab company to confirm my driver was waiting outside.

Ryan stood up slowly. When he touched a hand to my cheek, we both flinched. Ryan was scared of my reaction, and I was scared that I’d confuse myself again and be under his spell. “You know that I love

you; you know that. This is pointless because we need to be together...and..."

I pushed his hand away, and his head dropped. "There's nothing I can say, is there?"

"No," I said, my voice barely audible. "I have to go now."

He embraced me, his naked body rich with the scent of us, his own smell that had made me hallucinate into thinking he really cared about me for two months.

"Don't leave," he whispered. I struggled out of his arms and literally flew out of the flat. I leapt into the car and told the driver to just hurry up. To take me home.

* * *

When my parents came back, my mum twigged immediately that there was something wrong. I couldn't quite tell her exactly what happened, but I mentioned that his ex-girlfriend had come back. My mother kissed her teeth and said, "Don't waste your time then, my baby. Do you want some pepper on your rice?"

Yes, because indigestion would really help right now. Dad caught me in my room systematically deleting all the emails between me and Ryan and all the photographs of us together.

"Hey, Dads," I said weakly, pulling down the lid of my laptop.

"What's up?" he asked, touching a hand to my head. "Aren't you with your boyfriend tonight?"

"We broke up."

"Oh, Court, why? What happened?"

I took my Dad's hand and held it tightly. "He did something pretty awful. I can't...couldn't ever trust him. He used me to make a point."

"That doesn't sound like him," my dad said, sitting down on my bed. I looked at his face. He looked so much younger than a man his age should; his dark eyes were concerned for me. I was the one who wasn't supposed to cause him any trouble. The "good" child.

"Why do you say that?"

"Because he made the effort of calling us to ask permission to take you out before he ever set foot in our house. Bad boys don't do that. Court, when I was that age, I did some stupid things. But I was lucky in that I had people who forgave me. No one is perfect. Has he done anything to show that he's sorry?"

"It's not just a matter of him saying sorry." Him sending flowers to my workplace, to my home, sending me emails, calling me, texting me... None of it was going to work.

My father tutted impatiently. "Child, I've been married for nearly forty years. You think I don't know that sorry isn't the end of it? You will never have a lasting relationship unless you learn to forgive."

"Just like that?" I asked, shocked at his mutiny. Why wasn't he standing up for me?

"No. You talk about it together. When you stop talking and you let other people whisper all sorts into your ear, then you're doomed."

For the millionth time that day, I felt tears sting my eyes. "I don't know what to believe."

"Just think who would have the most to gain by lying. I liked him. You know I can tell a good one a mile off. Think about it. I hate seeing you miserable."

"Thanks, Dads. Love you." He gave me a tight hug.

"Your daddy loves you more. You're a smart girl' you'll always make the right choice."

* * *

Andie and Jay met me in our local pub for a Sunday roast dinner a few weeks later. Jay wanted to broach the Ryan subject, but Andie wasn't having it.

"Look, yeah, I just want to eat my food in peace. Don't make me mad by making us talk about your shit of a best mate."

Jay put an impatient hand over her mouth and said to me, "He is a broken man." He held on more firmly as Andie started struggling. "He's gone far beyond the boundary of tears. Rich said that he'd be crying into his beer over you, but he's just staring into his drink like it holds the answer to life. He's supposed to start his apprenticeship with Robert Matthews, and he's asked if he can defer it."

"What?" I said, shocked. "Is he insane? He'll lose it!"

"Exactly." Jay subdued Andie by giving her a tickle. "He can't think about anyone or anything else but you."

Having made his point, he released Andie, then pushed her shandy towards her. "You," she heaved, "are in so much fucking trouble."

He gave her an assured smile. "Am I really?" He stroked a hand over her bare thigh soothingly.

Andie gave a Marge Simpson-like noise of disapproval in her throat. "All right, look, I'll admit, he looks like he's been pushed onto a tube track, but fuck,

man, he screwed you over. For that wannabe Playboy ho.”

Jay laughed suddenly. “Andie got thrown out of the club for slapping her.”

“What? She asked for it. Fucking biatch. Pass me the mustard, please.”

“Court, I know he’s my mate, but I knew him when he was going out with Melissa, and she fucked him around like no one’s business. Chris didn’t help either—he was throwing it in Ryan’s face. I’m not saying what Ryan did was right, but I understand his motivation. And he wouldn’t have carried on if he didn’t adore you. I think about a month after you two started emailing, we all knew about you. To the point where I could have pointed you out on the street without even seeing a photograph of you. Seriously.”

