

*Some monsters are real
– and he only wants her*



MINE AFTER MIDNIGHT

A MASKED DEVOTION NOVEL

BESTSELLING AUSTRALIAN ROMANCE AUTHOR

LAUREN JACKSON

About the Book

A dark masked man romance for fans of Navessa Allen

I shouldn't have come back. Bryn Walter left town five years ago with one goal: forget Asher Vale. The boy from the wrong side of everything. The boy she was never supposed to love. The boy who promised to protect her – no matter what it took.

I never let her go. Asher left, but he never gave her up. He watched. Waited. Returned, again and again, to the place she left him, clinging to a promise that was never meant to fade. Bryn was always his – he's made sure of it.

Being back was supposed to be temporary. The moment Bryn sees him again, the past snaps tight around her throat. Their connection is still there – stronger, darker, impossible to ignore. And as pieces of what really happened begin to surface, Bryn starts to realise the truth: some love stories don't end.

Because Asher's devotion was never innocent. And loving her isn't the worst thing he's done.

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For the readers who like their love stories a little dangerous.

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Content Warning

Thank you for choosing to read *Mine After Midnight* – I hope you enjoy it!

Mine After Midnight is a dark romance and contains themes that may be upsetting to some readers, including stalking, obsession, grief, references to death, toxic family dynamics, violence, self-harm, explicit sexual content and references to past familial abuse, including child sexual abuse (not depicted on page). Please read with care.

I hope you enjoy Bryn and Ash's story.

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PLAYLIST

‘i like the way you kiss me’ – Artemas
‘Chemistry’ – ALXS
‘Call Out My Name’ – The Weeknd
‘Moth to a Flame’ – Swedish House Mafia and The Weeknd
‘You’ve Created a Monster’ – Bohnes
‘MIDDLE OF THE NIGHT’ – Elley Duhé
‘Slow Down’ – Chase Atlantic
‘Darkside’ – KAIZXKU
‘HEARTBEAT’ – Isabel LaRosa
‘Hopeless’ – Always Never
‘Chills (Dark Version)’ – Mickey Valen, Joey Myron
‘ON THE HUNT’ – Houndrel
‘Dangerous Hands’ – Austin Giorgio

For complete playlist –



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1

ASH

Five Years Ago

I don't hear him coming – only the whistle of a blade flying past before it buries itself in the tree inches from my cheek. My brother's aim is good, even when his intentions aren't. Blood roars in my ears as I stumble back. The trees seem to close in on me, and I feel as if there's no way out.

Low-hanging branches and razor-sharp leaves slap my face, arms, and neck as I run as fast as my legs can carry me. The sensation of my skin splitting makes me wince. Sunlight breaks through the trees in harsh streaks, the heat pressing down on my back. Sweat slides down my temples and stings the fresh scratches on my arms. I can't hear anything around me over the sound of my laboured breathing and thundering heartbeat.

I force my legs to keep moving, plunging deeper into the woods. The ground is uneven, punctured by roots that grab at my ankles like they're trying to drag me down, but I push harder. I can hear him behind me now; steady, unhurried footsteps cut through the chaos of my own.

He's enjoying this. Of course he is.

A low laugh drifts between the trees, soft enough that I could pretend I'd imagined it, if I didn't know him so damn well. He's close enough that the sound sends a shiver down my spine, unsettlingly familiar. We grew up racing through these woods, but back then he chased me with muddy hands and a wicked grin – not a weapon.

'Keep running all you want,' he calls, his deep voice smooth like he isn't bothered or puffed at all. 'We both know how this is going to end.'

Gritting my teeth, I push through a curtain of branches, the sting on my skin nothing compared to the heat rising in my chest. Fear, adrenaline, and

something darker I choose to ignore pump through my blood. The air swelters with humidity, causing sweat to drip into my eyes. The trees thin for a half a second, and that's when I hear it: the faint rush of water ahead. The river. It's both hope and trouble, depending on how desperate I'm willing to be.

I break through the last line of scrub, my sneakers skidding across loose dirt where the bank drops. The water churns faster than I expected; the river's swollen from the storm, brown and angry, dragging whole branches in its current. It's not safe, but neither is staying here.

Behind me, his footsteps smash through the undergrowth, like he's tearing the whole forest apart.

'Don't you dare,' he shouts, voice raw.

I'm already moving.

I slide down the bank, the mud slick under my palms, and splash into the water. The shock of it hits instantly, cold and biting, stealing the air from my lungs. The current drives at my legs, trying to push me off my feet.

He reaches the top of the bank as I wade deeper.

'Get out of the water!' he roars.

Right now, the river is the only thing between us. The current pulls harder, swirling around my knees, then my thighs. I can barely stay upright, each step a gamble, each breath burning. I keep moving. He slides down after me, hands tearing at the mud for balance.

If I'm fast, I can make it out to the main road, where the petrol station is. He won't attack me in public. His footsteps quicken. So do mine.

I hurl myself up over the bank. My foot slides out from beneath me, and I crash heavily into the ground. I hiss, feeling my skin graze as I get tangled in something that feels like a bush. Scrambling back to my feet, I push on, adrenaline pumping so hard through my veins that I can barely see straight.

My backpack suddenly jerks back and my feet leave the mossy terrain. I'm slammed so hard into the dirt that the air dissipates from my lungs. My body is dragged backwards, and the sound of the water floods my ears.

Familiar, eerie blue eyes – so like my own – peer down at me. His upper lip curls in a menacing sneer before his fist collides with my nose. A horrific crunch fills my ears and a strangled scream escapes through my lips. The punch knocks the world sideways. For a second, all I register is shock and a sharp ringing through my skull, like someone has struck a bell inside my head. My breath stutters, trapped somewhere between my lungs

and throat, and heat spreads across my jaw, seeping into a slow, throbbing wave. I taste copper, the bitterness curling on my tongue, and anger climbs up my spine. The emotion is not foreign to me. It's almost comforting.

Skin smacks against skin. Blood. Pain. Dirt coats my tongue. Red fills my vision. It's all over my skin, oozing and dripping as punch after punch hit me so hard, I fear he'll bury my head into the soft, damp ground.

'If you *ever* touch what's mine again, I'll kill you,' he growls through his teeth, a dark look of rage tainting his features.

Blood gurgles in my mouth, wet and suffocating. I try to inhale but choke, my windpipe tightening in agony. His fingers sink into my arms, leaving immediate bruises as he drags me further. Darkness edges my vision and I beg for it to consume me. My body scrapes against rocks, gravel, dirt, sticks.

'Say it,' he spits. 'Say you won't ever steal from me again.'

Heaving, I lift my chin, glowering up at the person I've known my whole life. My flesh and blood.

'Fuck. You.'

Fury flashes in his eyes as he shoves my head into icy cold water that stabs my bleeding, wounded skin like a thousand tiny needles. I inhale sharply and water floods through my teeth, mixing with the blood swelling inside my throat. My ears ring so loudly I can't think.

The punishing grip on me finally eases and suddenly, there is no one beside me. Slowly, I pull myself out of the water. My dark, wet hair falls across my forehead, sticking to my skin, blanketing my eyes in thick darkness. I press my cheek into the cool mud, wheezing.

Soft footsteps fall and I close my eyes. He's come back. He's not finished with me. My pulse spikes, every muscle coiling, ready to bolt again even though I'm soaked, exhausted, and unable to stand. The river churns somewhere behind me, a reminder of how close I came to letting it take me. The footsteps stop a few metres away, light, hesitant, nothing like his heavy, furious stride.

'Are you ... okay?'

The voice is soft and weary. Young, too. I force my eyes open. A girl stands just beyond the tree line. She appears my age – sixteen or so. Her eyes are wide as they flick from my face to the muddy river behind me.

'You look like you're about to pass out,' she says, taking one careful step closer. 'Or drown. Or both.'

My throat is raw, scraped from breathing too hard. 'I'm fine.'

'That's a lie,' she answers, deadpan.

A branch snaps somewhere deeper in the forest. My chest tightens instantly. He's still out there. The girl's brows flick up at the sound, but she doesn't panic.

I'm unable to speak, but something in my expression must give me away. Her grip on her bag shifts.

'Okay,' she breathes, almost to herself. 'You need to move.'

I blink at her. 'Why are you helping me?'

She shrugs, but her eyes stay fixed on the dark line of trees behind me. 'Because you look like someone who really needs it.'

There's another crack of branches, closer this time. My heart slams painfully against my ribs. The girl reaches out her hand, palm open, steady despite the tension in her jaw. She gently touches my skin, brushing feather-light across my arms. A strong scent of lavender and something I can't quite place washes over me, and for a moment, it eases the all-consuming pain.

A ragged sound escapes me as I roll onto my back, forcing my eyes open. Gentle, leaf-green eyes blink down at me, framed by long dark lashes. Pretty freckles are dusted across her cheeks, which are splashed with pink. Long, strawberry-blond hair blows over her face. She hastily pushes it away. Bright red nails and silver rings cover her fingers.

'Can you stand?'

Coughing, I roll to my side and spit out blood and water. Her hand touches my back. The heat of her skin radiates through my shirt, comforting me. After several long moments, I can finally breathe, though every part of my body screams in pain.

'I think so,' I eventually sputter.

'I can't imagine how you must be feeling.'

My cheek twitches. It hurts. 'I'm used to it.'

'I'm calling an ambulance.'

'No,' I quickly say. I collect every ounce of energy inside my body to push into a sitting position. Pain wells and burns inside me, all too familiar. 'I'm fine.'

She looks taken aback at my words.

'*Fine?*' she exclaims, blinking slowly. 'You're probably the furthest thing from fine.'

'Just a scratch,' I reply weakly.

‘I’m calling an ambulance.’

I try to protest, but I’m fading. I sag into the girl, and everything gives out. She catches me, her eyebrows furrowing in concern. I lean heavily onto her lap, my eyelids growing heavy.

‘I’m getting help,’ she says determinedly.

‘Stay,’ I whisper, my fingers clinging weakly to her shirt. ‘Please. Stay.’

And then everything goes dark.

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BRYN

Now

It feels weird being back in Black Water Cove.

My Vans scuff along the cracked pavement of Main Street. Hardly anything has changed here, but at the same time, so much is different. I pass the old cinema on my left, its faded sign barely legible now. I remember sneaking in here when I was twelve, hiding from the world with a borrowed book from the local library in my popcorn-smelling fingers. Now the glass is grimy, the paint peeling, and I feel a little sad at how unloved and old it looks. It seems that a lot of things in town have faced a similar fate.

People pass me by, nodding politely or staring a little too long. The coffee shop door squeaks when someone opens it, espresso smells wafting out. I catch a glimpse of myself reflected in the window, a familiar face and a stranger all at once. My hair's longer than it used to be, but still that strawberry blonde, my freckles are as pronounced as ever, and my eyes the same green they've always been, but there's a sad, haunted look about me that wasn't there when I was a teenager.

A breeze kicks up, rustling the faded banners that hang across the street, and for a second I imagine I could just turn around, walk back to the highway and keep driving, but something inside me keeps my feet moving forward. This town has its claws in me, whether I like it or not. I wonder where I'd be if things were different, and we had stayed.

A laugh drifts from the corner near the old newsagent. I look up. Ryan Jones is strolling towards me with the same crooked grin I remember from high school. He's taller than I remember; his hair is darker than it used to be. I had a giant crush on him through most of school.

‘Bryn?’ His voice is uncertain, as though he’s not sure it’s actually me he’s talking to.

‘Ryan,’ I say.

His brows lift. ‘Wow, it’s been ages! How’ve you been?’

‘Yeah,’ I say, shrugging. My hands fidget with the strap of my bag.

‘Good, thanks. I’m just visiting.’

He rubs the back of his neck, as if wanting to continue the conversation but unsure how to put his thoughts into words. ‘Cool. How’s your family?’ he says eventually.

I glance down at the cracked pavement, chewing my lip as I take a second to gather my thoughts.

‘They’re fine. No one lives here anymore,’ I say.

There’s a pause, an awkward space filled only by the sounds of the busy street. We used to banter with each other. Laugh and flirt. Write each other notes in class. Now years have passed, and we are strangers.

‘Are you visiting Elodie and Tess? Are you still friends?’ Ryan asks, shifting the weight from one foot to the other, as though he is unsure quite what to do with himself.

‘Yeah, we’ve stayed in touch.’

‘Must be nice, seeing familiar faces after all this time,’ he says. The corners of his smile dip slightly, like he’s trying to lighten the mood, but failing.

‘Yeah,’ I reply, searching for the right words. Being back here is harder than I expected. Everything reminds me of her.

He studies me for a moment, the way he used to in high school. It’s as if he’s trying to figure out who I am now versus who I was back then.

‘You’ve changed,’ he says softly.

‘Naturally,’ I say, a little stiffly. ‘It’s been five years.’

Ryan releases an awkward chuckle. ‘I guess that’s a while.’

I nod, feeling the weight of that truth settle over me. The streets, the old buildings – they all bring memories back. Some I’m ready to face, some I’m not.

‘I should probably let you go see your friends, but if you want to catch up over coffee, or just want someone to talk to, you know where to find me.’

I nod, surprised at how little excitement I feel, considering how over the moon I would have been if he’d asked me back in high school. ‘Thanks, Ryan. I might take you up on that sometime.’

He gives me a small smile before turning toward the cafe. I keep walking, letting the chatter of the street fade out behind me. My steps slow as I approach the park at the edge of town. The grass is a vibrant green, the swings creak in the slight breeze, and for a moment, it's as if time hasn't touched this place at all.

I stop at the edge of the playground, remembering us here, laughing, her hair tangled in the wind. She'd chase me around until we collapsed on the grass, breathless and dizzy. I remember the way she used to tug me along, fearless, daring me to climb higher, swing faster. I blink rapidly, trying to hold back tears for my sister.

Moving to sit on the edge of the swing set, I let myself sink into the quiet. The park is empty now, but I can hear her voice in my head, the echo of her laughter that never really left me. I draw in a shaky breath, trying to ground myself. The past isn't here anymore, but the pain is still real. A soft breeze rustles the leaves above, and I close my eyes. For a moment, it almost feels like she's still here with me.

When I stand, brushing off my jeans, I know I have to keep moving forward. Being back in Black Water Cove doesn't need to be heavy and sad. I'm looking forward to seeing Tess and Elodie. I've seen them plenty since moving to Brisbane – they've visited quite a few times – but I haven't been back here myself. Not until now.

Elodie's twenty-first felt like a good enough reason to finally make the trip, and Tess could use a friend after everything that's happened since her breakup. I don't know how long I plan to stay, and that's okay. For once, I don't need a plan. I'm just going to go with the flow and see what happens.

For the first time in a long time, I decide to carry her memory with me instead of letting it weigh me down. I leave the park behind, heading toward Tess and Elodie's apartment, the anticipation of seeing them replacing some of the heaviness in me.

When I reach the building, I hesitate for a moment and draw in a steadying breath. I wonder if I would be living here with them if I'd never left. They buzz me in and after a short elevator ride up, I'm at their flat. I knock, and almost immediately, the door swings open.

Tess is there, hair in a messy bun, wearing an oversized hoodie that looks far too big – I fear it might be the recent ex-boyfriend's hoodie.

'Bryn!' she exclaims, stepping forward and pulling me into a tight, warm hug.

Elodie appears in the doorway behind her and leans casually against the frame. 'Yay! You're here!'

'I wouldn't miss it,' I say.

Elodie's grin widens, and the tension I've been carrying all day begins to melt. Tess squeezes my shoulder lightly before she steps back to let me in. I follow them into the apartment. It's a little chaotic. There are half-empty wine bottles and glasses scattered across the counter, clothes thrown over chairs, and a pile of text-books that looks at risk of toppling over with a breeze.

Tess drops onto the couch dramatically. 'How are you?'

Elodie plops down next to her. 'We haven't heard from you in ages. What's new?'

I sink into the couch across from them, letting my shoulders relax a fraction. 'You know, work mostly. Nothing very exciting to report.' I shrug, keeping it vague. I don't really like talking about myself.

Tess wrinkles her nose. 'Busy, huh? Doing what?'

I can't help a small smile. 'Honestly, nothing exciting. Sorry to disappoint.' I lean forward, resting my elbows on my thighs. 'More importantly, how are you, Tess? What happened with Liam?'

Tess lets out a dramatic groan. 'We're done and I'm over him.'

Elodie raises an eyebrow. 'Don't be fooled, she's been crying non-stop for the past week.'

Tess flops back into the couch, exasperated. 'I'm devastated. I thought we were going to get engaged soon, and now he's blocked me on everything. All over, just like that.'

I wince, understanding all too well the raw intensity of heartbreak. A different kind of heartbreak, but I know the pain well enough. 'That's brutal,' I murmur. 'I'm so sorry, Tess.'

She twists the tassels of a couch pillow in her hands. 'I know we're only young, but we were supposed to have this plan, a future together, and now it's just gone, like it never mattered. All because "I'm not feeling it anymore",' she says, using air quotes. 'And now his best friend has returned from overseas and it looks like he's having the best time of his life. He's posting stories constantly, out at parties, on a trip, at a festival. All things I wanted to do with him, but he could never be bothered.'

'She stalks him from a fake account,' Elodie supplies.

'It's actually her fake account, mind you,' Tess says.

‘Well, I never liked him. Not sure if that makes you feel better or worse.’

Tess’s jaw clenches at the comment, but she doesn’t reply. I reach over, brushing her arm lightly.

‘I’m really sorry, Tess. That must have been an awful conversation to have, especially if you were blindsided by it.’

Tess exhales, finally meeting my eyes. There’s a flicker of vulnerability in her expression.

‘Thanks, Bryn. It’s nice having you here.’

I give her a small smile. Surveying the apartment, I think about all the moments I’ve missed here, and wonder if I should have returned sooner. I’ve been lost for years; being here could have made me feel like I belonged somewhere again. Being back with my two best friends.

He could also be here ...

I push that irritating thought from my mind, refusing to open the folder and explore it any further.

Tess sighs. ‘Ugh, I just feel so stupid. And angry. And sad. I can’t even figure out which emotion I’m supposed to feel first.’

‘You can feel all of them,’ I say gently. ‘You don’t have to sort it out right now. Just feel whatever you need to feel.’

Elodie smirks. ‘See? That’s why she’s the sensible one. She’s always been the voice of reason, even when we were teenagers.’

I shake my head, a soft laugh escaping me. ‘Don’t make me sound so boring.’

My gaze drifts to the dining table, where half the surface has been taken over by recording equipment: microphones on small stands, tangled headphones, a laptop with editing software open on the screen. It looks more like a tiny studio than somewhere you’d eat dinner.

The girls started a podcast a little over a year ago. At first, it was just the two of them talking into cheap microphones in Tess’s bedroom, giggling their way through awkward recordings and posting them online for fun. People loved it. Now, in their weekly episodes they sit down to talk about everything – dating disasters, money problems in your twenties, health kicks that last two weeks before collapsing, messy friendships, bad sex, good sex, the strange chaos of trying to figure out life while everyone pretends they already have. Nothing is off limits. I love listening to it. It’s half advice, half storytelling, but mostly just the two of them being completely unfiltered with each other.

Tess is the thoughtful one – the calm voice that tries to see both sides of every story. Elodie, on the other hand, has absolutely no filter. If something ridiculous has happened to her that week, the entire internet is going to hear about it.

The dining table setup tells me they must have recorded recently. Tess's notebook sits open beside the laptop, pages full of messy bullet points and scribbled ideas.

Elodie notices where I'm looking. 'Careful,' she says. 'If you get too close, we'll stick a microphone in front of you.'

I snort softly. 'Absolutely not.'

Her grin widens. 'Oh, come on. The listeners would love you.'

I shake my head. 'I'm not exciting enough to be on there.'

'As if.'

'Maybe one day.'

Elodie leans back into the couch, clearly interested in that answer.

'Okay, enough doom and gloom. We need a distraction.' She grabs her phone from the coffee table and starts tapping at the screen with purpose. 'Let's go out tonight.'

Tess groans. 'El, I look like I've been crying for forty-eight hours straight.'

'Which is exactly why we're going out.'

'Where are you thinking?' I ask.