“He was with us yesterday at one of Jay’s thingies,” Andie piped up.

“Andie made sure he’s deaf as well as heartbroken.”

“Things he needs to hear. If you won’t tell him, I will. Just coz he’s your bredrin, doesn’t mean you shouldn’t tell him how things are.”

“You know he’s seen Melissa,” Jay added.

“Oh God, look, stop it!” I said to both of them. “I don’t want to know. Just stop bullying me about him. I didn’t do anything wrong—he did. And he can’t take it back.”

“He can if he tells Melissa to fuck off in the middle of Brompton High Road. If he really wanted to show Melissa, he’d have invited you to South Africa to rub it in their faces. But he came home, to be with you.”

I bowed my head as tears tugged at my eyes. "Can we please stop talking about this, now? Please?"

Andie nudged Jay. "I told you, man." She leaned over the table and squeezed my hand. "It's all right. Just eat your food. Now, *X Factor* starts soon. Let's start bitching about what bullshit Cheryl Cole is going to put on her body and call fashionable."

Jay relented and got up. "I'm going to get some more drinks. Another cider, Court?"

I nodded, and he disappeared to the bar. Andie was cutting into her roast beef with vigour.

"So," I said, forcing lightness into my voice, trying to enjoy the immediate change of subject. "You and Jay."

Andie gave a modest little shrug. "He knows how to talk to me."

"You mean he's not afraid to tell you to shut up," I teased.

"That too. Plus, yeah, man threw me around the bedroom like he was using me to put out fire. Never had sex like that before in my life. You tell him I told you that, you will die."

I grinned and pretended to zip my lips closed. Andie picked up her Yorkshire pudding and tore it with her fingers. "Well, you'll probably die of a broken heart anyways, so..."

"Andie!"

"All I'm saying is why give that bitch Melissa or that cock Chris the satisfaction? At least talk to him. You're going to run into each other, because I'm not giving up good sex just to save you face, you gets me?"

Jay put down the pint glasses. "I heard that."

"Fuck," Andie hissed.

“I’ve heard that too, usually followed by ‘baby, that’s so good.’” He laughed as he avoided her fist. “I’m going to sit next to you, Court.”

Jay moved his plate to the other side of the table, then gave me a quick kiss on the cheek. “You know everything will work out, right?”

I picked up my pint glass and drank instead. No one could expect me to talk if I had my mouth full.

* * *

I was coming home from work the next day, with homework! Selene needed a portfolio of vintage lace to finalise the collection, so I had to stick little squares of material to each design. I really should have done it during the day, but I got another bunch of flowers from Ryan and burst into tears. Again. I hated it, I hated being so unprofessional. And I bloody loved that job!

Selene had taken me into her office and sat me down. “Courtney, I know this is your first relationship, so take advice from an older woman.”

“You’re only eight years older.”

“With a three-year-old and a husband. And about ten evil ex-boyfriends. If you don’t deal with things head on, they seep into every inch of your life. It’s like you’re trying to pretend nothing’s happened and everything is fine. It’s affecting your work. I know you think it isn’t, but you should know designing comes from being creatively open and being able to tap into memories and emotions, and if you’re trying to ignore the fact you even have any emotions, you won’t be able to do it.”

She held up one of my more recent designs for cropped trousers. I knew it sucked, but seeing it next to Selene's face, it sucked even worse. "You could have had this perfect with two things." She drew in military buttons and a few lines that instantly smartened them up. "You would have done that yourself, if you weren't so distracted. I understand it's difficult, but you need to sort yourself out."

"What did you do with your evil ex-boyfriends?"

"Husband included, I legged it." She sent me a smile. "But I speak from experience. Running away or burying yourself in work never helps. You're just going to hit a brick wall."

"Can you tell him to stop?" I begged.

Selene gave me a long, searching look before she picked up her mobile. "Ryan? Hello, it's Selene. How are you?" Selene bit into her bottom lip. "I know. But you have to do something. You need to stop the flowers. To her work anyway. No Ryan, I understand, but you're not being fair. It's upsetting her. Oh, I know. All right. All right. I will. Okay, thank you. Bye now."

She put her mobile down and gave a long sigh. "He said sorry for upsetting you, again. And the flowers will stop. Okay?"

Not really. "Yeah. I'm sorry, Selene, I'll sort myself out, I'll be better, I'll work harder."

"No Courtney, just...whatever is wrong between you and Ryan, I hope you sort it out."

So now I was fucking up at work. Just as I reached my house, I was thinking of creating an effigy of him to burn on a pyre when I ran slap bang into Chris.

"Courtney!"

“I am not talking to you,” I said dismissively, taking out my house keys and opening my door as he followed me. I turned to shut the front door in his face, but he put his foot in the door.

“Courtney, please.”

I pursed my lips together, holding the door firmly. I looked at his face; there was a greenish bruise fading from his eye. “Courtesy of Ryan?” I nodded to his eye.

He touched it defensively. “Just after you left the club, yes. I want to say sorry.”

“Sorry for what? Embarrassing me in front of my boss, destroying my relationship, ruining my life?”

Chris bowed his head and tried to take my hand. “For all of it.”

I edged out of his grasp. “Thank you for the apology. Bye.”

“I still want us to be friends.”

“You have to be kidding me! You know what, Ryan had every opportunity to make it clear what a complete and utter cock you were and still are. And he didn’t—it’s almost like he was protecting you.”

“Doubtful. He was probably protecting you from...you know, thinking you’ve wasted your time with me.”

That gave me pause. If he really wanted to make me hate Chris, that was all he needed to say. And he hadn’t. “It doesn’t matter anyway. I hope at least you’ll start treating people better. You can’t walk over people like that.”

“I know. At least say that you won’t cut me out. I hate not being able to talk to you.”

My brother came up behind Chris and tapped him on the shoulder. "Out the way, short stuff. And if you even look at my sister the wrong way, I'll break your legs."

Chris paled as Adam eased past me and sent me a subtle wink. Struggling not to laugh, I said, "You understand that warning, don't you?"

"Yeah, it's pretty clear," he said shakily. "Please, just think about it. We were good mates for so long."

"Because I had no idea about the kind of person you are!" I breathed out. "If we're ever going to be friends again, you need to not treat me like a puppet. I've got my eyes open now, okay?"

He nodded. "I'll give you a ring later, maybe?"

"Maybe." I shut the door, wondering why his apology didn't make me feel any better.

Chapter TEN

The week dragged by like cement. I woke up on Saturday morning in search of tea and toast, following a night ignoring offers from Summer, Iain, Andie and Jay to go out and party and listening to horrifically depressing music. Massive Attack topped the list. I saw the post on the doormat and sifted through it. Mum, Mum, Adam, Dave, Mum, Dad, Me. Me? It was a large envelope with DO NOT BEND printed on the front. I took the envelope into the kitchen while I made the tea.

I opened the envelope to see a range of black-and-white printed photographs. I shook them out to see a folded note inside as well. Ryan's handwriting. The note started shaking as my stomach plummeted in fear.

Dear Courtney,

You've had enough of me apologising, and I probably can't say it enough, but I am sorry. I know you don't believe me, but any motivation to get revenge on Chris vanished pretty damn quick. And without it I would not have had the best six months of my life with you. Melissa is a fucking Barbie doll compared to you. I mean she's completely unrealistic. How scientifically she's supposed to breathe and walk, God knows.

That's all. Other than I've never been more in love with anyone than you. And there's something you should hear, and I don't know why no one has spoken to you about it, but as you've taught me the importance of honesty, here goes.

These pictures are for you. I don't know why you've got this complex about the way you look, and I won't even try to pretend that I understand it. As I've seen you naked, I feel in the best position to judge. I need you to see how everyone else sees you, how I see you. A beautiful, funny, sexy, loopy bird. I love you, and I hope that you'll forgive me. I'm not going to send you the digital. These pictures, Homer and your emails are the only proof that I ever had you in my life.

Ryan xx (coz you is damn special and you deserve lots of kisses forever)

There were so many pictures of me, and I couldn't remember him taking any of them. There was one of the two of us at the store re-launch party, taken by Ryan extending his arm. His eyes look disturbingly catlike in the black-and-white print, and I was aiming a pouty kiss toward his cheek. I wanted to think something disparaging, that at least the dress looked all right, but I looked all right. I looked more than all right. There was one of me skipping from his flat in a sleeveless t-shirt and layered miniskirt, me in an open laugh, oh my God, you could see my tonsils, me in Ryan's bathroom wearing a towel and singing into a hairbrush. *Oh, you son of a bitch!* I thought angrily. I hurried through the other photos to see if there were

any nude ones. The dodgiest one was me fast asleep, with a white sheet curled around me. A suspicion made me turn the photograph over. *All the glamour ones have been sent to The Sun. When you're as famous as Katie Price, you can thank me later.*

I couldn't help it, I started laughing. Maybe it was just a mark of how good a photographer Ryan was that I looked really good in all of them. No double chin, no bingo wings, no rolls of stomach. But then we had spent a lot of time having sex, so I was pretty toned.