Elodie's thumb freezes on her screen, her eyes widening. She tilts her phone toward us. 'There's a Fright Night event at Shadow Land Amusements tonight.'

My stomach dips. Shadow Land. I haven't heard that name in years. The old amusement park at the edge of town is fun, but also creepy, depending what time of the year you go. I remember going there with my sister. She dared me to go on the roller-coaster, convincing me it wasn't 'that bad', and then laughed wickedly when I screamed. I swallow, a lump forming in my throat. It's been a while since I thought about my sister, but being back here is just as difficult as I expected. She's everywhere I look.

Tess perks up a little, wiping her face. 'Fright Night? Like costumes and jump scares and people pretending they're going to murder you in dark hallways?'

Elodie beams. 'Exactly that.'

‘I don’t know ...’ Tess starts, but Elodie shoots us both a look that says she’s not accepting no for an answer tonight.

‘Is tonight the best night for that kind of thing?’ I ask hesitantly.

‘Bryn, come on,’ she says, nudging my foot with hers. ‘You’re back. Tess is heartbroken. I’m bored. This is *exactly* the night for it.’

Tess nods, surprisingly eager now. ‘Yeah. Honestly, getting scared out of my mind sounds kind of therapeutic.’

I shrug, releasing a small laugh. ‘Right. Nothing says healing like a grown man in a zombie mask chasing us with a plastic chainsaw.’

Elodie waves her hand dismissively. ‘Don’t be reasonable right now, Bryn. We’re going.’

Maybe I need this, too. Something that isn’t grief or memories or awkward run-ins with people who remember the girl I used to be. The bright, bubbly girl who had ambition and the world at her fingertips.

‘Fine,’ I say, lifting my hands in surrender. ‘Fright Night it is.’

Elodie pumps her fists triumphantly. ‘Right!’ she says, already springing off the couch. ‘No time to waste. Let’s get ready.’

Tess laughs, pushing herself up from the cushions. I shake my head, smiling despite myself. I follow them down the short hallway toward Tess’s bedroom, where clothes are already strewn everywhere. Dresses are draped over her chair, shoes are half buried under a pile of jackets, and makeup is scattered across the dresser.

Tess sighs dramatically at the chaos. ‘Don’t judge me. It’s been a bad week.’

‘Sweetheart,’ Elodie says, patting her shoulder. ‘Your room was like this before.’

I let out a quiet laugh and lean against the doorway. ‘So what’s the vibe tonight? Cute? Scary?’

Elodie turns to me. ‘You? Something lowkey. You’re already intimidating.’

‘Wow.’ I blink in mock offense. ‘Thanks?’

‘It’s a compliment,’ she insists.

Tess rummages through a drawer, pulling out a sequined top and a black skirt. ‘I just don’t want to look like someone’s abandoned house plant.’

‘Done,’ Elodie says, snatching the clothes from her. ‘Go shower. Bryn and I will attempt to wrangle this mess.’

Tess disappears into the bathroom and Elodie opens her bedside table, pulling out a half-finished bottle of pink gin. 'Ah-ha! Emergency supplies.'

I grin, feeling slightly relieved that I will have a little liquid courage leading into tonight. I don't scare that easily anymore, but the thought of people jumping out from shadows all night makes me feel a little uneasy. I'm worried I might accidentally hit one of them out of fright.

Elodie grabs three mismatched glasses from the kitchen and fills them generously. By the time Tess reappears, hair dripping and cheeks pink from the heat, her eyes looking slightly less bloodshot, we're already seated on the bed, holding out her drink.

'To welcome Bryn back to Black Water Cove, and to new beginnings.'

'And to not letting small-dick losers ruin our lives,' Tess adds, taking the glass.

'Cheers,' I say, lifting mine.

We clink our glasses together. The gin burns a little on the way down. I don't drink often, but I'm enjoying it tonight.

As they start on makeup, I sit at the edge of the bed, letting myself soak in the moment. The soft music playing from Tess's phone, the faint scent of hairspray, the warmth in the room ... these elements make up a version of normal I didn't realise I missed. I have friends and family where I moved to in the city, but the place has never felt quite like home. Not like Black Water Cove does.

Elodie turns to me, tapping her makeup brush against her palm. 'Bryn. Your turn.'

I groan, but move toward her anyway. 'Nothing too wild.'

'No promises,' she says with a wicked grin.

3

ASH

Five Years Ago

When I wake, the first thing I see is long, strawberry-blond hair. My arm is limp at my side, littered with cuts and bruises, but the thing I focus on is the soft hand threaded through mine.

She's here.

My tongue feels glued to the roof of my mouth. My muscles are sore as I attempt to adjust myself in the hospital bed. She sits in a chair beside me, her sleepy eyes resting on my face.

'You're awake,' she whispers.

I nod. 'It appears so.'

'How are you feeling?'

'Like I'm a lucky guy.'

A look of confusion falls over her face. 'A lucky guy?'

'A very lucky guy. A beautiful girl saved me, and stayed until I woke up.'

A blush creeps up her neck and jumps across her cheeks as she smiles.

'I've never met anyone who could turn a traumatic situation into something positive.'

I crack a smile, ignoring my body's complaints as I do. 'I'd take the beating again, if it meant I got to meet you.'

'You don't even know me.'

'I hope that will change.'

Biting her lip, she tucks a piece of hair behind her ear, revealing small cherry earrings.

'Who was he?'

I rest back into the lumpy pillows and gaze up at the white ceiling. The question slices through the fog in my head sharper than any pain in my ribs. I look back to her, and she's watching me, her brows drawn together in a careful, worried way, like she already knows the answer isn't simple. Like she's afraid of pushing too far.

My mouth goes dry. My heart rate spikes on the monitor; the beeping quickens.

'I don't—' I start, but my voice cracks.

'Sorry,' she says. 'That was rude.'

'No, you weren't. It was my brother.'

The sound of her gasp fills the room. 'Your *brother*?'

'The one and only.'

'That is an awful family dynamic you have ...' she trails off, looking concerned.

'You're telling me.'

'I'm sorry.' Her hand tightens in mine. 'Truly.'

'I'm used to it.'

'Why was he trying to hurt you?' she asks quietly.

I stare at the wall, jaw locked so tight it aches. The memory hits in flashes: the snapping branches, his breath at my back, the fury in his voice, the look in his eyes when he cornered me.

'He gets angry.'

'That wasn't just angry,' she says softly. 'That was psychotic.'

'What's your name?' I ask, directing the conversation elsewhere.

'Bryn.'

'Pretty name.'

Ducking her chin, she smiles down at our hands, her cheeks reddening even more. 'And you?'

'Asher, but everyone calls me Ash.'

'It's nice to meet you, Ash.' She smiles. 'Although I wish it was under different circumstances.'

He shrugs. 'All great stories start with an adventure.'

Her smile widens. 'What a good way to look at it.'

'What were you doing out there alone?' I ask.

'I run,' she replies. 'Competitively, but also for leisure.'

Slowly, she stands, stretching. My eyes crawl over her, drinking her in inch by inch. She's tall, and athletic. For a girl who seems similar in age to

me – perhaps younger – she is well developed: curvy, muscular, with a chest that makes her shirt stretch tightly across it, down to a thin waist and long, tanned legs.

‘You go to school here?’ I ask, dragging my eyes away from her bare thighs and back to her sun-kissed cheeks.

‘Emanuel.’

‘Ah.’ I nod. Of course. The big private school up on the hill. No wonder I’ve never met her.

‘And you?’

‘Richmond.’

She nods. ‘You like it?’

‘Hate it.’

‘That’s a bummer. I love school.’

I nestle further into the pillows, watching as she wanders around the room.

‘What part of town are you in?’ I ask.

‘Near the village.’

In other words, she’s rich.

‘Nice.’

‘What about you?’ She turns, giving me her full attention once more.

‘Bex Forest is a little far from the village,’ I say instead, not wanting to admit that I live in the worst part of town.

Another story, whenever you're ready.

Come to [Lokepub](#) to pick your next novel.

‘I run far.’

‘That’s dangerous,’ I say, my eyes dipping over those gorgeous features. ‘Especially for a girl that looks like you.’

‘Do you always hand out compliments like this?’ she teases.

‘Never,’ I answer honestly. ‘In fact, I hate most people.’

‘Why?’

‘They suck.’

Her soft laugh rings out, and I can't help but smile in response.

'Not everyone does.'

'No,' I reply, my eyes connecting fiercely with hers. 'Not everyone.'

Bryn spends the rest of the afternoon with me. Sliding onto the bed, she fills the small gap beside me, sharing my pillow. We watch half of a season of some vampire show that she is obsessed with. I find it hard to peel my eyes from her long enough to pay attention.

The sun sinks slowly into the horizon. Our hands don't ever part.

The next time I open my eyes, it's morning, and the space beside me is empty. I sit up, wincing, and stare around the room, suddenly hollow without her warm presence. Shit. I fell asleep, and now she's gone. I wonder for a moment if I made the entire thing up. Loneliness can do that kind of thing to a person.

I fumble for a glass of water when my fingers snag something. My eyes lower to a piece of paper.

Bryn Walter

A breath of relief leaves me. The corners of my lip twitch, my eyes catching on her name. Her address and phone number are scribbled underneath it.

A knock at the door startles me, and I groan in pain at my sudden movement. I look to the woman standing at the door and shrink back into the bed immediately. I might not know *who* she is, but I know *what* she is. A social worker.

'Asher Vale.' She smiles warmly. 'I'm Liz. How are you feeling?'

'Fine.'

Her eyes dart across my battered body. 'You don't look so fine, Asher.'

'It's just Ash.'

'Asher,' she says, gently, and then clears her throat. 'Ash, sorry. Can we talk for a minute?'

Social workers are always the same. The same suits. The same forced kindness. The overuse of my name in sentences to make me feel like they actually *know* me.

Liz purses her lips for a moment. 'The hospital staff have tried to get onto your dad, but they haven't had any luck.'

'He's deaf.' I reply. 'He can't hear the phone.'

She pauses, her eyes narrowing slightly as she analyses me. 'I heard there was an altercation.'

‘That’s what they’re calling it?’ My voice cracks on the last word, and I clench my teeth so hard it hurts. I won’t give her anything more than that.

Her eyes dart down to the clipboard she’s holding. ‘Ash, this isn’t the first time you’ve been admitted to the hospital with injuries like this. My notes say that, in the past, there have been issues with your brother. Did he do this to you?’

She studies me closely. I hate it. Hate the pity simmering beneath her careful expression.

‘You know I’m not here to judge you,’ she says softly. ‘I just want to understand what happened.’

‘Nothing happened,’ I say. ‘I slipped over when out for a run in the forest. It’s no big deal.’

Her silence tells me she doesn’t buy it. None of them ever do. They just write down their theories in neat little boxes, tuck me into some category that makes sense to them. Neglect. Violence. High-risk family environment. They don’t know the half of it.

‘Your father hasn’t come by,’ Liz says, cautious, as if I’m a bomb about to detonate at the slightest movement.

I shrug. ‘He’s busy.’

She sighs in a way that makes it seem like this weighs on her more than it weighs on me.

‘Ash, you don’t have to protect him. Or your brother.’ Exhaling, I glare at the wall, feeling irritated. Not because she’s correct in her assumption, but because she has the power to remove me from my family. The last thing I want is to be forced into a foster home. I can look out for myself. I always have. My home life might be a complete fuck up, but at least I have the freedom to come and go as I please, and other than my brother when he’s in an episode, there isn’t anyone breathing down my neck.

‘I’m not protecting anyone,’ I say. ‘I just don’t like talking to people who get paid to pretend they care.’

Liz flinches. She opens her mouth, but pauses once more, as if unsure what to say next. Instead of arguing with me, she tries again. ‘Where do you live, Ash?’

‘Near the village.’

Her eyes narrow for a moment. ‘Where?’

‘Look, *Liz*,’ I say her name exaggeratedly. ‘I don’t know you. I’m not going to tell you where I live.’

She stares back at me, unflinching. 'I'm here to help you.'

My shoulders sag, a sigh escaping me. I let moisture fill my eyes, then lift them to meet hers. 'Really?'

Her gaze softens as she moves toward me. 'Yes, of course.'

'Could you ask for my phone? I can't find it, and I'd really love to call my dad.'

'Sure, hon.' She smiles. 'Let me get right to that.'

She quickly bustles out of the room. With lightning speed, I yank everything out of me, barely flinching as pain darts up my arms where the tubes were. I tear at the gown and throw on my bloodied, ripped shirt that was bagged and left on the table. I stomp into my shoes before high-tailing it out of the room.

'Hey!' a voice calls, but I'm down the hall and stepping into an elevator within seconds.

I draw in greedy gulps of fresh air as I run, pushing around people, not caring if I make contact with them. Everything hurts, but I only run faster.

They won't ever catch me.

4

BRYN

Now

The moment we step through the rust-red gates of Shadow Land Amusements, a chill inches down my spine.

A low buzz emits from the lights overhead. Dusty glass bulbs cast a dim glow over the ground as fog machines pour out more smoke than seems reasonable. The mist curls around our legs, rising in clouds that swallow the path before us. Somewhere beyond my sight, a ride creaks; a slow, mournful sound that drifts through the night air. Above us, the lights pulse again, dimming in and out of brightness, making it difficult to see our surroundings. After a moment or so, my eyes adjust.

Tess stops beside me, tugging her jacket tighter.

‘Is it supposed to be this empty?’ I ask.

‘It’s Fright Night, Bryn. They’re setting the mood,’ Elodie replies.

The carousel at the park’s centre groans into motion even though no one’s near it. Horses rise and fall slowly, their glass eyes catching the light, unblinking, like they’re watching us. They’ve done an excellent job at making this kid-friendly park seem creepy as hell.

A warm wind skims across my neck. Behind me, a metal gate slams and heavy footsteps thud, though when I glance around, no one is there.

‘Okay, that was definitely staged,’ Tess mutters, but her voice wavers.

Ahead of us, a trail of fake blood leads toward the Haunted Midway. A sign above it reads *WELCOME TO FRIGHT NIGHT: DON’T GET LOST*. The last word is smeared, as though something dragged claws through the paint. Elodie bounces on her toes in excitement.

‘Come on, let’s find the maze. The reviews said people actually cried their way out of it.’

I swallow, feeling a little uneasy. My pulse shouldn’t be racing – this is all just props and actors and scares – but the shadows seem to darken the further we go. The fog parts abruptly, and a sudden chorus of pounding footsteps explodes from the alley to our left. Tess gasps, stumbling back into me as a wave of figures bursts through the smoke. Scare actors come sprinting toward us, their silhouettes warped by strobe lights. They’re dressed in dark clothing with a variety of masks: cracked porcelain grins, stitched leather mouths, deep black eyes. One drags a metal chain behind him, the sound giving me goosebumps.

Elodie shrieks and grabs my arm, her nails digging in, but the actors veer at the last second, splitting around us like a current rushing around rocks. Their laughter is manic as they disappear down the path behind us. A group of people a few metres back screams.

‘Nope, nope, I’m done, fuck this!’ one of them cries out, sprinting toward the gate, causing a few of the actors to cackle in glee.

The chain-dragger skids to a stop, pivots, and barrels after them.

‘Holy *hell*,’ Tess breathes, her hand pressed to her chest. ‘They don’t usually run at guests like that, right? That felt like they were actually going to plough through us.’

The fog seeps back in, swallowing the last of the fleeing figures until it’s like nothing happened at all, and only the echo of footsteps remains.

Elodie forces a laugh. ‘Okay, that was a bit extreme.’

‘Extreme is one word for it,’ Tess mutters, rubbing her arms as if she can scrub off the chill they just gave her.

Speakers crackle with distant screams and distorted laughter, the sounds warped and creepy. We press deeper along the Midway, swallowed by rows of attractions on either side. Shadows from the rides loom over us: outlines of roller-coasters, the silhouette of a stalled Ferris wheel, its carts rocking faintly in the breeze. The lights here are dimmer, tinted red and purple, casting everything in a deep, coloured light. Fog thickens around our ankles, turning every step into a wade through ghost-water. A distorted carnival jingle begins to play somewhere to our right. Elodie shivers, but her excitement starts to return – she lives for this kind of sensory overload.

‘I think the haunted maze starts up ahead,’ she says, pointing at a cluster of black-and-white striped tents. A giant sign above them blinks *THE LOST*

PATH, though half the bulbs are dead, making it read more like *THE LO T P TH*.

‘That’s inviting,’ Tess says sarcastically.

We approach slowly, passing a row of empty carnival games. Mallets rest abandoned beside a strength-test game, and the giant clown-faced target at the top grins down at us, its paint cracked into spiderweb-like veins. A soft hiss of air escapes from somewhere within it, like it’s breathing.

‘I fucking hate clowns,’ Tess mutters, looking warily up at it.

As we walk, more scare actors appear, lurking near stalls, slumped in doorways, shuffling across our path at odd angles, zombie-like.

‘I hate zombies,’ I add, a shiver running down my spine.

They’re convincing, with their jerky movements and timed jumps. A burst of adrenaline surges through my chest each time one lunges. Elodie laughs. Tess has broken into a nervous sweat.

‘Ohh, let’s get a pic!’ Elodie says, pointing at a mirror.

It looks like an old funhouse mirror, warped at the edges, its frame carved with twisting vines and painted skulls. The glass reflects us in smudged streaks of red-and-purple light. We lean in together, and I feel something warm settle in me. We *do* look good, dressed in matching styles: knee-high boots; short, fitted dresses that cling to our curves, with hemlines ending mid-thigh; hair curled, glinting under the moody carnival lights.

It feels good to have fun again. I haven’t been out like this in ages. Work, study, deadlines – they’ve been eating me alive. Tonight feels like coming up for air. Being with Tess and Elodie, laughing, wandering around a creepy theme park in cute outfits seems to be just what I needed.

‘Okay, pose!’ Elodie says, angling her phone.

We shift closer. I give a small smile, Tess tosses her hair dramatically, and Elodie raises her chin as she always does in photos, for a ‘better angle’. The glass in front of us warps our reflections just slightly, stretching our legs, narrowing our waists, and turning us into eerie, glamorous versions of ourselves. Elodie takes the photo just as someone explodes out of the darkness behind the reflective glass surface. A shriek tears out of me so violently, my knees buckle. Tess yelps and nearly drops her bag. Elodie scream-laughes, her grip on her phone wobbling.

The scare actor crashes forward, slamming his hands against the glass from behind it. The entire mirror rattles on its crooked hinges, dust shaking loose from the frame. He’s dressed like an undertaker in a long black coat,

with pale makeup, hollowed-out cheeks, and a top hat that casts his eyes in shadow. He grins through cracked black lips, then drags one finger slowly down the inside of the glass, leaving a dusty trail.

‘Oh my God,’ Tess gasps, clutching her chest.

Elodie is wheezing with laughter. ‘That was amazing, did you see Bryn’s face?’

I’m still gripping her arm, my pulse racing, my breath coming out in short, fast spurts. He taps the glass once more then fades back into the shadows behind it, swallowed by the dim red light.

‘That almost put me into cardiac arrest,’ Tess mutters.

Even as my heart hammers, a grin sneaks onto my face. It’s been a long time since something scared me in a way that made me feel alive like that. We continue moving, Tess glancing over her shoulder like the undertaker might bolt out for round two. Ahead, a jagged archway marks the entrance to The Lost Path maze. Red fog spills out from within, illuminated by hidden strobes, so the mist seems to flicker in and out of existence.

‘Okay,’ Elodie says, clapping her hands, ‘I’m going first. Let’s do it.’

We step beneath the archway, swallowed by fog and the thumping bass of a sound system that must be planted inside the walls. The path inside is narrow, claustrophobically so, and lined with high, dark walls. Lanterns sway overhead, casting dim pools of light around us, but barely enough to see anything more than a metre ahead.

‘Right or left?’ I ask.

Elodie spins dramatically. ‘As Beyoncé would say, to the left.’

We follow her. The corridor funnels us into a larger chamber alive with distorted moaning sounds. Tess’s shoulders are practically at her ears. More fog rises, reaching knee height and glowing faintly blue this time. Fake branches hang low enough that I brush one and nearly leap out of my skin. Something – hopefully a mechanical spider, not a real one – skitters across the floor, and the sudden movement sends Tess squeaking and grabbing my dress.

Elodie cackles and rushes ahead, turning a corner. ‘This is awesome!’

‘Elodie – wait!’ Tess calls.

We hurry after her, but the passage splits unexpectedly; two identical openings veer in opposite directions.

I grab Tess’s sleeve. ‘Which way did she—’

A scream echoes down one of the corridors. Not a terrified scream – Elodie’s delighted, chaotic cackle-scream.

‘Great,’ Tess says flatly. ‘She sounds like she’s having too much fun with all of this.’

We choose the left path again. The walls lean inward here, and the space feels even smaller than before.

‘Turn back, if you do not have a death wish ...’ an eerie voice whispers. My stomach drops, and the hairs on my arms stand on end.

‘El?’ I call out, waiting a moment, but there’s no reply.

We reach another intersection. Three choices, and no sign of Elodie.

‘Maybe she went straight?’ Tess suggests.

‘Left, she always chooses left,’ I reply.

‘She’s probably at the end already, laughing at us.’

We push forward. The corridor narrows even further, until we’re practically shoulder to shoulder. A figure drops suddenly from a hatch above us, dangling upside down, mask white, eyes hollow. We scream, turning to sprint blindly through the corridor, and that’s when the maze splits again, a sharp zigzag that forces Tess one way and me the other.

‘Tess!’ I shout, reaching for her.

My fingers brush hers before a panel slides between us. The soundproofing muffles everything instantly. The corridor is suddenly silent.

‘Hello?’ I breathe. ‘Tess? Elodie?’

I strain to listen for a reply, but can only hear the faint thump of music through walls. I press my palm to the panel that separated us, and it gives a little but stays upright. A cool draught snakes along the floor, curling around my ankles and lifting the hairs on the back of my neck. I feel as if I am alone in the maze. The lantern above me flickers before dying completely, throwing me into total darkness. The music stops.

A soft sound breaks the silence. Not a footstep – more like the gentle scrape of someone dragging a gloved finger along the wall ... someone right behind me. I whirl around, my heart slamming in my ribs.

A tall figure stands at the far end of the corridor, barely visible in the faint glow of a strobe hidden somewhere behind them. Every few seconds, the light flashes, illuminating them in disjointed snapshots: black clothes; broad shoulders; a mask, sleek and matte black except for the faintest silver lines tracing over the cheekbones like scars. A man, I presume. His head is

tilted, as though he's studying me. The light flashes again and in the blink of an eye, he's much closer than he was a second ago.

'Oh – um – hi?' My voice cracks embarrassingly. 'You got me separated from my friends.'

He steps forward in deliberate, slow movements that have my heart jackknifing in my chest. They're calculated and predatory, but playful too. There's something in the tilt of his head, the measured pace, that suggests he's waiting to see what I'll do. For a second, it feels all too real.

'Great. Okay. You're one of the hardcore actors,' I mumble, backing up a step. 'I get it. I'm scared. Congrats.'

The lights flash again, and he appears at my side, leaning a shoulder against the wall as if he's been casually waiting for me.

I gasp and stumble back before I spin and run, my heeled boots thudding against the floor. The corridor zigzags wildly, forcing me left, then right, then through a narrow gap barely wider than my shoulders again. My pulse is a roar in my ears.

Behind me, his footsteps follow. He's chasing me.

I look back to see another bright flash, revealing him at the corner I just turned. His shadow stretches long behind him.

'You're enjoying this way too much!' I shout, breathless, half laughing, half terrified.

He doesn't speak; he simply tilts his head again. Another flash. He's closer yet again, clearly able to use these flashing light techniques to his advantage. I dart into another passage, nearly slipping. My hand hits a cold metal bar, which thankfully feels like a handle. I yank it open and slip inside what looks like a dead-end room, with mirrored panels lining the walls.

Perfect. A trap. I spin to face the doorway and freeze, my eyes landing on his broad frame that blocks the exit entirely.

'Okay,' I say, forcing my voice to sound braver than I feel. 'You win. I'm caught. Happy now?'

He steps inside, the fog curling around his army-like boots. The strobe light above us pulses weakly, slicing the darkness with flashes that catch the silver lines on his mask. They make his face sharp, almost wolfish.

'You want me to keep playing?' I ask, sounding a little too breathless.

He crooks one finger, beckoning me to him. My stomach flips so violently I feel nauseous.

‘Oh, you’ve got to be kidding me,’ I whisper, but a grin tugs at my lips despite everything. ‘Fine. Round two.’

Before he can reach me, I dart to the side, slipping behind one of the mirrored panels. It leads into another hidden passage. I run, laughing this time, adrenaline electric in my veins. Behind me, I hear a low chuckle. It’s soft, muffled by the mask, but unmistakably deep and amused.

I run fast, but he continues to get closer.

The maze bends, guiding me into a narrow corridor where the walls lean inward, funnelling me like prey. My boots thud on the floor as I push myself harder, my lungs burning. Every few seconds a strobe flashes, illuminating him behind me, turning the corner, closing the gap between us with an ease that makes this feel like a game of predator versus prey. Like he knows exactly how fast I’ll run, exactly where I’ll turn. He’s probably done this a hundred times.

I take another turn and collide with a dead end. ‘Shit.’

Before I can pivot, his shadow falls over me. In the next flash, he’s already here, his hands braced on the wall either side of my head, caging me in. His body heat radiates through the cool air; his height and width fill the tight space. He must be well over six foot to tower over me like this, since I’m not a short girl. I stand at five-nine and he makes me feel small, meaning he’s at least six-four, if not taller.

His mask is inches from my face, black and smooth, its silver lines shimmering with each pulse of light. My heartbeat pounds in my ears, loud to the point I can hardly hear my own thoughts.

‘Okay,’ I pant. ‘You win again. Seriously, A-plus commitment. Very spooky.’

He doesn’t move. His startling blue eyes shine through the mask as he studies me. My breath catches in surprise. Those eyes. Brilliant and beautiful. His head lowers slightly, angled like he’s drinking in the sight of me, and for a small moment, I think he might try to kiss me, which seems completely absurd.

I swallow, wanting to speak, but find no words. He lifts a gloved hand and trails one fingertip along my jaw, deliberate and gentle. It seems almost too intimate for a stranger. Too familiar for a random scare actor. He tilts his head once more, eyes appraising me. My eyes catch on a silver glint of a bracelet. I lean closer, trying to confirm if I really just saw a small red cherry on it, but it’s fallen back under his sleeve.

A shiver bolts down my spine. I press back against the wall, breath stuttering. 'You're ... a very intense performer,' I breathe.

The strobe cuts out for a second, pure darkness swallowing us both. When it returns, he's even closer. His voice, a low, raspy murmur, slides through the narrow space. 'This has been fun,' he says, tone laced with something warm and haunting all at once. 'You still run the exact same way.'

Cold prickles race over my skin. He leans in, his lips near my ear, his voice dropping to a whisper that curls down my spine like a secret meant only for me.

'Hope to see you again soon, Bryn.'

Before I can react, the lantern buzzes, blinding me for a brief moment, and when my eyes adjust, the corridor is empty.

He's gone. No footsteps. No fog disturbance, just the faint echo of his voice. The air around me is still buzzing, and a scent lingers behind – something warm and strangely intoxicating. It hits me slowly – a smoky spice, like cedarwood, and a hint of something richer. It clings to the corridor even though he's gone, and wraps around me like hot breath on my neck.

My pulse trips as a chilling realisation sinks through me.

Does he know me?

5

BRYN

Five Years Ago

Jogging down the deck steps, I head toward the table and place the salad down. There's a knock on the door and loud voices float out to the back. More guests have arrived. My stepfather turns, peering at the house, before turning back to flip the meat on the barbecue. He's a quiet, stand-offish kind of guy, especially compared to my socialite of a mother, but he somehow manages to survive all the social arrangements we have. Grant is short and broad, solid in a way that makes the room feel smaller the second he walks in. His hair is a deep brown and thinning a little on top, but he combs it back neatly.

My mum is the complete opposite of Grant. Where he's quiet, she's all lightness and charm, as though she floats instead of walks. She's the picture-perfect housewife – the kind of woman who could smile for a magazine cover without needing photoshop. Her strawberry-blonde hair – so similar to my own – is always styled in soft curls that brush her shoulders, like she just stepped out of a salon. Her makeup is subtle but flawless: dewy skin, rosy cheeks, lips always glossed in a shade that matches whatever dress she's chosen for the day. She loves anything that looks 'effortlessly elegant', even though I know she puts a lot of effort in.

She's graceful in a way I'll never be. My mum knows everyone in town, remembers their birthdays, their kids' names, their favourite drinks. She hosts brunches, charity dinners, garden parties; her schedule is always full, always jam-packed with social events.

Standing next to Grant's stillness, she looks out of a commercial. Bright, warm, perfect. Even her voice goes higher around him, like she's constantly

performing and doesn't even notice. Sometimes I wonder how they ended up together. How her sunshine ended up tangled with his shadows. I'm convinced it's because of how wealthy he is, and with the way she smiles at him, I'm pretty sure this is the life she's always wanted.

Since we're moving to Brisbane next month, this is the last party we'll be hosting here. We'll only be a few hours away, so the social circle will still meet on occasions, but it's the end of an era. We've lived here for a long time. I was devastated about the move – something to do with my stepfather's work. I've been assured my new school offers an amazing track team, and that's all that matters to me in the long run, but I'm going to miss my best friends terribly. I love Black Water Cove, it's all I know, and moving to a new place terrifies me.

Grant glances over his shoulder, his thick eyebrows bending toward each other. Crow's-feet wrinkle the outer corners of his eyes and spread into thin lines that run down the side of his face.

'Where's your sister?' Grant asks.

Scanning the backyard, I notice she isn't among the clusters of people gathered. I shrug. 'Not sure. I'll go find her.'

'Bryn!' a shrill voice shouts. I pause and plaster a fake smile onto my face as my mother's best friend beelines toward me. Her bright red lipstick is so vibrant it gives me a headache. 'Look at those long legs! She will have a boyfriend before you know it.'

A blush kisses my cheeks as Mum smiles. 'She just met someone, she tells me!'

Swivelling her piercing eyes to mine, Anita beams. 'Oh, have you now?'

'It's nothing,' I mutter, not wanting to get into it. I didn't want to tell my mother about Ash in the first place, but I had to explain why I was gone for so long, and I didn't want to lie.

'Mmhhh.' Anita winks. 'I'll be back for details later.'

'Great.' I smile, and Mum gives me a warning look before her smile is back on and she's ushering everyone toward the table.

Exhaling, I make my way inside. After searching downstairs, I hurry up the steps. The only door closed is Isla's. I knock before entering. My sister looks a lot like me, but more enhanced: darker skin, lighter hair, bigger boobs, wider eyes. She is drop-dead gorgeous – the kind of beauty that has people staring openly in the street when we pass. I hate how aware I am of it. Isla has a way of turning everything into a competition. If I receive a

compliment, she must have three. If I do something well, she does it better. She looks up at me like she already knows exactly what I'm thinking, a not-quite-smile tugging at her mouth – more a smirk than anything else – and it's utterly infuriating.

'Hey,' I say, eyeing her outfit. She's dressed in ripped jeans and an oversized band t-shirt that drowns her eye-catching curves. Her hair is thrown up into a messy bun on the top of her head. She used to never be seen without a full face of makeup, a miniskirt, and heels. Now, it's as though she's doing everything she can to be the opposite. 'You coming down?'

I glance at my own outfit: a pale-pink dress that stops mid-thigh, with petite white flowers on it. Mum picked it out for me. She loves playing dress-ups with us, as if we are her own personal dolls.

'No.'

I lift my eyes. She's picking at her black nail polish, so chipped it barely covers half her nail. Isla is two years older than me, but sometimes it feels like more.

'Why not?'

'Don't feel well.'

I narrow my eyes. This is the third time in a row she's bailed on a family function. Our mum puts a lot of pressure on us to attend everything. We *must* be the picture-perfect family everyone wants. For a long time, we were, but something is different now. *Isla* is different. She used to be a carbon copy of Mum, as if it were a battle of who could be more perfect, but something has changed in her.

'What's wrong?' I ask, moving to the bed and sitting on the edge of it.

'I don't want to fucking go, all right?' she snaps, shoving to her feet and stepping away from me.

I flinch at her tone. 'What the hell?'

She folds her arms over her chest, and I look at them. 'What's on your arm? Are they bruises?'

'Fuck off and get out of my room!' she snarls at me, lunging toward me and pushing me so hard that I tumble off the bed. I cry out, throwing my hands out only just in time to catch myself.

'You're such a fucking bitch!' I hiss at her. I've never been one to swear and I'm shocked when the words leave my mouth. I stomp out of her room and slam the door so hard that it rattles the walls. Releasing a shaky breath,

I stride through the hall and down the steps. My stepfather is at the bottom of them, looking at me curiously.

‘What’s going on?’ he asks. ‘Where’s Isla?’

‘In her room. She said she doesn’t feel well.’ I sigh. ‘And she was a total asshole to me.’

‘Language.’

‘Tell her that,’ I mutter, before going back outside.

The cool afternoon air washes over me as I move things around on the table, arranging them correctly before plucking a grape from one of the fruit bowls, trying to shake off the encounter with Isla.

‘Can you go grab the napkins, love?’ Mum asks as she brushes past me, and I nod. I’m taking my time in the kitchen, enjoying the peace and quiet, when the doorbell rings. I push away from the counter and pad to the door, seeing a guy I don’t recognise standing there.

‘Bryn Walter?’ he asks.

‘That’s me,’ I say, eyeing the rose in his hand. He hands it over.

‘For you.’

‘For me?’ I echo, staring down at it in surprise. ‘Wow. Thank you.’

‘There’s a note,’ he points to the small white envelope. ‘Have a nice day.’

‘Thanks, you too,’ I reply distractedly. I run my thumb over one of the petals before I open the note.

For Bryn. I owe you my life. Meet me tonight, at the docks on East Side. 8 p.m.

– Ash

Biting my lip, I try to hide my smile.

This day just got a little bit better.

I slip out easily enough. My mother and stepfather are entertaining out the back. When I said I was heading to my room, they barely even acknowledged me. The music was loud, and six empty wine bottles were lined up on the kitchen counter – they won’t notice I’m gone. Throwing one leg over my bike, I push off the ground and silently cycle down the street, my hair flapping behind me in the cool wind. It only takes a few minutes to get to the docks.

Ash is leaning against the fence, dressed in all black, his hands dug deep into his pockets. A flutter of butterflies explodes in my stomach. His dark hair falls across his forehead as he glances up.

‘Hi,’ I say.

‘Hi.’

‘Thank you for the rose.’

His lips curve upward. ‘You’re welcome.’

‘How are you feeling?’

‘It hurts to breathe, but it’s whatever.’ He offers me a lopsided smile, a dimple appearing in his left cheek. He is so damn hot. ‘How was your day?’

‘It was fine, I guess. We had people around at the house all day. They’re still there.’

‘Sounds fun.’

‘It’s really not. My sister and I used to stick together to make it bearable, but ...’ I trail off, expelling a heavy breath through my nose.

‘But what?’

‘She’s been off lately. I don’t know what’s going on.’

‘Have you tried talking to her about it?’

‘Yeah, but she won’t let me in. We were super close once, but everything is different now. It feels like she hates me sometimes.’ Raking my fingers through my hair, I force the smile back on to my face. ‘Sorry. Didn’t mean to dump that on you.’

‘Don’t do that.’

‘Do what?’

‘Suppress what’s on your mind because you don’t think someone else cares for it.’

‘That’s what I’ve been taught to do my whole life,’ I say, meeting his piercing blue eyes. The icy blue reminds me of glaciers, startling against his dark features, and a little magnetic, making it hard to look away.

‘That’s bullshit.’

I smile. ‘It is, isn’t it?’

‘Totally.’

‘How’s things at your house? With your brother?’

‘Just another day in paradise.’

‘It must be scary. Being in the same house as him after what he did to you.’

‘It’s nothing new.’

‘Do your parents know?’ I ask. ‘Aren’t they concerned?’

‘It’s just my dad. He’s very absent from our lives. He’s deaf and on disability pension due to a fall at work. He basically just lies on the lounge

and drinks his days away. He has no idea what goes on in the house, let alone outside of it.'

I take a step closer. 'Oh, Ash, I'm sorry. That's awful.'

'It is what it is.'

'I know we just met, but, if you ever need help, you call me. Okay?' I say gently, placing my hand over his.

'Same to you.'

'I'm serious,' I press, my eyes boring into his. 'Let's have a code sentence.'

More books to choose from.

Look up **Lokepub** on Google and find a novel you like.

He raises an eyebrow. 'A code sentence?'

'Yeah. Like a sentence that we say to each other when we need the other.'

The corners of his lips twitch. 'Okay. Like what?'

'Like ... "Have you ordered pizza for dinner?"'

'But what if you genuinely wanted to know if I ordered pizza for dinner?' He grins.

'Well. I absolutely hate pepperoni. So if I say, "Can you order pepperoni?" you know I'm in trouble.'

'I don't like pepperoni either.'

'See? Works perfect.'

'Okay. Sure.' He smiles. 'And while we're going, if we want to talk to the other person but don't know how to start the conversation, let's say, "How's the weather doing where you are?"'

'Deal,' I smile.

He holds out his hand, and we shake. We stare at each other for a moment, and I let my eyes roam over his face. Even with all the cuts and bruises, I can tell he is extremely handsome. He has pretty blue eyes, long lashes, darker-than-midnight hair, and a jawline that could cut glass. He's tall. A lot taller than me.

The air is cold on my cheeks and I rub my hands together, shivering. I move closer to him. Our fingers brush and a jolt of nervous electricity shoots through me. He yanks his hoodie over his head and passes it to me wordlessly.

‘No.’ I shake my head. ‘Then you’ll be cold.’

‘Doesn’t matter.’

Smiling, I take it gratefully, sliding it over my body. It’s warm and smells strongly of something I can’t quite describe. I tug down the sleeves so they swallow my hands.

‘Does it suit me?’

‘Definitely.’ He grins. ‘Your parents don’t mind you being out late?’

‘They don’t know.’ I smile sheepishly.

‘I didn’t realise you were a bad girl,’ he teases.

‘They’re busy socialising. What they don’t know won’t hurt them.’

‘Mmhmm,’ he says. The sound is deep and comes from his chest.

‘What’re your parents like?’

‘My mum is full on. She wants everything and everyone to act perfect, even if things are falling apart. Like with my sister. She just tells everyone something different. She doesn’t care about what’s actually wrong, as long as she looks fine.’ I shake my head. ‘I don’t know how to explain it.’

‘And your father?’

I shrug. ‘Stepfather. He’s fine, I guess. Quiet. A little controlling. Strict, I suppose, but he’s fine.’

‘How long has he been around?’

‘About a year and a half.’

‘Around the length of time your sister’s been acting differently?’

I pause for a moment, blinking at the space ahead of me before turning my gaze to him. He’s already watching me curiously, a tilt to his head.

‘Yes,’ I say. ‘Now that you mention it.’

He nods slowly. ‘Maybe that has something to do with it.’

‘I ... never made that connection before.’

‘Might not be anything,’ he says.

A shiver rolls down my spine, and I straighten uncomfortably as my mind runs rapidly with questions. ‘I hope it isn’t.’

‘Me too,’ he replies quietly. He moves closer. ‘Can I have your number? So I can text you?’

A swooping sensation falls through my stomach as I nod, trying to appear casual. 'Sure.'

I put it into his phone. The screen is so cracked, I can barely see what I'm typing. As he pushes the phone back into his pocket, he rummages around for a cigarette and lights it before inhaling. He tilts it toward me.

'Want some?' he asks.

I blink at him. 'You smoke?'

'You don't?'

'No.' I shake my head. 'Aren't they expensive? And bad for you?'

'They are. A lot of things are bad for you.'

'How do you afford them? Do you work?'

He nods. 'Yeah. At the library. I work most nights.'

'Wow,' I say. 'I want to get a job, but with my practice and sporting events on weekends, I don't really have the time.'