Something dropped onto the photograph. I touched a hand to my cheek and realised that I was crying. This was boring. I had to go and see him. If anything, I should go and get those nudes back from him.

* * *

I still had my keys, so I stepped in and nearly tripped over the can of Stella that had obviously been thrown against the door in frustration. I picked it up and carried it into the living room. The place was a mess. I put the can down on top of the newspapers and takeaway leaflets on the coffee table. I started to chicken out. I could do this another day.

I heard a roar from Ryan. "Where the fuck is it!"

He stormed out of his bedroom and came to a screeching halt when he saw me standing there. "The furniture won't respond to if you take that tone with it."

"Jesus," he whispered, eyes wide.

"No, it's Courtney," I corrected. "It's been a month."

"Six weeks," he corrected me.

He wasn't wearing anything other than a pair of jeans. He kept blinking, probably thinking that I was going to disappear. He looked gorgeous.

"I would sit down, but..." I made a gesture to the pile of crap that was making a mountain on his sofa. Then I indicated his lack of clothing.

He closed his eyes for a second, then told me, "I'll be back in a minute."

He disappeared into his room and emerged tugging on a t-shirt that I had picked up for him. He scooped up some of the rubbish on the sofa and shoved it onto the armchair. I sat down awkwardly, then tensed as he sat next to me. I edged back into the sofa arm.

"Hi," he said hesitantly.

"Hey you," I murmured. We were silent for a few minutes; then I cleared my throat. "What...er...what were you looking for?"

"Your letter," he said abruptly.

"Oh," I said. I took the envelope out of my bag and gripped it with both hands so it wouldn't shake. "I came about these."

Ryan leaned back into the sofa defensively. "You didn't have to bring them back. You could have shoved them in the post."

"I'm rubbish with snail mail," I reminded him. "Do you want to tell me when you took these?"

He watched me under his lashes. "If it's about the one of you in the shower...well..."

"More about the one of me asleep," I clarified.

“I could have pulled the sheet down,” he excused flippantly. I gave him a stilling look, and he held up his hands, “Look it wasn’t meant to be offensive. You looked pretty cute, snoring away, so... You can’t argue with those photos, so... Fuck, I’m shutting up.”

There was another long moment of silence. I gripped the envelope harder, to stop myself from wanting to comfort him.

“How’s Melissa?” I asked.

He looked at me tiredly. “I don’t know. Haven’t spoken to her since we had a little chat on the high road. Consisting, if you’re interested, in ‘fuck off,’ ‘fuck off, you empty-headed cheating bitch, no I don’t want to get back together,’ ‘fuck off,’ ‘fuck off,’ and ‘fuck off.’”

“And what if she gets back together with Chris?”

“Good for her,” he said without emotion. “I’m sure the double funeral will be featured in *Hello*. I can take the photos, you can flash your knickers.”

He really didn’t care what she did? “Ryan...” I started.

He closed his eyes. “If you’re going to say how much of a shit I am for what I did, there’s no need. I know. I don’t need to hear it any more. I just hoped that...” He opened his eyes and glared at me as if he resented my entire existence. “Why are you here? What else do you want me to say or do? Believe me, you don’t have to be physically here to make me feel any more of a cunt than I already do.”

I recoiled from his anger.

He sighed and rubbed the heel of his palms into his eyes. “Sorry. This girl I love hates my guts. Completely fair, but I still feel like I’m dying.” He gave

me a watery smile. "How about you? Good few weeks?"

"Fucking horrific wouldn't begin to cover it," I admitted.

"Really? I thought you got rid of a smarmy, fake, lying two-faced bastard of a boyfriend?"

My face flamed. "I was angry when I said that. I didn't mean it."

"Yeah you did," he said sadly, "and you were justified."

"Let me ask you something. Why didn't you tell me what Chris did?"

"It didn't matter by then. You stopped being his friend, his standby girl, and you were my friend, my girlfriend. And I didn't want you to be hurt by him. He really is a massive wanker."

I snorted with laughter. "I know. He's got firm warning from Adam."

"Break his legs?" Ryan guessed. "I got the same warning."

"Recently?"

"I saw him a few days ago."

"What the hell did he say?"