'You're lucky that you have someone to support you.'

'I am.' I nod. 'I wish it was the same for you.'

He sucks in a long drag before exhaling a puff of smoke. It filters through the air, and I watch it fade from a cloud into nothing. I reach for the cigarette and inhale sharply. My throat burns and I cough loudly, almost dropping it.

Ash snickers, taking it from me. 'You need to ease into it, babe.' My stomach clenches at the word *babe*. 'Like this.'

He demonstrates inhaling twice, before handing the cigarette back to me. I do as he says, and this time, it's a bit smoother, but I cough again.

'Better.' He grins.

'That's disgusting.'

He shrugs. 'Yeah.'

'Since you work at a library, you like to read, then?'

'Yeah. I'm always reading. It lets me pass the time without spending too much money,' he replies.

'That's true. I read a lot. Romance and fantasy, mainly. What about you?'

'Thrillers and horrors. Fantasy from time to time. I do read a lot of non-fiction, though. I like to learn new things.'

'That's cool,' I say. 'All the boys in my class hate reading.'

'They're missing out.'

My phone vibrates against my leg, making me startle. I fumble for it, my heart dropping to my stomach when I read Mum's name on the screen.

There's plenty of leftovers. Are you hungry?
I can bring something up? X

Releasing a breath, I quickly type out a reply.

'I should go,' I say reluctantly. 'It was nice seeing you.'

'I'll walk you.'

We walk to my bike and he reaches for the handles automatically, pushing it along for me. I shoot him a grateful smile.

'Thanks for the flower. It was really sweet.'

'Well, you saved my life. The least I can do, really.'

Our arms graze, and the breath in my throat hitches. Slowly, he tangles his fingers through mine. My heart beats sideways in my chest as I try to keep my breathing even. His thumb strokes the side of my hand as he walks me home, the warmth of his skin searing into mine.

'This is it,' I whisper, my voice coming out shaky.

'Nice place,' he comments, surveying the house, eyes slightly narrowed as he takes in every corner, the neat lines of the windows, the polished front steps, like he's cataloguing it all, figuring out what it says about the people who live here.

'Thank you for walking me home.'

Stepping forward, he tucks a piece of my hair behind my ear. He gazes at me for a moment, before leaning down and pressing his lips to mine. I don't have time to think, don't even know how to prepare, because I've never been kissed before. The kiss is soft at first, like he's as unsure as I am, but there's heat there, a thrilling, magnetic pull that makes my stomach flip. I barely breathe, frozen between fear and something that feels dangerously close to desire.

Everything around us fades into nothingness. There's only him, only this moment, only the taste of him. It's faintly smoky, warm, intoxicating. I don't know what to do. I've never done this before. I don't even know *how*. I melt into it, letting the world shrink to the narrow space between us, to the pulse of his chest against mine. When he finally pulls back, just slightly, his forehead resting against mine, there's a sly smile on his lips.

'As good as I expected,' he murmurs.

I can't find words. I can't even breathe. I just stare, heart hammering, and realise I'll never forget this. I'll never forget him, or this moment.

'Goodnight, Bryn,' Ash says, the left side of his mouth twitching. 'See you soon.'

'See you, Ash,' I manage to force out, my head spinning. In a daze, I push the bike up my driveway, focusing on taking each step one at a time, so I don't somehow trip and make a fool of myself.

I can't wait to see that boy again.

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6

ASH

Now

I watch her from the shadows of the maze. The fog ghosts over the floor, swirling around my boots. She moves a little slow, as if dazed, caught somewhere between exhilaration and fear.

She's never seen me like this, but I've seen her enough for both of us. I've kept every small detail locked away, tucked into my memory like treasures no one else can touch. Her laugh, the way her hair curls ... I remember it all. Now, here she is, walking through my maze, exactly where I need her to be.

She reunites with her friends, Tess and Elodie, their voices shrill and excited, cutting through the low bass of the music. She smiles at them and shakes her head, still catching her breath. She's flushed, wide-eyed and shaky in a way that makes me ache to reach for her.

I can't believe it. I can't *believe* she's here. That she's standing there and doesn't know I'm the same boy she ran through the woods with all those years ago. The boy who was too reckless, too bold, too obsessed to let her go. I should let her go now. Let her leave, safe and unknowing.

But I don't. I can't.

I linger, hidden in the shadows, heart hammering, pulse thrumming. She's alive, beautiful, untouchable in her daze, and I want – need – to see everything, remember everything, imprint it all again like I did the first time.

The thought hits me: I can't let her slip away again.

She's mine.

I vanish further into the smoke, just another shadow in the maze, letting her think she's safe, letting her friends pull her away, but my eyes never leave her.

I've been waiting for this moment for a long time.

I'm not letting her get away again.

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7

ASH

Five Years Ago

The cool wind nips at my skin as I lean against the tree. I didn't ask for my hoodie back; I want it to be hers now. A reminder of me.

My lips throb, and the taste of her is still on my tongue, warm and sweet. It's a taste I'll never forget. Her lips, soft and sweet with curiosity, cling to my memory like the smoke to my lungs. I can still feel the heat of her mouth, her startled quick inhale, the way her pulse pounded against mine. Every detail of the kiss I've stored, replayed a dozen times, and already crave again. I run my tongue over the memory of her on my lips, tasting the faint trace of her perfume and the tang of the night air, the sugary-salty sweetness of her skin. It's intoxicating. Addictive. Dangerous.

When I close my eyes, she's there: that taste, that heat, that spark I've never felt before. It's not just her lips; it's her, all of her, condensed into something that's mine alone to remember, mine alone to chase.

I watch Bryn walk into her bedroom, a blissful smile on her face. She twirls in front of the mirror, running her hands down my hoodie, before resting her fingertips on her lips. I smile, feeling exactly what she does. The soft lamplight catches her hair as it falls around her shoulders, framing her face like a halo. Every movement is effortless, fluid, innocent, and yet pierces me straight through. She doesn't know I'm watching, and that gives me a different kind of thrill.

I memorise everything: the curve of her smile, the way her chest rises and falls with each gentle breath, the tiny sway of her hips as she twirls again. She radiates life, and I'm tethered to it, helpless and greedy all at once.

Her laughter drifts softly through the room when she catches her reflection in the mirror, her eyes sparkling with delight. I close my eyes for a moment, remembering again, feeling the heat of her presence like a live wire pressed to my skin. Every fibre of me aches to reach out to touch her, to be closer, but I can't. I don't want to rush things. I can't screw this up.

Girls like her don't ever notice boys like me, but somehow, she has.

The light goes out, and I slide to the ground, draping my arms over my knees. I rest my head against the side of the tree. Talking and laughter echo from the back of the house onto the street. It's obvious everyone has been drinking. After an hour or so, Ubers are called, and the guests leave couple by couple. The house is blanketed in darkness, and suddenly it's still. The night air prickles my skin. I glance down at the time. It's almost 2 a.m. Exhaling and rubbing my tired eyes, I keep watching. My insides clench uncomfortably when a dim light – from a phone, perhaps – lights up the hallway.

The figure is somewhat short and broad – the stepfather. Pushing to my feet, I glance around before darting quickly across the road. I slink against the fence, peering up, following his shadow as it moves across the hall. My breath clogs my throat as he passes Bryn's room before stopping at another. He steps inside the room. I squint at the dim light, trying to see what's on the walls. It's definitely a girl's room. Her sister's.

Feeling nauseous, I shake my head, wanting to tear inside the house and feel his blood coat my knuckles, but I don't. I inhale and inhale until it hurts. I stand, tightening my hands into fists before reluctantly leaving.

I need a plan.

I walk unhurriedly through the street. My eyes roam over every house, each dark window. None of them hold any interest. Only hers.

The street I live in is a lot livelier than those in the village. Loud music thumps from backyards, laughter booms, TVs blast at volumes way too high. I kick open my gate, hanging on its final hinges. With a groan, it tilts and tears from one of the hooks. A step creaks under my weight as I mount the porch stairs and slip through the front door. The TV is rumbling and my father is sprawled across the lounge, snoring, as usual. An empty bottle of bourbon lies on the floor beside him.

The house feels stale, as if it hasn't breathed fresh air in months. There's a suffocating stench of marijuana in the air. My stomach grumbles loudly and I move to the kitchen. Mouldy bread sits on the counter, sweating in the

humid air. Opening the fridge, I scan the empty shelves and sigh, closing the door.

‘Hey there.’

I startle, spinning on my heels to see a dark-haired girl dressed in a skimpy singlet and see-through lace panties. She smirks, her eyes travelling all over me.

‘Kaine didn’t tell me he had a cute brother.’ She bites her lip. Her hair is messy, trailing down her shoulders and resting just above her pebbled nipples, which are visible through the thin material of her singlet.

‘He’s sixteen,’ a voice snaps behind me. My brother appears, scowling, dressed in only a pair of black sweats. ‘And knows better than to touch what’s mine. Don’t you, Ash?’

I give him a sarcastic thumbs up in response. His eyes turn to me, narrowing into slits and flashing darkly with warning. I give him a surly look back before brushing past them and disappearing down the hall. A dark rage fills my veins, but I manage to hold it together while I shower, brush my teeth, and throw a pair of shorts on.

Collapsing onto my bed, I stare up at the ceiling, unable to get my mind off Bryn and her family. I fist my hands, digging my nails into my palms, before forcing my fingers to unfurl and flatten against the mattress.

Light footsteps walk down the hall and stop at my door before it opens. The girl I met earlier enters with a coy smile, slipping inside my room and closing the door. Exhaling, I turn to stare up at the ceiling, knowing my brother will come looking for her and all hell will break loose.

8

BRYN

Now

I'm surrounded by bright lights, thumping music, swirling fog. Everything around me demands my attention, but I can't stop thinking about the masked man.

We're halfway back to the rides when Tess nudges me.

'Bryn? You good? You look like you've seen a ghost.'

'I'm fine,' I say too quickly, adjusting the strap of my bag.

Elodie loops her arm through mine. 'Girl, something happened in that maze. You came out looking like you'd seen a real-life demon or something.'

'I was chased by this guy in a mask and he said my name. It wigged me out. He might be someone we used to go to school with ... But I haven't been here for years, I don't know many people who'd recognise me.'

The girls both glance at me, looking confused and intrigued.

'I don't know anyone who works here, and I know everyone.' Elodie frowns.

I shrug. 'Maybe they look at people's tickets, pair it with the photo we took on entry and then find the match. Really cement the fear in.'

'Seems a bit excessive,' Tess points out.

We move through the crowd. People laugh and scream, shoving past us in groups. My mind goes back to him, and a rush of heat floods me so fast I have to look away from my friends, hoping they won't notice.

'Seriously,' Tess says, peering at me in concern. 'You're really flushed. Do we need to sit down? Get food? Water?'

'I'm fine,' I repeat, weakly.

The truth is, I'm not scared. I should be. I absolutely should be, but all I can think about is the way he chased me, how close he stood, how steady his breathing was while mine is rapid. He seemed familiar in a way that doesn't make sense. Like *deja vu* I can't place. Or maybe I just don't *want* to place it.

I glance back toward the maze. Fog spills from the entrance, thick and patchy in the lights. The inside is pitch-black, punctured by a shifting mass of shadows and silhouettes as new groups wander in. He never appears, but my pulse jumps anyway.

Somewhere in that darkness, he's in there. For the life of me, I can't stop hoping he's still watching.

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BRYN*Five Years Ago*

Inhale, exhale, inhale, exhale.

I keep pushing forward, my feet hitting the ground in even thumps. My long ponytail swishes against my shoulder blades. Birds chirp over me, nestled on tree branches high above.

My pace slows when I reach the point in the forest where I first saw Ash. Flashes of the fight come back to me in waves, making me dizzy. I can't stop thinking about him and that kiss. I'd never been kissed before, and it was even better than I'd imagined it would be.

With my hands planted on my hips, I blow out a heavy breath, dabbing at the sweat on my face. My phone vibrates. Scampering to pick it up, I let out an excited squeal when I see his name.

Ash: How's the weather where you are?

I quickly type out a response, then finish my run with a wide grin on my face. My heart sinks when I reach my driveway. The garage door is open and my stepfather is there, piling things into boxes.

'What are you doing?' I ask breathlessly, staring at the full boxes scattered across the floor.

'There's been a change of plans,' he says gruffly, without meeting my eyes.

'What's that mean?'

‘We’re moving earlier than expected.’ He grunts, pulling a heavy box down from a shelf and sliding it across the floor to join the others.

Swallowing, I stare at them. ‘How soon?’

‘Go talk to your mother.’

Sighing, I head into the kitchen. Mum is doing the same thing: piling our utensils into boxes. I grab a Gatorade and take a long drink before facing her. She gives me a tight smile.

‘Things have changed, kiddo. Better get packing.’

‘When are we leaving?’

‘Monday.’

‘As in the day after tomorrow?’ I exclaim, feeling the walls close in around me. The plastic bottle pops in my tightening grip.

‘Save the scene, I’ve just dealt with this from your sister. Go and pack your things.’

I feel numb and a little dazed as I climb the stairs. Loud banging and huffs come from my sister’s room. I hover near her door, leaning on the doorframe.

‘What’s wrong?’

‘What’s wrong?’ She spins on her heel, glaring at me. Her hair is messy and she has deep, dark purple bags under her eyes. ‘I’m not moving anywhere with *them*. They can’t uproot our entire lives because of *him*.’

‘Grant?’ I ask. I’m assuming she’s referring to my stepfather and the new job.

‘Who else would I be talking about?’ she snaps in irritation. ‘Have a voice, for once. You don’t want to move just as much as I don’t.’

‘Mum knows what she’s doing. If she says this is the best thing for us, then I support that.’

‘Mum has no idea what the fuck is happening in this house.’

I stare at her. ‘What do you mean?’

‘Open your eyes. Neither of them are who they say they are.’

‘That’s enough.’ I startle at Grant’s deep voice. I pivot to see him standing behind me. I dart out of his way and glance back at Isla, whose face has paled significantly. ‘Bryn, go pack your things,’ Grant bellows.

Nodding, I slip past him, unsure what Isla’s words meant. Forcing the thoughts from my head, I exhale. My hands are shaking as I look around my room, wondering where I should start. My phone buzzes and I pull it out. Despite everything, I smile at his name on my screen.

Suddenly, my door flies open and Isla charges in. She glowers at me.

‘I fucking hate you.’

I balk, flinching back from her. ‘What?’

‘You’re a dumb, stupid bitch and I hate you.’ Her eyes flick to my phone and I quickly clutch it to my chest. She snarls, lunging forward. She plucks it easily from me and throws it hard at the wall. The screen shatters into a thousand tiny bits of glass, before the phone thumps harshly onto the wooden floor.

I gape at her, tears springing to my eyes. ‘What the hell is wrong with you?’

‘Why was it never you?’ she spits before stomping out of the room. She slams my bedroom door so hard, I’m surprised it doesn’t fall off its hinges. As usual, I’ve got no clue what she is talking about. I follow her out, blinking in shock. My stepfather steps out of her room, pushing up the sleeves of his shirt.

‘What is going on?’ I ask.

‘We’re leaving,’ he growls. ‘Today.’

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10

ASH

Now

The apartment is dark when I step inside.

I switch on the bathroom light, its harsh glow bouncing off the mirror and the black tiles. My reflection stares back at me. The mask is still hanging around my neck, and my face is streaked with sweat, fog residue, and layers of theatrical grime.

Bracing my hands on the counter, I exhale.

Bryn.

It's a name I've tried to forget, but in truth it's embedded in me like a wound that never quite closed.

I peel off the mask first, dropping it beside the sink. The cool air hits my skin, and for a moment I close my eyes, imagining her fingertips instead. I can still feel her pressed against the wall of the maze, her breath catching as I caged her in. Beneath where the mask sat, the paint is layered so thick it feels like a second skin. I drag my fingers through it, breaking it apart, wondering if she would've touched me like this, or flinched at the darkness underneath.

Turning on the tap, I splash warm water onto my face, watching the makeup bleed into dark rivulets that swirl down the drain. They seep away in black, grey, red layers of my Fright Night persona. It also happens to be my online alter ego. Grabbing a towel, I scrub harder, until my skin stings and my reflection comes up clear. I go about my routine on autopilot, my mind focused on only one thing ...

Bryn is back. After all these years. After I'd convinced myself she was gone, living some peaceful, boring life far away, but no, she walked straight

into Shadow Land Amusements, right into my maze, right into my hands like I've been wanting her to for years.

Leaning in closer to the mirror, I grip the edge of the sink as images of her flash behind my eyes. Her flushed cheeks, the dazed look she had when she stumbled out of the maze, the way she glanced back, as if expecting me to have followed her. Maybe I should have. I drag my fingers through my hair, pushing back the damp strands, and laugh under my breath.

All that waiting, and now she's here again.

'She has changed,' I whisper to my reflection. 'But she is still beautiful. Still mine.'

I shut off the light and walk into the living room, my eyes beginning to sting with exhaustion, even though the night isn't over for me. Working out and running are what I do in the early hours of the morning, when it's dark and no one is around. This town is far more exciting when everyone is asleep.

I'll find her again.

We will continue this cat and mouse game.

Tonight is only the beginning.

11

ASH

Five Years Ago

My fist slams into the punching bag over and over. Sweat drips down the back of my neck as I throw everything I have into each punch. Bryn stopped replying. We went from texting every minute, to radio silence.

Glowering, I stare out at the bright day. I can't go sneaking around the neighbourhood until it's dark, and this day has decided to go painfully slow. I take a long sip of water before going back to the punching bag. It's the only thing I can do right now to prevent me from going off the rails.

Upstairs, everyone is home, including friends of my brothers, who are nothing but morons who share one brain cell among the lot of them, their trashy groupies included. I grunt through each punch and manage to go a whole five minutes without checking my phone.

Where the hell is she? And what is she doing?

My phone sits on the workbench, screen dark, with no new notifications to light it up. I've checked it so many times that the battery's almost dead. I scroll through our last messages again, just to make sure I didn't miss something, some hint, some shift in our messages, but there's nothing. Her last reply was hours ago.

I rub a hand down my jaw. My heartbeat pounds through me, restless and uneven, like something hot and ugly clawing at my ribs. I can't sit still anymore. I shove over a stool so hard it tips, clattering against the cement floor.

The air down here is stale and dusty, but the basement is the only place that ever feels safe in this shitty house. Cracking my knuckles, I plant my feet and hit the bag as hard as I can. The chain jerks from impact. I hit it

again and again, the sound echoing off the concrete walls. Sweat starts gathering at my temples. With every punch I land, the same questions slam through my head: Why isn't she replying? Did I say something wrong? Has someone else got her attention?

My breathing becomes ragged, but I don't stop. Maybe she's with someone. Maybe she's laughing at my messages and ignoring them. Maybe – no, this is my paranoid brain convincing me of something that isn't true. Bryn is a nice girl, and we connected on a level that I never have before. I'm overthinking things, as usual.

I punch the bag until my knuckles scream and my arms shake. Pressing my forehead against the swaying leather, I shut my eyes.

'Just text back,' I whisper into the empty basement. 'Just tell me you're okay.'

My phone stays quiet. The silence stretches around me, the air thick with it. The longer it lasts, the further something inside me slips. Dread settles in my gut, cold and certain, because I know how people disappear. I know how quickly things can go wrong. I know what it feels like when the world starts taking things from you.

I don't like her stepfather, and I don't like her in that house with him.

Gripping the bag to stop its swinging, I lean my weight into it, breathing hard. Why would she ghost me? I run both hands through my hair, tugging until it hurts. It doesn't help. The silence keeps spreading, filling every corner of the basement like rising water. The worst part of all this is my mind. No matter how many times I hit the damn bag, I can't stop my thoughts from turning dark.

What if he's done something to her?

After exhausting myself to the point that I'm lightheaded and disorientated, I beeline for the shower and rinse off every bit of sweat and grime from my skin. I scrub my body, wincing as my cuts sting under the water. I run soap over them, enjoying the pain.

Unable to avoid the kitchen any longer, I slowly stroll down the hallway. Heavy smoke fills the air, and a rap song is blasting from the speakers. My father is nowhere to be seen. He's in his room, I guess. My brother and his friends fill the small lounge room. The girl from the other night is straddling my brother's lap. I barely glance her way. She tried that exact move on me, too.

‘Hey, cutie,’ she calls out. I don’t miss the anger swirling in my brother’s eyes. ‘Come hang.’

‘Would rather be hit by a bus, but thanks,’ I reply dryly.

A few of them snicker, earning glares from Kaine. One of the guys on the floor eyes my face.

‘Looks like you already have been.’

Ignoring him, I move through the kitchen. I don’t know why I bother – there’s no food, as usual. Glancing out the window, I see the sky is finally starting to darken. The group calls out to me again, but I slip out the door, letting it bang shut loudly behind me.

I order myself takeaway and eat it by the beach while I kill time. The dark waves crash violently against the rocks. I taste the salt in the air and lean back on the rock, watching joggers and walkers go by.

After I finish eating, I check my phone again, starting to feel angry, and more than a little worried.

Fuck it.

I bring up her contact and hit call. It goes straight to voicemail. I try again. Hissing, I jam the phone back into my pocket and push to my feet. I force myself to wait a moment to clear my head while I finish a cigarette, before I head to her house.

The street is unusually quiet as I walk down it, making sure to avoid nearing any lampposts. The house is completely dark. I stare at it, listening, but it appears that no one is home. Quietly, I pad across the street and head down the side of the house. I peer into the window, seeing empty rooms.

What the fuck?

I climb over the porch railing and silently walk to the back window. Gently, I peel back the flyscreen and push open the window before sliding inside. I use my phone torch for light as I walk through the rooms. My heart plummets to my stomach.

She’s gone.

12

BRYN

Now

I wake to the sounds of clinking mugs and soft voices drifting down the hallway. For a moment, I'm suspended between sleep and memory. Fog surrounds me; I hear pounding footsteps, a masked man whispering my name; I feel his hot breath against my cheek. My heart feels as though it's beating sideways, but then I open my eyes to find myself in my friend's spare bedroom. Soft morning light spills through the curtains in thin golden stripes, warming the blankets tangled around my legs. I exhale slowly, trying to calm my racing heart.

It was just Fright Night. Just an actor. Nothing to get worked up over.

Pushing myself out of bed, I throw on a hoodie and pad barefoot into the kitchen. Tess is perched on the counter cross-legged, her hair a mess of curls piled on top of her head. Elodie stands by the coffee machine, humming off-key as she pours espresso into three mismatched mugs.

'There she is,' Elodie says, handing me one. 'Sleeping Beauty, awake from the dead.'

The coffee is strong and hot, and it hits my system in all the right ways. 'Last night was intense,' I say.

'Are you still thinking about the dude in the maze?' Tess asks.

'Did you get it on or something?' Elodie says, waggling her eyebrows.

I choke on my coffee, causing them both to laugh. Leaning my hip against the counter, I attempt to play it cool, but every cell in my body is still buzzing with the memory of him: his warmth, his closeness, the way he said my name like he was waiting for me to recognise him. There was something so familiar and unsettling about his eyes.

‘I haven’t been able to stop thinking about it,’ I admit. ‘He seemed to know me. It was weird.’ I shake my head, as if that will help rid my thoughts of him. ‘It’s nothing. I just got spooked.’ I look down at my mug and notice Tess eyeing me from my peripheral.

‘I wouldn’t say you looked spooked,’ Elodie teases. ‘You looked more turned on to me.’

Heat rushes to my cheeks. Great.

Tess’s eyebrows rise sharply, as surprise flickers across her face. ‘My, my, does someone have a mask kink?’

‘I certainly do,’ Elodie pipes up when I fail to reply. ‘Why do you think I suggested we go?’

‘Fair point,’ Tess replies. ‘When I wasn’t running away, I did check a few of them out. Some of them were pretty hot.’

‘So he chased you. That’s it?’ Elodie probes.

My face gives me away. They both pause, exchange a glance, and then grin in unison.

‘Oh my *God*,’ Elodie squeals. ‘Something happened.’

‘No!’ I protest, flustered. ‘But he caged me in. It was scary, but in a sexy way.’

‘Love that!’ Elodie grins.

Tess nudges me gently. ‘You okay, though? You seemed a little shaken after.’

‘Yeah. I’m fine. It was just the adrenaline.’

I take another sip of coffee, trying to steer my thoughts to something else, but my mind keeps slipping back to the mysterious man in the mask. Thoughts of someone else threaten to consume me, but I shove them firmly back into the folder I’ve labelled ‘do not open’, because I simply can’t go down that road again. The masked man is not him, and I refuse to let him occupy any more space in my mind.

Elodie hops off her stool and starts rummaging through the cupboards. ‘We should make pancakes. I’m in a pancake mood.’

Tess groans. ‘You’re always in a pancake mood.’

‘That’s because pancakes are a lifestyle.’

I smile, grateful for the normalcy of the two of them. Their apartment is cramped and mismatched, decorated with op-shop furniture and photos bluetacked to the walls, collage-style. The smell of coffee lingers, mixing with the faint hint of pancake batter.

Tess is scrolling on her phone, mumbling about a new song, while Elodie leans back on the counter, drumming her fingers.

‘Oh! Shadow Land is doing a ticket giveaway on their TikTok. Should I enter and we go again?’

‘No thanks,’ Tess replies without looking up from her phone.

I pause mid-sip, my stomach twisting with a mix of nerves and ... something else. The idea of seeing him again feels inevitable the moment I think of it. I tell myself it’s just curiosity, nothing more.

‘I might enter,’ I admit, my voice quieter than I intended.

‘That’s the spirit! Come on, it could be fun, and who knows? Maybe you’ll see Mystery Maze Guy again.’ Elodie winks, nudging me with her elbow.

I flush, setting my mug down. ‘He probably does that with everyone and won’t remember me.’

Tess finally looks up, eyebrows raised. I avert my gaze, a little embarrassed at how obsessively I’m thinking about him. The thought of being back there, surrounded by fog and lights, with the sound of his footsteps just behind me, makes my stomach tighten in a way that is equal parts thrilling and terrifying. The way he said my name has me in a chokehold.

Elodie smirks. ‘Let’s both enter. Double the odds of winning.’

Biting my lip, I scroll through the Shadow Land page, scanning all the videos of actors prowling around the park, scaring people, and dressing up in terrifying outfits. I comment under the giveaway video, securing my entry into it, and a little thrill sparks through me. I *want* to see him again, even if I shouldn’t. Our moment in the maze would have meant nothing to him. He’s probably just an intense actor who takes his role very seriously. He won’t remember me, or care for a repeat of last night.

Or so I tell myself ...

I click on another video with almost one million views. It’s a quick montage of fog machines, people screaming on rides, and actors leaping out at unsuspecting visitors. Elodie scrolls too and suddenly brings her phone closer to her face, an amused smirk dancing across her lips.

‘Oh my God, their videos are so hot they could be thirst traps.’

I glance over at her screen and freeze. My stomach lurches. The videos are moody and cinematic: lots of close-ups, masked men leaning in, gestures designed to be provocative and seductive. My heart skips a beat

when a tall man dressed in all black slides across the floor on his knees, eliciting a terrified scream from the group of girls in front of him. He gracefully gets to his feet, turning to the camera and striding toward it menacingly.

My eyes are glued to the masked man in the video. The way he tilts his head; the slow, deliberate movements. The same mask. The same blue eyes behind it, piercing even in footage.

My heartbeat is loud in my ears. ‘Play that again.’

Elodie does as I say and afterwards, she pauses the video, hovering the screen under my nose. Leaning in closer, I stare at the username the Shadow Land Amusements account has tagged: AshOfNight.

I can’t breathe.

Ash.

It can’t be him.

But he knew my name.

Tess notices my sudden silence. ‘Bryn? What is it?’

‘That’s him,’ I whisper, my throat suddenly paper dry. ‘The one who chased me and pinned me to the wall.’

‘Woah,’ Elodie murmurs, eyes widening. ‘He is *hot*.’

I nod slowly, heart hammering, every memory of last night flashing through my mind in vivid colour. The heat of his hands, the intensity of his gaze locked on mine, the way he said my name in that deep drawl of his. My thoughts spiral to Ash, the boy I have not let myself think about for a long time.

It can’t be him, can it?

‘Hot, but intimidating,’ Tess says.

Something about the masked man and our encounter has rattled me. Part of me wants to block the account and not give it any more of my time, while the more curious part of me wants to know more, and wants to go back to see him. I need to know if it’s *him*.

We scatter to our rooms to get ready. I rummage through my drawers, plucking out an outfit. I try to force thoughts of last night out of my head, but I can’t resist taking a peek. Pulling out my phone, I unlock it, swipe to open TikTok, and type his username into the search bar: AshOfNight.

The account pops up immediately, and ... wow.

He’s famous. Like really famous. His videos are everywhere. There are clips of him in his costume, jumping out at people, running through fog,

and close-ups of him leaning in just like he did last night. He looks mysterious, dangerous, and weirdly playful. There are thousands of comments under each of his videos.

He's literally my nightmare and my dream all at once 🔥
stopppp he's too hot for this world 🤪
i would let him jump scare me anytime 🙈
the way he moves 😭💧
mask or no mask ... raw
how is he allowed to be this sexy and terrifying at the same
time
tears are running down my thighs
he's a whole vibe 🧡
i'm dead. absolute perfection 🤖

I scroll and scroll, unable to peel my eyes off him. I watch a clip from last week of him creeping through the maze, the camera cutting to the terrified reactions of the guests. The way he moves, the way he looks through the mask ... it's the same magnetic energy, the same teasing dominance, that had me frozen in the maze. The next video is of him adjusting his gloves, leaning toward the camera, a smirk visible underneath the mask. My stomach twists. Every shot of him makes my pulse spike. There's a flash and then suddenly he's crouched low, staring at the camera, whispering in that same husky voice I recall from last night.

'You never know who's watching ...'

Heat creeps into my cheeks. I want to pretend the way he moves doesn't feel familiar. Pretend the sound of his laugh isn't hauntingly close to one I've spent years trying to forget. It's ridiculous. Plenty of men have dark hair, are tall, and smirk like they know exactly what they're doing to you. But every time I convince myself it can't possibly be him, I find another reason to doubt it. Another gesture, movement, a tiny detail that twists something uncomfortable in my chest. I refuse to mention any of it to my friends. They'll tell me not to go back, if it's him. Because of what he did.

So I keep scrolling instead, pretending I'm just as curious as everyone else, for entirely different reasons.

There's another video, an older one, where he and another masked man advance together, unhurried, like predators stalking their prey.

at the same damn time
The mask ... the makeup ... it's all staying on
You just know they know what they're doing 

There are hundreds of people in the replies losing their minds, and the responses get dirtier the more I scroll. I can feel my cheeks heating. Part of me wants to close the app, pretend I don't care about any of it, but another part – the part I can't fight – wants to watch everything.

Every video. Every angle. I need to know if it's really him, after all this time.

Looking at him feels different to watching other famous people online because I know he's real. He exists. He's out there, only fifteen minutes from here, and I bet he's working again tonight.

I keep scrolling.

And I can't stop.

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13

BRYN

Five Years Ago

The house is too perfect. It has high ceilings, polished wooden floors, and walls painted a white so stark it gives me a headache if I stare too long. The kitchen has sleek marble countertops, stainless steel appliances, and cabinets that close silently no matter how hard you try to slam them.

From the balcony, you can see fancy cars glide along the streets, and neighbours walking by with designer bags and outfits that drip with luxury. Everything is new, clean, and too orderly. It doesn't feel like home. Our last house was fancy too, but it still felt like ours. Every step I take echoes across the cavernous space, making it feel even bigger and colder. Grant hired an interior decorator, throwing away all our previous furniture, and now the house feels cold and sterile, like it was ripped straight from a catalogue.

I feel as though everything has been taken out from under me: my friends, school, the track team ... Ash. I only met him very recently, but he's already left an impact on me. I would have loved the opportunity to get to know him more, and I'm worried about him. His home life sounds less than ideal, and I'm concerned that he doesn't have anyone looking after him.

Pressing my forehead against my bedroom window, I try to find warmth in the sunlight, but it only highlights the hollow feeling in my chest. Grant insists that the move is going to be a 'fresh start', not that I even understand why we need one. Things have been a little tense at home lately, but it seems quite dramatic to leave so suddenly and uproot all our lives.

Isla and I used to be close when we were younger, and we were always there for each other, but now she has completely shut me out – she's turned into someone I don't recognise. I could handle whatever happened as long as I had her, but now that she's cut me off, I feel lost. She's here too, living in the same new house, adjusting just like I am, and yet she feels so far away.

I miss the old Isla. The one who'd tease me, who'd sneak into my room at night just to talk about nothing. She made me feel like I mattered and that I wasn't alone. Now, I try to talk to her, but she is drifting through her own world, and every glance she gives me feels careful and guarded. It's like living with a toxic, jealous friend who you should probably cut out of your life to protect yourself, but can't, because she is family. We're supposed to be in this together. We've always been each other's anchor, a safe place for the other, but now, I feel completely alone.

Leaving my room, I find Isla standing at the kitchen counter, her hands wrapped around a mug. Once again, she isn't dressed in her usual revealing clothes. She is in an overworn hoodie, a pair of mismatched socks, and her hair is ratty.

'Hey,' I say softly.

She flinches before turning to face me, a strained smile on her face.

'Morning.'

I lean against the counter beside her, trying to pretend that everything is normal. 'Did you sleep okay?'

'Fine,' she answers after a moment. 'Don't love the new house.'

'Me neither.' My fingers dance across the countertop, a little surprised she's bothering to make small talk, since she basically just shouts in my face these days. 'Are you doing okay?'

'Yeah,' she replies dismissively. 'Just a lot on my mind.'

There's always a lot on her mind these days. School. Moving. Adjusting. That's what she says, anyway, but her eyes dart toward the hallway – the part of the house that leads toward our parents' room – and something in her expression flickers. Something she hides before I can catch it. I study her for a second, but she turns away, moving to the fridge.

'Want breakfast?' she asks as she pulls out fruit and yogurt.

'Sure,' I say, even though I haven't had much of an appetite since the move.

As she chops strawberries, I notice the faint tremble in her fingers. It isn't enough for most people to see, but I notice it because she's Isla, and I've always known her better than anyone.

'Are you sure you're okay?' I ask quietly.

She freezes, knife in hand, for half a second. Then she forces another small smile. 'Just tired.'

A lie. I can feel it settle in the space between us, as if the lie is physically hanging there. She slides the cutting board away, clearing the counter with quick, distracted movements. She won't meet my eyes as she keeps her hands busy. I swallow down the hurt, that sinking feeling of being shut out by the one person who's always been my home. I want to reach out, push gently, and tell her she doesn't have to pretend with me. I don't know what's happening with her, and I don't know how to help. She won't let me in. Silence stretches between us as my eyes burn with tears. Finally, Isla sighs and brushes a loose strand of hair behind her ear.

'I'm going to shower,' she says softly, already stepping away.

'Okay,' I whisper, a tear falling down my cheek.

She pauses at the doorway as if she wants to say something else, but she doesn't. I stare after her, the ache in my chest deepening. I've never felt further from her.

She's slipping away, and I don't know how to hold on.

The box is still sitting on my doona, its glossy packaging torn open, and the new phone is in my hand. I was relieved that Mum agreed to replace the one that Isla smashed, even though I still haven't received any sort of explanation or apology from her. The entire situation has me baffled.

The phone boots up and I exhale in relief when I see all my old information there. Moving to my contacts, I type in: Ash.

I stare at his contact. It's been a few days now, and he probably thinks I ghosted him. The thought makes my stomach twist. Even worse, he might have forgotten all about me. After shooting off a quick text to the group chat with Tess and Elodie telling them I finally have a new phone, I sit down on my bed, legs suddenly weak, and hover my thumb over the screen. My heart hammers.

I hit call before I can talk myself out of it.

'Hello?'

His voice sends a shiver down my spine. It's deeper than I remember.

‘Hi,’ I murmur, hating how shaky I sound. ‘It’s Bryn.’

‘I know.’ His voice lifts, warm in a way that makes me melt. ‘I was worried about you. Are you okay? I went by the house and it’s empty.’

‘Yeah.’ I force a nervous, breathy laugh. ‘My phone broke. I wasn’t ignoring you. I couldn’t message anyone and then my stepfather decided to bring forward the move. It all happened very fast.’

He exhales softly. ‘Well, I’m glad you’re all right. You quite literally vanished,’ he says, sounding concerned. ‘I thought I did something.’

‘No, you didn’t.’

‘I’m happy you called,’ he says finally. ‘Things haven’t been good here.’

My cheeks heat and my stomach flutters. I look around my perfect, empty room and for the first time since moving here, I don’t feel so alone. Talking to him makes me feel as though at least someone’s in my corner right now.

‘What’s going on?’ I ask.

‘A social worker is trying to track me down. My dad is a deadbeat. My brother is psychotic. I feel like I’m barely keeping my head above water, and then when you disappeared, I thought I was going crazy. That maybe I had imagined you after all. I did take a pretty good beating to the head.’

‘I’m definitely real, Ash,’ I whisper. ‘I’m so sorry that you’re going through all of that. I can’t even imagine.’

There’s a soft rustle on his end of the line. I imagine him in his room, leaning back on his bed, his hair falling into his eyes.

‘Tell me everything I missed.’

I smile and begin to talk.

14

ASH

Now

The apartment is quiet when I walk inside after another shift, as always. The place is nice. Much better than the shithole I grew up in. It's sleek and immaculate, something my masked alter ego has afforded me – a life I never expected to have.

Who knew that sliding around on my knees with paint on my face, scaring people half to death, would send viewers into such a frenzy? Collaborations, brand deals, and all sorts of endorsements come my way daily because of it. It's kind of surreal, considering I'm such an antisocial person in real life.

I drop my bag, the weight of my costume still clinging to me, the last traces of fake blood staining my wrists. I have to wonder what my neighbours must think when they see me coming home after midnight, with fake blood splattered across me and ghostlike makeup still thick on my skin.

Crossing the room, I open the window to get some air, but it doesn't help. The sounds of chatter, music, and laughter from the bar across the street are reminders of my lack of social life. I try to shift my thoughts elsewhere, but my mind keeps circling back to Bryn. How fun it felt to chase her the other night, knowing I made her heart race. Her pretty green eyes were so wide and innocent, even after everything.

I frown when I hear footsteps in the hallway outside my apartment, followed by a harsh rap of knuckles against my front door.

‘Yo, Ash. Open up.’

Reluctantly, I open the door just enough to see two guys that used to spend a lot of time with my brother. They are wearing their typical fake-leather jackets and cheap cologne, and their eyes shift over everything in my apartment, as though they're assessing what's worth stealing. These are two faces I swore I'd never see again once I cut ties with my family, but here they are.

'Your brother around?' Vince asks.

My jaw flexes in irritation. 'You know exactly where he is, and you both know I don't speak to him.'

'Yeah, yeah,' Trent scoffs. 'Funny thing is, people say you still talk to him. Do some of his dirty work now that he's behind bars. His name still gets around, and yours ain't far behind it.'

There it is. The curse of my bloodline. It doesn't matter how far I ran all those years ago, whose couch I slept on, or how many jobs I juggled – I will always be *his* brother. Coming back to Black Water Cove was not an easy choice to make, but I decided that he has no control over my life anymore. I refuse to give him the power or satisfaction. It was always going to be worth dealing with this kind of shit if Bryn returned, and much to my luck, she has.

I clench my fists and force a steady breath. 'What do you want?' They exchange a look.

'Just passing through,' Trent says. 'Heard you were back in town. Thought maybe you'd know who he's been working with.'

'I don't,' I snap. 'I don't care for him or his business.'

Vince, the taller of the two, inclines toward me, breathing stale beer into my face. 'Right. But his name follows you whether you care or not. People get nervous when a Vale pops back up.'

I open the door a little wider and stare him dead in the eye. 'Then people should know not to fuck around with one.'

An unfriendly grin spreads slowly across his face. 'Careful, Ash. You look a lot like him when you're angry.'