"If you get back with my sister and upset her again, I will break your legs." Goodness, maybe Adam knew me better than I thought that meathead did. "That's why I sent you the letter and the photos. Because he thought...there was a chance that..." I cupped his face with both hands, and his voice faltered.

"I've missed you every single second," I spoke over the lump in my throat. "And I've just decided that I don't care. About the how and the why or who came

before me. I just want to be with you. As long as you still love me...”

He pulled me into his arms, a hug so tight I thought he was going to crack my ribs. “Of course I still love you.”

“But I was a horrible wailing banshee.”

“Silly banshee. Just because I fell for you in a second and a half doesn’t mean I’d fall out just as fast. I was about to get desperate.”

I buried my face into his neck, inhaling the beautiful musky smell of him. Good God, I’d missed him so badly. “I wished all sorts of horrible things on you.”

“I’m sure.” He chuckled, catching my hand and cradling it to his chest. “I had that coming.”

“You’ll have a lot of other things coming if you don’t clean this place up...”

“My cleaner quit. She was fed up of my beer/weed breath.”

“Well, I’ll quit too if...” He simply silenced me with his mouth.

Okay, I thought, *I’m* shutting up now.

Epilogue

From: Ryan Klark rudejoker@h...
To: Courtney Phillips yapalot@g...
Date: 12 March 2011
Re: Concrete Jungle

Bored. Aren't you finished yet? How long does it take to buy a dress?

xxx

From: Courtney Phillips yapalot@g...
To: Ryan Klark rudejoker@h...
Date: 12 March 2011
Re: Patience

My dearest darling almost husband. Wait a bloody minute. I'm not picking it myself. I'm just humouring your mum. You know Selene's almost finished the dress. But I get to hang out with you when Robert's not yelling at you to get off your freakin' phone. xx

From: Ryan Klark rudejoker@h...
To: Courtney Phillips yapalot@g...
Date: 12 March 2011
Re: Too late

He would fire me if he was paying me anything, but he's not and he knows I'm good so he's letting me get away with it. When you're done being dragged around Vera Wang by my shop-obsessed mother, come to the Meatpacking District. Babe, you won't know what's hit

you. Wear your ring as well, I don't care if it needs sizing, I'm not having any blokes trying it on. xxx

From: Courtney Phillips yapalot@g...
To: Ryan Klark rudejoker@h...
Date: 12 March 2011
Re: Much too late

Two guys tried it on today already. Waiter included. I felt so embarrassed that he had to bring me food! Don't worry, I think guys can tell when a girl is taken. Meatpacking... He he he...

xx

From: Ryan Klark rudejoker@h...
To: Courtney Phillips yapalot@g...
Date: 12 March 2011
Re: Dirty girl

Love that. Love you. Okay, I'm definitely going, Robert's threatening to throw me off this building. Love you still. xxx
PS: you're missing an 'x'. Get on that, babe.

From: Courtney Phillips yapalot@g...
To: Ryan Klark rudejoker@h...
Date: 12 March 2011
Re: So you should

I am so sneaking into your room tonight. Love you too. xxx (one more coz you is mental)

****BILLY LONDON****

BILLY LONDON

Ah, poor Billy. The only girl between two boys who each have nearly a foot on her. Didn't stop her from starting physical fights with them. She still thinks she can take them. So while she used to hide away in her wardrobe to read a book or four, she started to question why the heroines in those books would just lie there and take it. No, not just sex, but downright James-Bond-backhand-slapping, do-as-you're-told-woman, inappropriate lie there and take it.

She couldn't understand it. These women were just playing that mental woman from *Coming to America*, Miss "Whatever You Like" who barked like a dog and hopped on one foot. Billy didn't want to do that. Definitely not because one empty-headed fool with different anatomy told her to. So she started to create characters and worlds where the women could own their sexuality, their intelligence, their right to turn around and say "jog on, mate" without apology.

The small problem was that other people wanted to read what she was had written. "Er...why?" didn't cut it as an answer. After years of prodding and pleading and come on and for goodness' sake, what's the point otherwise, she closed her eyes and pressed "submit." Actually, she had Prosecco, limencello and white wine, then pressed "submit." Who would have thought people would actually enjoy reading about the crazy characters who live in her head? But they have done, and Billy feels rather proud of that connection with her fellow man.

Billy lives in London with the most patient family in the world and doesn't forget for a minute how lucky she is. Well, she wouldn't mind a BBC adaptation of one of her novels... Ooh, with Richard Armitage!

Blogspot: <http://sobillysaysshesays.blogspot.com/>