The words hit deeper than I want them to. The men turn, disappearing down the hallway. I stay in the doorway long after they're gone, anger swirling bitterly in my gut.

Finally, I shut the door quietly, lock it and lean against it. My pulse is still running a little fast from the visit. Two of my brother's 'friends' – and I use that term very loosely – think they can intimidate me. They don't know me

at all. I've been in darker places than this and faced a lot worse. Their veiled threats are nothing compared to what I've survived, and if they had taken even one step toward me, their faces would have made contact with the cricket bat I keep beside the door.

The adrenaline begins to fade, but I need to unwind. I reach for my phone, seeking my usual comfort: social media, my little digital playground.

My eyes widen. Bryn has followed my anonymous account where I post all my scare actor masked adventures. Clicking on her profile, I go to her latest video. It's quite an old daily vlog. I brush the screen with my finger, memorising the new angles of her smile and the way her eyes catch the light. I press play on the video.

'Come spend a day in the life with me,' Bryn says to the camera, her voice bright and bubbly. She's walking down a quiet suburban street, the sky behind her pale with early morning light. A handbag hangs off one of her shoulders, and her hair is pulled back into a low bun. She's dressed for work in tailored pants and a neatly tucked-in crisp white blouse. She's almost unrecognisable from her teenage self. The Bryn I knew lived in ripped jeans and oversized hoodies, her hair always loose and tangled from the wind. But we were teenagers then, unapologetically ourselves, and the future was something distant and abstract.

This Bryn is grown up. She's polished, like she belongs in the city she's walking through. She pauses at the tram platform and turns the camera back to herself, smiling. The morning light reflects in her eyes and, for a second, I forget to breathe. Her early twenties suit her. There's a quiet confidence about the way she moves, a steadiness that wasn't there when we were younger. Back then, everything about Bryn was restless energy. She had loud laughter, messy hair, and made impulsive decisions. She'd talk so fast I could barely keep up. Now she looks composed, like she's grown into herself.

The clip jumps. She's on the tram now, the windows flashing with blurred trees and houses. Bryn sits by herself, one leg folded neatly over the other, a book open in her lap. Every so often she glances up at the camera and smiles. The video transitions to the next clip.

'Mandatory coffee stop,' she says, filming the cup in her hand as she walks through the city streets. The rest of the vlog moves through her day in little pieces: a mirror selfie in an elevator; a quick clip of her desk at the

marketing office, computer screen glowing while she types. Her workday consists of emails and meetings, the quiet rhythm of a nine-to-five. Later, she's back on the tram, golden sunset light filling the carriage.

The final clips are at home. Bryn stands in a small kitchen beside her mum, the two of them laughing while stirring something in a pan. After dinner she films her desk, which is littered with sketchbooks, her open laptop, plus a digital drawing tablet glowing softly.

'Time to work on my graphic design course,' she says to the camera. 'One day I'll escape assessments and deadlines, I swear.'

The video ends with her smiling and waving into the lens. I grin too. I hope she enjoyed our little bit of fun the other night. I hope she wants to come back for me. Given she has found me online and is clearly interested in watching my videos, I think it's safe to say she's intrigued. I wonder if she's made the connection yet. A long time has passed since we were teenagers. I've got my own game now, one I play with patience, and Bryn will have to follow my rules.

I scroll again, watching, waiting, a rush beginning to curl in my chest. My thumb hovers over the 'follow back' button, a simple tap that could close the gap and spark a whole chain of surprises, since I don't follow anyone back. Part of me wants to leave it, but the larger, more dominant part of me wants to toy with her. I'm still obsessed, even after all these years. The thought of her discovering who I am sends lightning bolts of anticipation through me. I can feel the exhilaration crawl up my spine as I type a comment, then delete it. No, that's too forward. I could slide into her DMs, but that would be too bold and reckless. I need to be patient and not ruin the surprise so soon.

Settling back into the lounge, I continue to thumb through her page. She doesn't post much anymore. I stare at her username: TheRealBrynCarmichael. Carmichael? I frown in confusion. That's not right, she's Bryn Walter. That's the name I remember, the name everyone knew her by back then. I start digging, searching through tagged photos, comments, and accounts she follows. It doesn't take long before things start to click into place. Carmichael is her mother's maiden name. I scroll further, piecing together fragments like a puzzle. There's an old post mentioning a funeral, a sympathy comment buried under a photo from years ago of Grant. Her stepfather. Grant *Walter*. A few months after the funeral, Bryn's old account went quiet. She must have started over completely,

making new accounts using the name Carmichael. I never knew Walter was not her original name. I wonder why she went by that. She once mentioned her father briefly, and not kindly. Maybe the name was part of that – something chosen, instead of inherited. The answer settles into place. Of course. That's why I could never find her: Bryn Walter vanished years ago, and Bryn Carmichael took her place. No wonder she became a ghost.

Letting myself be consumed by this girl yet again, I look through every photo, every video, every comment. Opening her DMs, I almost send one, but I back out once more, tossing the phone onto the lounge beside me. I let out a low chuckle. Oh, how satisfying it will be to play this game.

In the quiet darkness of my apartment, the thrill is mine alone. Bryn has returned to my orbit, unaware that I'm already clutching her in my claws. That knowledge tastes sweeter than any spotlight, or any applause from my fans.

When her curiosity finally drags her toward me, I'll be ready.
I'm always ready for her.

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15

ASH

Five Years Ago

The yelling from downstairs rattles the walls. My brother's voice is deafening as it clashes with someone else's. I've heard enough of it tonight. Enough of everything. I can't breathe in this house anymore. Reaching for my hoodie, I pull it over my head and slip through my bedroom window. The night swallows me, and I melt into the shadows, my favourite place to be. The only sound I can hear, other than the buzz of streetlights, is the padding of my footsteps on the pavement as I make my way through familiar streets. Each step I take is careful.

The abandoned house sits at the end of the block, dark and lifeless. Her family left only a week ago, so no one's moved in since. It stands as tall and pristine as it did before, but the windows stare like empty eyes onto the street, emitting nothing but darkness, unlike the soft glow that used to come from it. The vibrant gardens that wrap around the front of the house are starting to wither.

I slip through a side gate that's been left slightly ajar, its hinges whining softly under my careful push. I've traced this house already, so I easily slink around the back, avoiding the areas with automatic lights, and get to the window near the back sliding door. Shrugging my backpack off my shoulder, I glance around before curling my fingers around the frame, but this time it doesn't budge.

I pull out my t-shirt and wrap it around my knuckles. Plunging my fist into the window, it breaks easily and, somehow, quietly enough. I pause and strain my ears, listening out for someone who might have heard, but other than the neighbour's TV, I don't hear anything. A dog in the distance lets

out a loud, startled bark, which his owner quickly yells at him for, and then everything dies down once more. With access now to the inside latch, I unlock the window before sliding it up and slipping inside, careful not to land on any of the broken glass.

It's eerily silent in here, and a faint scent of baked goods still lingers. Or maybe I'm just imagining that. I make my way up the stairs, tiptoeing until I reach Bryn's room. It's bare now, but I look around the room anyway, remembering the posters she had on the wall, the record player on her desk, and the vine plant that twisted down her bookshelves. I mean, I never actually stepped foot in here, but I studied its details from afar.

Now, it's empty. There is no furniture, no lights, no warmth, just my shadow stretching across the walls. I sink onto the floor, my back against the corner where her bed used to be, and let the silence wrap around me. It's much nicer than the loud heavy metal music and shouting that I'd be hearing at home.

I pull my knees up, resting my chin on them, and let the night creep in through the open window. A small, bitter smile tugs at my lips. I don't know how long I'll stay tonight, but I don't care. I want to feel close to her, and I don't want to be anywhere near my house right now. Tracing my fingers along the floorboards she once paced, I imagine her here, going about her routine.

Lying down on my back, I stretch out, and my fingers brush something. I turn my head to find a thin chain glinting faintly under the moonlight. I pick it up carefully, inspecting it. It's a bracelet, thin and delicate, with a tiny charm shaped like a cherry, matching the earrings she was wearing the day we met. I turn it over slowly between my fingers, feeling the coolness of the metal that once rested against her skin. I tuck the bracelet into my pocket, a secret reminder that she existed in this world, here in this room, before she was pulled away from me. Tonight, I am a shadow in her room, a ghost in the memory of her life, and for these few hours, that's enough.

I curl up against the wall. The quietness of the night passes over me, and for the first time tonight, I feel calm. It's refreshing to not need one eye open while I sleep or have to look over my shoulder. However, since I'm not used to the quiet, sleep doesn't come easily. Dipping my hand into my pocket, I press my fingers against the bracelet. My chest tightens, a mix of longing and exhilaration that refuses to settle. Eventually, I drift off to somewhere between a memory and a dream. In my mind, she's here with

me, smiling at me from the corner of the room, unaware of the dark thrill I carry just beneath my surface. I reach for her in the dream, and she reaches back, but remains just out of my grasp.

My lips twitch into a half-smile as I sink deeper into the quiet obsession that is consuming me like a disease.

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16

BRYN

Now

The air outside is warm, and the street is buzzing with late-afternoon energy as the three of us drift from shop to shop. Elodie walks a few steps ahead, talking with her hands the way she always does, her voice bright and animated. Tess lingers beside me, quieter than usual. It pains my heart to know she's hurting.

'Okay,' Elodie says suddenly, stopping outside a boutique window and turning toward us with a dramatic sweep of her arm. 'Birthday shopping. We are not leaving this street until I find something worthy of my twenty-first.'

'You say that like we didn't just spend an hour in the last store,' Tess murmurs.

'Yeah, well, that one only had boring options, but I still had to try them all on, just to see.'

'They didn't have anything sparkly,' I point out.

'Exactly,' Elodie says, pointing at me. 'You get it.'

We step back onto the street a few minutes later, empty-handed, Elodie complaining loudly about the lack of taste in this town.

'Honestly,' she says, tossing her hair over her shoulder. 'Do people here want me to look amazing or not?'

'Maybe they're trying to protect the rest of us,' I tease.

We're halfway down the street when I hear someone call my name.

'Bryn?'

I turn in surprise. Ryan stands a few feet away, one hand shoved into the pocket of his jeans, the other holding a takeaway coffee. He looks almost

exactly the same as he did the other day: tall, with a lazy smile and that same confident energy he carried back in school.

‘Hey,’ he says, his smile widening when he realises it’s definitely me.

‘Ryan.’ I smile. ‘Hi.’

Elodie’s eyes flick between us immediately, interest sparking. ‘And hello to you, too,’ she says dryly. ‘I’m standing right here, you know.’

‘Hey, Elodie,’ Ryan says sheepishly. ‘Tess.’ She offers him a polite smile. He glances back at me, and I can feel the weight of his attention. ‘How is it being back in town?’

‘We’re on a very important mission,’ Elodie cuts in, nudging my arm.

Ryan’s brows lift. ‘Oh yeah?’

‘Searching for a birthday dress for yours truly.’

He laughs softly. ‘Right. Serious business then.’ His gaze flicks back to me. ‘Are you in town for long?’

‘Not really sure yet.’

Ryan nods slowly, his gaze lingering just a little longer than necessary. ‘Well,’ he says, rubbing the back of his neck. ‘I’m still keen for that catch up sometime. Coffee, dinner ... something like that. If you’d want to.’

‘Oh. Sure,’ I say. ‘That sounds nice.’

Elodie clears her throat loudly. ‘Okay,’ she says, looping her arm through mine. ‘Back to the mission.’

Ryan laughs. ‘I’ll see you around.’

‘Bye,’ I say.

We walk on, and the second we’re out of earshot Elodie grabs my arm.

‘Excuse me,’ she hisses. ‘Ryan is so cute! Please tell me you’re into him.’

‘I don’t know.’

‘Umm ... hello? Did you see those muscles? Those eyes? Talk about tall, dark, and handsome. Ryan *still* has a crush on you after all this time. So cute.’

Tess lets out a quiet laugh beside us. ‘He was definitely flirting with you,’ she says. ‘He is sweet.’

I shake my head, but I can’t stop the small smile tugging at my mouth.

Elodie points ahead suddenly. ‘Oooh. That place.’

The shop has darker lighting than the others, the window display filled with black lace, leather dresses, and an array of dark, gothic-looking accessories.

‘Yes,’ she says approvingly. ‘This is exactly the shop I’ve been looking for.’

Inside, it’s even edgier than it appeared. Clothes hang in rows of deep reds, blacks, velvet, and silk. My fingers brush along the fabrics as we move through the racks.

‘Elodie, this is very you,’ Tess says, holding up something sparkly, possibly the only sparkly dress in this shop, which is why I’m a little surprised Elodie chose it. She does have a darker vibe about her, but she has always loved flashy, sparkly dresses. Anything that draws the eye.

Elodie wrinkles her nose. ‘Too much sparkle, if there is ever such a thing.’ Then she stops suddenly. ‘Oh my God.’

I look up to see her holding a dress, shaking it in my direction. It’s a deep, rich red that seems to glow under the soft lighting.

‘You have to try this,’ she says. ‘It’s so you.’

I hesitate, a memory flashing through my mind immediately. Ash. The way he used to look at me when I wore red. My stomach twists at the sudden thought.

‘Bryn,’ Elodie presses. ‘Try it.’

I take the dress. ‘Fine.’

The fitting rooms are at the back of the store, separated by thick curtains instead of walls. Stepping inside one, I pull the curtain closed behind me. For a moment, I just stand there, holding the dress up against myself, before I place it on the stool and begin to undress, pulling my top over my head then sliding my jeans down my legs. The air feels cool against my bare skin. My eyes sweep over my reflection. A strange feeling crawls up my spine, as though I’m being watched.

I look toward the small gap in the curtain, and for a brief second, I swear I see something: a tall figure, standing unnervingly still, behind a dark mask. The very same mask I saw in the haunted maze, but instead, there is no gothic makeup underneath. It’s just the mask between me and him.

A rush of heat floods me, my pulse roaring suddenly loud in my head. For a moment I can’t move, can’t even breathe properly, locked between panic and something else I don’t quite understand.

That’s impossible.

My body reacts anyway. Heat spreads across my skin, and something dark and confusing curls in my stomach. Why does part of me ... *like* this? Why does the danger make my heart race in a way that isn’t entirely

fearful? What is wrong with me? I swallow, unable to tear my eyes away from the mask.

‘This is weird,’ I whisper under my breath, forcing myself to move forward. Slowly, I push the curtain open wider. The other fitting room is empty, and so is the hallway. There is no masked figure. There is no one watching. Just a shop assistant walking toward me, brows knitted together.

‘Hi,’ she says gently. ‘Is everything okay?’

I blink, feeling uncentered for a moment, my heart still pounding. ‘Yeah,’ I say slowly, mentally shaking myself.

I glance around once more, confirming there is no one else here. The worker smiles politely. Stepping back inside the small fitting room, I ease the curtain closed again. My hands tremble slightly as I put the red dress on over my head. My mind keeps circling the same thought.

Did that really just happen, or was it all in my head?

I turn toward the mirror. The red is striking against my skin and doesn’t seem to clash with my hair. For a second, I hear Ash’s voice in my head again.

You look good in red.

‘Bryn?’ Elodie calls from outside the curtain. ‘Are you alive in there?’

Exhaling, I force myself back to the present. ‘I’m fine,’ I call back.

‘Come out then,’ she says. ‘We need to judge.’

Taking another shaky breath, I pull the curtain open. Elodie’s eyes immediately light up.

‘Oh my God.’

Tess looks up from the rack she’s browsing through, and her expression softens. ‘That’s really nice,’ she says.

‘Nice?’ Elodie scoffs dramatically. ‘It’s criminal how good that looks on you.’

Heat creeps up my cheeks.

Tess tilts her head thoughtfully. ‘You look confident in it,’ she says.

I glance down at myself. ‘I’ll get it,’ I say, before I can overthink it.

‘Victory. Now we just have to find a dress for me, which I’m starting to think is impossible at this point.’

‘You’ve tried on three,’ Tess says mildly.

‘Three terrible ones.’

‘You said the green one was “acceptable”.’

‘Acceptable is not birthday worthy,’ Elodie insists, already turning back toward the racks.

I slip back into my clothes while she storms off in search of something better. When I step out of the fitting room again, she’s halfway across the store, aggressively flipping through hangers. Tess lingers near a rack of softer colours, her fingers brushing lightly over the sleeves of a dress hanging near the end.

‘That one is nice,’ I say, nodding toward it.

She glances down at it like she’s only just realised she’s been touching it. It’s a simple, dark-blue backless dress with long sleeves. It would look incredible on her.

‘Oh,’ she says quietly. ‘I wasn’t really looking for anything.’

‘You should try it,’ I say.

Elodie pops up beside us suddenly, eyes narrowing at the dress like she’s assessing it.

‘Yes,’ she says immediately. ‘Tess, that’s a good one.’

Tess hesitates. ‘I don’t know ... backless is a little daring for me.’

‘Try. It. On,’ Elodie says, already pushing the hanger into Tess’s hands.

A few minutes later, Tess steps out of the fitting room, smoothing the fabric over her hips. The dress fits her perfectly. Elodie lets out a low whistle.

‘Okay,’ she says. ‘Where have you been hiding that body?’

Tess rolls her eyes, but there’s a faint pink blushing her cheeks.

‘It’s comfortable,’ she says. ‘Surprisingly.’

‘You look really good,’ I say, smiling at her.

Tess glances at herself in the mirror again, like she’s still deciding if she believes us. It’s sad to see how her confidence has wavered since the breakup. Elodie claps her hands.

‘Great. Bryn has her dress. Tess, you have your heartbreak dress.’

‘Heartbreak dress?’ Tess repeats.

‘Yes,’ Elodie says firmly. ‘The one that makes Liam realise he’s made a catastrophic life error.’

That finally earns a laugh from Tess. ‘Fine,’ she says. ‘I’ll get it.’

Elodie beams. ‘Two down,’ she declares dramatically. ‘One to go.’ She turns back to the racks with renewed determination.

A little while later, we step back out onto the street, shopping bags swinging at our sides. The late afternoon sun has softened, casting

everything in warm gold. Thankfully, Elodie found a dress. I was beginning to think we would be out all day.

‘Coffee,’ Tess says gently. ‘Please. I’m dying for one.’

Elodie gasps. ‘You? Requesting caffeine?’

‘Yes,’ Tess says simply. ‘It’s been a long week.’ Her voice carries a quiet heaviness that reminds me why I came back. Not only to celebrate with Elodie, but to be here for Tess. She truly loved Liam, and my heart breaks for her, knowing that it didn’t work out. Getting sliced out of someone’s life that quickly hurts deeper than most people care to admit. I’d know.

‘Coffee it is,’ I say.

We duck into a small cafe on the corner, the smell of roasted beans strong from the moment we walk in. Elodie claims a table while Tess and I wait near the counter for our order. She leans lightly against it, arms folded.

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‘You didn’t say much about Ryan,’ she says after a moment.

I glance at her. ‘There isn’t much to say.’

Tess gives me a look. ‘He asked you out.’

‘He suggested coffee.’

‘That’s asking you out.’

I breathe a small laugh. ‘I don’t know. I’m not really looking right now.’

The truth is, there’s only ever been one boy who’s held my attention.

Tess shrugs. ‘He always liked you.’

Before I can respond, the barista calls our names. We take the drinks back to the table, and as Elodie launches into a dramatic retelling of a terrible date she once went on, I pull my phone from my bag to check the time.

AshOfNight has posted a story.

Without hesitation, I click on the notification. The story loads, the unmistakable backdrop of the amusement park appearing on my screen. The

camera pans to reveal a masked figure leaning casually against a railing. He is looking away from the camera. I scan over the text written over the video.

You know that's my favourite colour on you ...

For a moment, I can't breathe. The cafe noise fades into the background. My fingers tighten around the phone as the blood drains from my face. That wasn't my imagination. He was there, between the curtains, watching me in the fitting room, his possessive gaze gripping me like something he owns.

'Bryn?' Tess's voice pulls me back. I look up slowly. 'You okay?'

My heart is beating fast, and I force myself to swallow the lump that has formed in my throat.

'Yeah,' I force out, still processing the video, and the fact that he was there.

He followed me?

Glancing down at my phone one more time, I read his words once more. A shiver runs through me, part adrenaline, part fear. I take a deep breath and shove my phone into my bag, trying to act normal as Tess says something about her drink not tasting right. They never give her the right milk, apparently. My hands are still shaking slightly as I take a sip of my own.

I know, with a sinking certainty, that I'll have to go back. I need to see him again.

I tug at the zipper of my leather jacket one last time and step back, studying myself in the mirror. Fright Night is on again tonight, and I've made the decision to go back. Excitement zings through me, but jittery nerves bubble under the surface too.

I run my hands down the front of my outfit, something fun and a little daring, perfect for blending into the chaos of the night without looking like I'm trying too hard. It should capture his attention though, since it's tight-fitting and shows a generous amount of cleavage. I spin, checking the fit, imagining the scares and surprises waiting for me. Part of me is giddy at the thought of the haunted mazes and actors leaping out from the shadows, but there is only one actor in particular who I want to come find me. I sling my bag over my shoulder and give myself one last look in the mirror, happy with my appearance.

I can hear the theme park sounds well before I'm at the entry gate. Screams, laughter, the thump of music from the haunted mazes, they all wrap around me, causing an excited tingling sensation to shoot through me. I probably shouldn't have come here alone, but I was too embarrassed to admit that I wanted another encounter with the masked man. There's something about him that is getting under my skin.

Clutching my bag tighter, I step through the gate into the Haunted Midway. The lights are flickering, and shadows twist along the walls and scary props. Actors leap from corners, growling and snarling, their faces painted in grotesque masks. I recoil more than once, letting out little squeals that make me laugh at myself. I feel more on edge than the first time I was here.

I subconsciously begin scanning the crowd, wondering if I'll see anyone I know, but it's a sea of strangers, all lost in the chaos. Then I see *him*. A prickle of awareness ripples through me as his eyes bore into mine. He's behind the mask, of course, but there's something in the way he moves – calculated, confident, and dangerous in the most magnetic way – that suggests he recognises me and has been waiting for my return.

Or this is nothing but a figment of my imagination and I've gone completely nuts.

I try to shake it off and tell myself it's just part of the experience. It's probably normal for them to remember people and latch onto them to scare them even more. Laughing nervously, I brush a strand of hair behind my ear. *It's Fright Night*, I tell myself. *It's supposed to be scary*. And yet my pulse races in a way that has nothing to do with fear.

He slides on his knees toward me before he casually returns to his feet, unhurriedly strolling my way. My stomach does a little flip, and I try to laugh it off. *It's just part of the show*, I tell myself. Though the mask hides most of his face, except his mouth and jaw, it's his voice that stops me cold, because now that I'm convinced that he's Ash, I realise he sounds just like him. Or I'm hearing things.

'Back again?' he murmurs, lips curving into a sexy smirk that makes a fluttering sensation appear in a place it most certainly shouldn't.

I stumble back a little, caught off guard, my heart hammering. I search the mask, trying to place him, trying to find something familiar in the stranger behind it. It has to be Ash, if he's singled me out like this. His username, AshOfNight, can't be a coincidence.

He steps closer, and I have to fight the urge to step back.

‘You always come running into the chaos,’ he says, and there’s a teasing edge to his words. ‘Or maybe you’re just drawn to me.’

I blink, unsure how to respond. My pulse is racing, and I can’t tell if it’s from the thrill of being caught staring at him, or if it’s something deeper – something that stirs memories I didn’t know were there.

‘I don’t know what you mean,’ I whisper.

‘Oh, come on,’ he murmurs, voice deep and sultry. ‘You came back to see me.’

I can’t help the nervous laugh that escapes me. ‘You’re really good at this,’ I manage, my voice soft. ‘Scaring people, I mean. Making them think you know them personally.’

The corner of his mouth twitches as he shrugs. I stand a little straighter and avert my eyes, feeling the intensity in his stare, even behind the mask.

‘It’s a talent,’ he says smoothly.

I frown. He’s not admitting he knows me. There’s something in the way he moves, the way he watches me, that feels too familiar. Too personal. I look back to meet his stare and study those gorgeous eyes. It has to be Ash. The mask makes it hard to tell, but I’m confident it’s him. I’ve never met anyone else with eyes like Ash. Not many men are as tall as Ash, either, and this man looms over me much the same as he did.

Abruptly, he steps back into the fog, vanishing into the shadows as quickly as he appeared, leaving my heart hammering and my mind spinning. A thread of curiosity I can’t resist tugs me forward as I follow him into the fog, scanning the area around me, but it’s as though he has completely disappeared. I hesitate for a moment and then continue, heading in the direction of the haunted maze. The fog swirls around my legs, the lights flicker, and the distant screams of other visitors fade into the background as I enter the first corridor.

Adrenaline pulses through my veins, loud and insistent, like it’s shaking me awake. For the first time in forever, I’m not numb. For too long, I’ve felt like a zombie, shambling through days that blur together, but now my skin prickles, my pulse races, and my breath comes fast. Fear and excitement twist together until I can’t tell where one ends and the other begins. The feeling is so overwhelming I almost laugh. It’s been so long since my body reacted to anything.

As I move deeper into the maze the fog thickens, swallowing the world behind me. There's only him now, and the path I'm choosing with every step. Something in me whispers that this is reckless, that I should turn around. Something else – stronger and more desperate – pushes me forward.

I need this. I need to feel *something*.

I catch a glimpse of him, but he's fast, slipping between shadows like he's part of them, always just out of reach. Every corner I turn, I see just a flash of movement, the glint of the mask, but then he's gone again. My stomach tightens with a mix of frustration and thrill.

'Wait!' I call, my voice echoing.

There's no answer, just the distant thump of footsteps. My stomach lurches when I see him again, a shadow moving ahead. I pick up my pace, heart hammering. Each time I nearly catch him, he slips into another corner, another shadow, and the chase feels endless.

Finally, he pauses at a dead end. I skid to a stop a few feet away, gasping, and he's there, leaning casually against the wall, arms crossed, the mask hiding all but the intensity in his eyes.

'You're persistent,' he murmurs, sounding amused.

I can barely catch my breath.

'I'm curious about you,' I manage, deciding to be honest with him. He tilts his head, studying me carefully, as though savouring every detail.

'You're curious,' he repeats, like it's a revelation. 'And curious girls find themselves exactly where they shouldn't be.'

'What if I don't want to stop?' I whisper, my voice shaky, unsure if I mean the chase or finding out more about him.

He leans in a little closer, and my pulse spikes.

'Then,' he murmurs, his voice impossibly deep, the kind of deep that doesn't need volume to command attention, 'I guess you'll just have to see where it leads.' He's just close enough for me to feel the heat radiating off him.

'You move faster than most,' he teases. 'You're enjoying the game.' His voice curls around me, soft and intimate.

I swallow, the fog thick in my lungs, my heart still racing from the chase. He's right, and the realisation startles me. I *am* enjoying it – the fear, the uncertainty, the way my body feels awake for the first time in years.

‘I didn’t know there was a game,’ I say, my voice coming out steadier than I expected.

A quiet laugh slips from him, barely more than a breath. ‘There’s always a game.’

The mask hides his face, but I can feel his gaze on me through two small eye holes. It makes the hair on my arms stand on end. My sensible side screams that this is a bad idea, but the side that wants to feel alive is desperate for more of his interest. The maze walls swallow the sounds of the park, leaving us suspended in this quiet pocket of tension. My heart pounds, not with fear now, but with something more thrilling.

‘I should go,’ I say, though I don’t move.

He tilts his head again, with a slightly slanted smirk on his lips. One corner of his mouth lifts while the other stays still. It looks lazy, almost effortless, like he’s amused by me. There’s confidence in the way he holds himself. His eyes are mischievous with a hint of challenge, as if he knows more about me than he’s letting on and wants me to play his guessing game.

The more time I spend with him, the more certain I am that he is Ash.

‘You should,’ he murmurs. ‘But you won’t.’

He’s right. I stay. Standing here in the haze, adrenaline surging through me, I feel present in a way I haven’t since everything fell apart, since I learnt how empty the world could be. Right now, with him watching me, with my blood humming and my breath shallow, I feel alive.

‘Curiosity will get you into trouble,’ he drawls. His words sound almost like a warning, but there’s a playful edge to them.

I step a little closer, emboldened by something reckless inside me.

‘Maybe I like a little trouble,’ I whisper, my tone flirtier than I intend.

He laughs. The sound is low and smooth, and goosebumps scatter over me. I’ve heard this laugh before, but not for a long time.

‘Oh,’ he says slowly, ‘I think you do. Otherwise, you wouldn’t have kept following me.’

I bite my lip, trying to keep my composure.

‘I don’t know why I’m back here,’ I say, feeling heat blossom down my neck. ‘I don’t even know who you are.’

He steps just a fraction closer, and I can smell the faint trace of something woody and dark beneath the mask, something undeniably him. He looks at me like he knows exactly what I’m thinking.

‘I don’t believe you,’ he whispers.

The words feel like a slap in the face, because I *am* lying. To him. To myself. I've been doing it since the moment I followed him, pretending this is just a game, just a scare actor doing his job. Pretending I don't recognise the cadence of his voice, the way he pauses before he speaks, like he's choosing his words carefully.

Like he always did.

My heart thunders in my chest. I keep my expression smooth, but my thoughts are spiralling now, racing back through memories I haven't let myself touch in years. A boy I knew once. A boy I lost long ago. A boy who used to look at me like he could see straight through whatever mask I was wearing. A boy who looked at me like I was the only girl in the world.

He lifts his gloved hand, curling a piece of my hair around his finger.

'You can keep pretending,' he murmurs. 'But you're bad at it.'

I swallow. 'You don't know me.'

That smirk deepens. He leans in, close enough that his voice drops even lower. It's intimate and unmistakable. It's not for the crowd, not for the show. This is all just for me. My heart is pounding so hard I feel like it might give me away. His gaze holds mine, searching, testing. Then he delivers the final move, like he's setting a trap he's already sure I'll fall into.

'So,' he says, voice smooth, knowing, devastatingly familiar. 'How's the weather where you are?'

17

BRYN

Five Years Ago

My legs feel shaky and weak, like they always do when I hear his voice.

‘Hey,’ I murmur softly, hugging the phone to my ear.

‘Hey,’ he replies, his voice rough around the edges, familiar in a way that feels like coming home. ‘How are you holding up?’

I exhale slowly, letting the silence stretch before answering.

‘I don’t know,’ I admit. ‘I feel like I’m here, but I’m not. I don’t connect with anyone like I did back home. It’s lonely.’

I hear him shift on the other end. His sigh is weighed down by something I can’t quite pinpoint.

‘I know the feeling,’ he says. ‘I’m still trying to figure out how to survive at home. My brother, he’s ...’ His voice drops, showing a hint of vulnerability that I’m positive he doesn’t show to anyone else. ‘He’s insane, and Dad is always home, but he’s not really here. I don’t know if that makes any sense.’

‘Makes total sense. It’s crazy, isn’t it? Feeling invisible in the middle of a crowd, feeling like no one really sees you?’

‘Yeah,’ he says softly. ‘Like you’re screaming, but the walls are too thick for anyone to hear.’

I pause, wanting to say something that makes it better, but there’s nothing that can. ‘I wish you were here.’

‘Me too.’

‘I love being able to pick up the phone and talk to you. It means the world to me that you’re here for me and willing to listen.’

‘I’ll always be here for you,’ he says. ‘You don’t ever have to wonder about that.’

I kick my feet against the edge of my bed, holding my phone tucked between my shoulder and ear. The ceiling fan whirrs softly above me. Everything feels small and safe in this moment, like the world can’t touch me as long as he’s on the other end of the line.

‘Tell me something,’ he says. ‘Anything.’

I think for a second, then laugh quietly. ‘It’s raining here. Like, really raining. Whenever it rains or storms, I think of you.’

‘Really?’ he whispers.

‘Yeah. I always check out what the weather is doing, in case you ask.’

‘I love listening to the rain when I fall asleep. I especially love it when it storms.’

‘Me too.’

There’s a pause, comfortable and warm, filled with the sound of rain tapping against my window. I can picture him perfectly, sprawled on his bed, staring at the ceiling, phone pressed tightly to his ear like he’s afraid I might disappear if he lets it go, because I am doing the exact same thing.

‘Thank you for always answering when I call,’ I whisper.

‘Of course. It’s nice to know someone else is fighting the same chaos you are. Makes it all a little less heavy.’

I cling to that thought. Even this far apart, we have a connection I can’t find anywhere else. For the first time this week, I feel like I’m not completely alone.

‘You okay?’ I ask.

He sighs. ‘It’s not just my brother. It’s everything – this house, this family. I feel constantly on edge, like I’m walking through a minefield and one wrong step will set everything off. I can’t ever just breathe.’

I squeeze the phone a little tighter. ‘I get that. Sometimes it feels like no matter what I do, I’m missing something, or someone’s not seeing me. Like I don’t belong anywhere anymore. I’m an outsider in my own family.’

‘Exactly,’ he murmurs. There’s a harshness in his voice now. ‘I’m supposed to be the strong one, right? The one who handles it all, but I’m not. I get angry too, and I get scared. I feel like I’m failing all the time.’

‘You’re not failing,’ I whisper. ‘You’re just human, and you’re surviving.’

There’s a quiet chuckle on the other end, small and almost broken.

‘Yeah ... surviving.’ He breathes a laugh, bitter and strained. ‘Sometimes it doesn’t feel like enough, but hearing your voice helps. I fucking miss you, even though I didn’t even get to know you in person that much.’

I close my eyes, letting his words sink in.

‘I know what you mean,’ I say. ‘I miss seeing your face, even though I only saw it a few times.’

‘I’m glad I met you before you left, Cherry.’

Cherry. The nickname slips easily from his mouth. My fingers move to catch the little cherries dangling from my ears.

‘Me too.’

There’s another long silence, and I let out a small laugh. It bubbles through my lips, completely out of my control.

‘What?’ he asks, sounding amused by my laughter.

‘Sorry. Not an appropriate time to laugh, but I just had this weird vision of your brother looking like a cartoon villain.’

Ash laughs, bringing a smile to my face.

‘A cartoon villain, huh?’ he teases. ‘He certainly is a villain.’

I grin, despite the heaviness of everything that surrounds his brother and the situation he’s in. I can feel the warmth of the connection between us, even through the crackle of the phone line. Ash’s laughter dies away quickly and I hear him exhale, the sound a little shaky.

‘You get me. More than anyone else does,’ he whispers.

‘Promise me we’ll always be like this,’ I say softly. ‘Even when things get hard, or life feels impossible. Let’s always be there for each other.’

‘I promise,’ he says. ‘Always.’

At this moment, I believe him. Even if the world outside is messy and cruel, at least we have each other. We have somewhere safe to come back to, a reason to keep going. We’re both quiet again, lingering in the comfort of the conversation, when I hear him clear his throat softly.

‘How’s your sister doing?’ His voice is gentle, casual, but there’s something underneath it, a careful weight that makes me pause.

I blink, caught off guard. ‘Uh ... she’s okay, I guess. Why?’

‘Just curious,’ he murmurs, like it’s nothing, but I hear the faint undercurrent of interest, the way he lingers on the question. Something bristles in me at the mention of her. I frown slightly, brushing a strand of hair behind my ear.

‘She’s fine,’ I repeat, and there’s a little hesitation in my voice, though I try to sound casual.

Of course he’s asking about her. Everyone does. It doesn’t matter where I am or who I’m talking to, she always finds her way into the conversation, bright and effortless and impossible to ignore.

‘She doesn’t need you worrying about her,’ I say, my tone coming out far more biting than I expected, my own words surprising me.

There’s a pause on the other end and I clench my teeth together in irritation, frustrated at myself for having reacted this way, but even more frustrated that he asked about her in the first place. I know he has seen what she looks like – she’s all over my social media – and honestly, I’m surprised he hasn’t asked more about her, sooner.

‘I wasn’t—’ he starts, then stops, like he’s choosing his words carefully. ‘I just wanted to make sure she’s okay. It sounded like she was having a hard time too, after some things you said.’

I press my lips together, heat creeping up my neck as I focus on calming myself down. I’m irrational when it comes to her.

‘She’s completely shut me out, but she’s had no problem settling in here. She’ll probably be the most popular girl in school by the end of the second week.’

I hate how small I sound, how the comparison slips in even when I don’t want it to. In my head, I see her the way everyone else probably does: prettier, smarter, more radiant than me. The kind of person people orbit without even realising they’re doing it. The kind of person no one ever forgets to ask about. She steals the show and, in the past, it seemed like her goal was to be noticed, although I can’t help but admit there has been a definite change in her behaviour lately.

‘Why do you care?’ I ask, sounding far tenser than I hoped.

‘Because she’s your sister,’ he says simply. ‘And because you matter to me.’

That wasn’t the answer I was bracing for. I close my eyes and lean back against my pillow. I want to believe him. I want him to be *mine*, uncomplicated and untouched by comparisons. I want this – *us* – to be something that doesn’t get swallowed by her light.

‘Okay,’ I say finally, barely above a whisper.

‘And Grant? How’s he been?’

‘Same as usual, I guess.’ I look to the ceiling, wondering why he would ask, why he would even want to know.

‘Huh,’ he says quietly, and I frown. I feel a strange shiver crawl along my spine. The questions are small, harmless even, but in the way he asks them, it’s as if he already knows something I don’t. A flicker of unease worms its way through me, and I can’t help but glance around my room, half expecting him to somehow be here.

‘Thanks for asking about them. It’s nice that you care.’

‘Of course. You’re important to me.’

I bite my lip, curiosity and unease swirling together in my gut. There’s something in the way he asked that lingers, and I can’t shake the feeling that he knows more than he’s letting on. I don’t know what he could possibly know that I don’t, but I can’t shake the feeling.

Fighting off a yawn, I stretch, my hands bumping against my bedhead.

‘You’re tired,’ he murmurs. ‘I better let you go. Goodnight, Cherry. Thanks for calling. It was nice hearing your voice.’

My earlier thoughts melt away and I smile. ‘You too, Ash. Goodnight.’

I set the phone down and stare at it for a long moment, my fingers lingering on the screen as though they can still feel him on the other end of it. I let out a deep sigh. I don’t know why I’m feeling uneasy about his questions. There’s something beneath the surface, something I can’t quite name.

I’m curled under the blankets, half asleep, when my phone buzzes. The blue light cuts through the dark. I rub my eyes.

Ash: Can I come see you?

I blink at the message, my heart skipping. He is hours away, with no licence. There’s no way he could get here on his own. My fingers hover over the screen, frozen between panic and excitement.

Bryn: How would you get here?

The reply comes almost instantly.

Ash: That doesn't matter, I'll figure it out.

My pulse jumps. Sitting up, I tug the blankets up closer to my chest.

Bryn: You don't even have your licence and I'm
hours away now ...

Ash: Doesn't matter. I'll get there anyway, as long
as you want to see me

Worry mixes with something else in my chest – excitement, hope, and anticipation.

Bryn: When?

Ash: Maybe the weekend? I have to see you

Staring at the screen, my heart hammering, I must re-read his message five times. The weekend isn't far away, but a few days feels like an eternity. The idea that he's willing to cross all those kilometres, rules, and obstacles just to see me makes the night feel electric with nerves.

Bryn: I would love to see you

Ash: I'll be there then

I tuck my phone under my pillow and close my eyes, imagining us reuniting, how it will feel to have his arms around me, to breathe in his

scent again, and hopefully, to feel his mouth on mine once more. My pulse is racing even as sleep tries to pull me under.

The weekend suddenly feels like it can't come fast enough.

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ASH

Now

Bryn freezes at my words, which left my mouth before I could stop them. I used the line we used to say, the one only *we* ever said. Recognition sparks in her eyes. It's just a flicker, but enough to know I confirmed her suspicions.

Smirking, I dart around her, allowing the fog to swallow me. I let her think she's alone and slip into the shadows behind her. Every step is calculated; every movement is slow enough to be undetected, but fast enough to keep her heart racing. The rest of the maze looms ahead in twisting corridors. She doesn't see where I've gone, which makes it all the more fun. I hover on the edge of her space, just out of reach, blanketed by the dark. I hear the quick catch of her breath when she senses movement but sees nothing.

Pressing myself against the darkened wall of the maze, I step lightly and watch her weave through the twists, trying to anticipate her turns. Something snaps beneath my foot, some sort of stick or leaf carried inside by others, and I freeze. Her shoulders stiffen. She spins around, scanning, her eyes wide.

I want her to know I'm here without showing myself. A ghost in the mist, I trail after her, careful to stay out of sight. The chase, the anticipation – it's intoxicating. She pauses at a fork in the maze. I shift from shadow to shadow, moving like a predator. I taste her fear. Her hand brushes the wall right next to my body. It's too fleeting for her to notice me, but I notice every detail.

I'm getting closer now – close enough that if she turned, she'd see me. My mind races ahead, planning the next move, wondering how far I can push her before she breaks. Maybe I'll break first, because even I can't deny the rush of adrenaline this is giving me.

Her pace picks up. She's trying to outrun me, but I know the maze like the back of my hand. This is my speciality. Just as the corridor narrows and the walls press in, I flick my wrist, a soft movement that causes the bracelet of hers I still wear to jingle, and she freezes. She hears it. She would remember that sound.

The game is on, and I don't intend to lose.

Every pause she makes, I mirror, only a little behind, just close enough to make her doubt the silence. The maze corridor turns again, narrowing further now. She runs her fingers along the wall, trying to find a hidden door or way out that isn't obvious. I take a half-step closer, careful not to give myself away. The fog is thick here, swirling around our legs. I move with it, as I have countless times before.

Bryn stops. I freeze. The tension coils between us like electricity. Her head whips left, then right. Her eyes dart around wildly, desperately looking for me, but the darkness is pressing in. I smile, feeling the thick paint stretch underneath the mask.

She's mine.

She starts running again, faster this time, her panic bleeding into determination. Her footfalls pound against the floor of the maze, and I fall into rhythm behind her. I anticipate each turn she takes before she makes it, slipping around corners she doesn't notice, closing the distance without revealing myself. The thrill coils tighter in my chest with every heartbeat. A laugh escapes her. I suppress my own. We are both enjoying this game too much.

She's forced to turn to the left and I cut across another corridor. She stumbles as my hand brushes the wall, and the vibration of her panic travels straight to me. I could step out now, reveal myself, but I decide not to. Not just yet.

The maze twists again. She rounds a corner too quickly, her momentum almost throwing her off balance. I hesitate, watching as her hands reach out before her, grasping at empty air. Then, I move, just a shadow flicking past the corner of her vision. Her gasp is sharp as she spins, trying to find me. I

catch the scent of her hair. She is so close, I could reach out, but I don't. I'm having too much fun.

The maze seems endless, but it's easy for me to remember every curve, every corner, and every secret passage. I designed it, after all. Bryn pauses before faking a left then sprinting quickly to the right. I glide silently behind her, closer now, just steps away. Her hand searches the wall again, frantic, and I can almost hear the thought in her head: *Where is he?* She rounds yet another bend, thinking she's escaped – or at least hidden – but my voice slips through the mist.

'You can't hide from me.'

Her head snaps toward the sound. I disappear again, melting into the fog.

'Creepy bastard,' she mutters.

I chuckle as she runs wildly, her movements becoming erratic and slightly desperate now. She's nearly at the exit of the maze. I can see the faint glow of the lights at the end of the last corridor – the promise of safety, or at least the illusion of it. She thinks she's escaped. I can see it in the way she picks up speed, the way she releases a breath of relief. Of victory.

I can't let her be free. Not yet.

I move fast and fluidly through the shadows as she approaches the exit. I'm on her in an instant, looming in close from behind, my chest to her back, my breath brushing her ear. Her body stiffens, and I can hear the sharp intake of air she can't suppress. I ghost my lips across her neck, causing her to shiver. I curl my arm around her, feeling her reaction beneath me, every inch of tension in her body a map I know by heart.

'Ash.'

The way she whispers my name has me unravelling. It's been years since she said it like that, the way she used to say it when we were younger – soft, instinctive, like it belonged to her. Like *I* belonged to her. God, I've missed that feeling – of belonging and fitting so perfectly with someone.

My hands find her waist, and I spin her around to face me, as a reminder to myself that this is real. That *she* is real, and really here, right in front of me. Her breath is warm against my lips; her hands are curled into my jacket like she's afraid I'll disappear again if she lets go.

I lean my forehead against hers, and the world finally goes quiet.

This close, I can feel everything: the heat of her skin, the uneven rhythm of her breath, the way she's trembling just slightly, like her body hasn't caught up to what her heart already knows. I close my eyes for a second,

just to take it in. She fits perfectly against me. Years of restraint unravel in this single moment, and I let myself revel in it, in being this close, being *allowed* to be this close again. Her hair brushes my cheek, familiar in a way that makes my chest ache. I don't rush it. I don't speak. I just stay, letting the moment stretch. I've missed this more than I realised – the quiet intimacy, the way everything feels right when she's this close to me.

I move my thumb without thinking, brushing it lightly along her jaw. She doesn't pull away. That small, silent permission sends something warm and dangerous through me.

'This,' I murmur quietly, barely more than a breath, 'is what I've wanted for a long time.'

I'm exactly where I want to be.

'Ash,' she whispers, tears filling her eyes.

I capture her mouth with mine before she can think too hard about it, before her panic can redirect itself into flight. The fog swirls around us, muffling the world, leaving only the heat of her skin against mine. Her hands find my chest, tugging me closer as the kiss shifts into something much more desperate and urgent. I tilt her head slightly, deepening the kiss, tasting everything she's holding back – fear, relief, longing – all tangled up in one heated exchange that has fire shooting through my veins.

Bryn presses into me, and I forget where we are for a moment. I don't rush it. I've waited far too long for this to ruin it by rushing. Her breath ghosts across my mouth. She tastes and feels just as I remember. The kiss is slower now. I feel it all: the way her lips soften against mine, the way she exhales like she's been holding her breath for far too long. I slide my hand up her back, gently squeezing her shoulders, like I'm afraid that if I don't anchor us here, she'll vanish into the fog again. Underneath her leather jacket, her shirt is tight, allowing me to feel every curve – all the parts I memorised.

Her tongue sweeps against mine, sending a jolt straight through my chest. There's recognition in it. Memory. Want. Years collapse into this single moment. I pull back for half a second, just to breathe, just to look at her. Her eyes are laden with lust, her lips are parted; she looks completely undone. And then I'm kissing her again, slower still, savouring it. The fog swirls around us, clouding over the world, and I forget about the maze, the crowd, and the masks. I forget about everything except the way she fits against me, and the way this kiss feels like the beginning of a story I've

read before. When I finally rest my forehead against hers again, my breath is unsteady, and my pulse is loud in my ears. I don't say anything. I don't have to. The kiss said everything we've been holding back for years.

I pull back just enough to look at her wide eyes, her chest rising and falling. The fog curls around us, as if protecting this moment from the rest of the world.

'You thought you could escape,' I murmur, my voice rough.

'Maybe I wanted you to catch me,' she whispers.

I laugh, then press my lips to hers again. This time, there's no holding back. She moans as I press her against the wall, tangling my fingers through her hair, kissing her harder and deeper than I ever have before. Longing courses through me, and I just can't get enough. Bryn's hands slide up underneath my shirt, dancing across my stomach before planting on my chest. Her skin on my skin feels incredible. God, I've missed this. Missed *her*.

Being back here with Bryn, I feel as if I've time-travelled back five years, to the days before everything got so messed up. I wish things had been different for us. I'd do anything to rewrite our history and better both of our lives, but unfortunately, it doesn't work that way. I can't change the past, but I can control what happens now. I lost Bryn once before; I won't let it happen again.

There's a sharp, panicked scream that pierces through the night from somewhere else in the maze. Another group of thrill-seekers, lost in their own fear, is moving toward us, waiting for me to jump out at them. The sound slices the tension between us, pulling her attention away. She spins, heart hammering, and I know that's my cue.

With one last glance over her shoulder, she shoots toward the exit of the maze. I let her escape, because tonight isn't about possession. It's about presence, about reminding her I'm here. That I never stopped being here.

Her silhouette shrinks into the distant glow of the park. Every nerve in my body is tense with wanting, waiting. The fog swirls, wrapping around me, hiding me completely now. Within a few seconds, she's gone from my sight, but not from my mind.

I'll find her again. I always do.

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ASH

Five Years Ago

Friday afternoons are always the quietest at the library. Working here suits me. I like the order of it. Reading has always been my escape. When things at home are too chaotic, I disappear into other places, other lives. I like learning new things, the small thrill of understanding something I didn't before, even if it's useless trivia or a place I'll never see. Between the shelves, I can be temporarily untouched by everything that waits for me outside these doors.

Books are easier than people. They don't interrupt, don't expect the right response, and don't look at you like you should be something else. I guess I don't mind people, but in small doses. Preferably at a distance.

I lock the library door behind me and start the walk home. The sun has gone now, and my shift was over far too quickly. I've attempted a few times to hang at the back of the library once my shift finishes, to read in peace, but the manager always ushers me along.

There's a book tucked under my arm. I borrow one every time I work. It's a paperback, with a sun-bleached image of red dirt stretching across the cover. The book is very weathered; it's been read and borrowed many times. I thumb the edges of the pages as I walk, wishing I could climb inside them and disappear.

The closer I get to my street, the heavier my steps become. The houses blur together, all identical porches and unkempt lawns, with the sounds of loud TVs and raised voices floating out through the kitchen windows. I don't want to go back yet. I never do.

At least today I have something else to look forward to: Bryn.

The thought of her cuts through the dread like sunlight through clouds. I can already picture her curled up somewhere with a book, probably a tea beside her, and soft music playing. Knowing I get to see her tonight sends a buzz of excitement through me. I just have to figure out how to get there.

I slow as I reach the corner, mentally mapping out whether I can take the late train. I might need to include a bus ride as well, but I'll make it work. It will be a long night of travelling, but it will be worth it to see her. Even better, her parents are away for the weekend; the girls are being supervised by their cleaner. I tried not to react when she said that. We certainly live two very different lives.

My house is much smaller than her old house was, with walls thin enough that every argument seeps through easily. There's no cleaner here, no cook, no one to smooth things over when my brother has one of his episodes. Just me, trying to avoid everyone while I keep the house going and fend for myself.

I shove my hands into my pockets and keep walking, letting the jealousy flicker and die. It isn't her fault. Despite everything, she never talks about her family's wealth as though it makes her better than anyone else. If anything, I think her life is just as lonely as mine. It's a reminder that everyone carries something, even the people who seem to have it all.

Glancing down at the time on my phone again, I attempt to work out a plan. If I leave before dinner, I can make the train. If I miss it, there's another one an hour later. I'll be exhausted tomorrow, but that feels like a fair trade, because seeing Bryn will make every kilometre, every transfer, every long hour of the night worth it.

I lock my phone and tuck it away just as my street comes into view. The house stands at the end of it, its paint peeling, front light flickering, as if it can't quite commit to being on. The familiar knot of dread settles in my stomach.

Stepping inside, I wince at the volume of the blaring TV. It's so high because Dad won't wear his aids. Empty bottles line the coffee table. He's sunk into the couch, his eyes glassy, his scruffy beard nearly reaching his chest. He doesn't look up when I pass. He never does.

My brother's door is half open. He's pacing again, muttering under his breath, his hands twitching like he's arguing with someone who isn't there. I slow just for a second, listening briefly, before quietly tiptoeing past his door, praying he won't notice me.

In my room, I grab my old gym bag from under the bed. The bag is hanging together by a thread. I pack the essentials, moving quietly, more out of habit than necessity. No one here is paying enough attention to hear me anyway, but I'd rather do what I can to remain unnoticed. I do not have the time or energy to deal with one of Kaine's outbursts right now. I also don't want to turn up with my skin split and covered in bruises. The last ones he gave me have only just faded.

I zip the bag closed and startle when Dad calls out something that sounds like my name. He's slurring, making it difficult to be sure. Quietly, I creep back down the hallway and poke my head into the living room. He's already focused on the screen again, and has a bottle tipped to his mouth. The footsteps from my brother's room continue.

Slinging the bag over my shoulder, I step out without a goodbye, hoping the creak of the door doesn't carry through the house. I hold my breath, peering over my shoulder, but neither of them seems to notice. As the door clicks shut behind me, my relief is immediate. I turn toward the station and start walking faster.

When I step off the train, my legs almost give out from under me. A deep, bone-heavy exhaustion has settled in, even after my attempts to rest. It's hard to sleep sitting upright on a vinyl seat with your knees jammed in tightly and your shoulders tense. I'm never quite able to relax through hours of rattling forward, with nowhere to direct my thoughts except back on themselves. I'm really excited to see Bryn, but at the same time, I'm worried that it might not be as good as the first brief hangout we had. What if she doesn't like me? What if I do something to screw it up and risk losing her?

My back aches. My neck's stiff from holding myself so tensely the whole way, like if I'd loosened up even a bit I'd have fallen apart. I roll my shoulders as I walk, trying to shake it off, but the tiredness doesn't fade. I force myself to exhale slowly, steadying my racing thoughts. I glance down at my black t-shirt and black pants with an unintentional rip in the knee. Adjusting my backwards cap, I try not to let my insecurity eat away at me. I push forward. The walk to her place is only fifteen minutes or so from the station.

Her suburb is quiet in a way that makes me feel loud. My overworn sneakers scuff noisily on the pavement. The houses are lined up neatly, their

lawns clipped short and letterboxes straight. There are no busted fences, blokes yelling, or sirens.

I pause at a patch of wild scrub near the path, stubborn stuff growing where no one's bothered to kill it yet. I crouch and pick a few flowers, little white ones. I hope she won't care that I didn't buy them. I couldn't, even if I wanted to – I used the last of my pay on the train ticket. I twist a bit of grass around the stems, careful not to snap them.

By the time I reach her street, my heart's beating hard. Her house stands out. It's big, and certainly showy. Light spills softly through the windows, the curtains are drawn just enough that I can see movement inside. A woman I don't recognise is moving around the kitchen, earbuds in her ears. She must be the cleaner. Or cook, or whoever it is that is meant to be keeping an eye out on the girls.

I go around the side, like Bryn and I talked about, keeping close to the hedge. The gate to the yard opens smoothly and soundlessly, and I step through it. The back of the house is much darker, with only the kitchen light on. I see a silhouette move past a window and freeze. I wait, breathing as softly as possible until the shadow moves away.

Crouching low, I slink across the yard, my shoes sinking into soft, damp grass. It's a well-maintained yard. Even in the darkness, I can tell how green the grass is, and that the surrounding garden is manicured. I hate how much I notice things like that. I hate how different this place is from mine. From anything I've known.

Bryn told me where to go; I inch toward the laundry door. I test the handle slowly, and it opens easily. Inside smells like soap and something citrusy. I close the door behind me, then just stand there for a second, letting my eyes adjust. I tuck the flowers behind my back like a kid caught stealing.

There's movement upstairs. I shoot off a quick text, telling her that I'm here. After a moment, soft footsteps hurry down the stairs. Bryn appears, her hair in loose waves, her eyes wide when she sees me. For a second, she doesn't move. She stares, as if in shock that I'm really here.

I step forward before I can stop myself. 'Hey,' I whisper.

A wide, bright smile takes over her face, and then she's on me, arms around my neck, face pressed into my chest, as if she's been holding in that hug for weeks. I wrap my arms around her, careful at first, then tighter. I forgot how small and warm she is. I bury my face into the side of hers,

inhaling. My body relaxes, as if it finally understands where it is. She smells of soap and something soft underneath, something that's just her: a lavender, flowery smell.

My eyes close without asking for permission, and the tiredness crashes over me all at once. It's heavy now that I'm not fighting it anymore. My hands curl into the fabric of her singlet, feeling the heat and smoothness of her skin beneath it.

Her house is silent around us. There are no TVs blaring, no one yelling, no doors slamming. Just the soft whir of something electrical, and the faint tick of a clock somewhere. It feels wrong that a place this quiet exists.

'You're exhausted,' she murmurs, like she can feel the fatigue leaking out of me.

'Yeah,' I exhale. 'Long ride.'

I don't tell her how close I was to falling asleep standing up. How my hands were shaking on the walk over. How the only thing keeping me upright was the thought of this exact moment. She shifts slightly, her cheek brushing mine, and my whole body lights up at the contact. My exhaustion doesn't matter to me. I'd stay awake for days if it meant standing here with her, breathing her in, pretending for a second that I belonged in this quiet, clean place.

'I missed you,' she whispers.

'Yeah,' I say, still surprised to hear words like that come from such a beautiful girl. Words directed at *me*. 'Me too.'

I pull the flowers out from behind my back and hold them out to her, suddenly unsure of them. They look pathetic in this house. Her eyes drop to them, then back to me.

'Oh,' she breathes.

She takes them like they're something precious, her fingers gentle on the stems. Her smile is soft and genuine, much to my relief.

'You picked them,' she says.

'Yeah.'

'They're gorgeous, thank you.'

Relief bubbles through me. She doesn't think I'm stupid. She appreciates the thought. Bryn grabs my hand then, pulling me deeper into the house.

'Quick. Isla's in her room and Helen is still here. She won't stay long.'

I let her lead me through corridors, taking in the crisp white walls and the way everything smells faintly of lemon and polish. There's nothing out of

place. There are no scuffed corners, no fingerprints on the light switches. My footsteps sound too heavy on the floorboards, even though I'm tiptoeing as soundlessly as I can.

Bryn moves confidently, her fingers tight around mine. We pass a doorway and I catch a glimpse of a bedroom with a made-up bed, its cushions lined up just right. Another hallway opens into a second living area – there's one downstairs, I saw it through the window. Just one of them is the size of my kitchen, dining room and bedroom combined.

She guides me toward her room at the end of the hall. Her door's already ajar, light spilling out from the gap. When we step inside, she closes the door quietly behind us. Her room isn't as spotless as the rest of the house. Clothes are draped over a chair, a few books are scattered across a desk, and there's a mug on the bedside table. She finally lets go of my hand. I stand there, unsure of what to do with myself, while she turns to me, her eyes kind and searching mine. For a second, neither of us speaks. The quiet presses in, thick and expectant.

'It feels like I shouldn't be here,' I murmur, but I step closer anyway.

Her eyes flick to the door, then back to me, like she's measuring the risk and deciding it's worth it. The knowledge that I shouldn't be here makes this feel forbidden and dangerous, which shouldn't excite me as much as it does. Bryn reaches out, brushing my wrist before sliding her hand into mine again.

'You should,' she whispers. 'Because I want you here.'

I don't answer straight away, because I can't get the words out. My throat tightens, as if my body doesn't quite know what to do with that kind of certainty. I've never felt wanted or accepted like this before. No one ever said things like that to me when I was a kid. I learnt early in life not to expect this, not to need it, because need turns into disappointment real quick. So I learnt to be quiet. To take up less space. To leave before anyone could tell me to.

But Bryn's words spread through me now, filling me with warmth. I swallow and nod, because if I try to speak, my voice might give me up. I grip her hand without thinking about it, brushing her knuckles with my thumb. I drop my forehead to hers, breathing her in again.

'No one's ever said that to me,' I admit quietly.

She embraces me tighter, and I'm humiliated to admit that tears fill my eyes. The tiredness comes back then. She notices before I do, her hand

sliding up my arm, steadying me.

‘You can sit,’ she murmurs.

I let out a shaky breath, something between a laugh and a sigh, and let her guide me down onto the edge of the bed. The mattress dips under my weight, much softer than what I’m used to. She sits beside me, her shoulder brushing mine. Her singlet fits her snugly, hugging her body, and her nipples pebble through the thin material. My eyes trace over her bronzed skin, and my hand moves to lightly touch strawberry-blonde hair. It’s softer than I expect. I let the strands slide between my fingers. I’ve always noticed her hair, the way it frames her face. It’s the kind of colour you don’t forget. I very rarely see anyone else with this exact shade. It’s beautiful and utterly Bryn.

‘Your hair,’ I murmur, quieter than I mean to. ‘It’s ...’ I rub the end of it between my fingers. ‘Beautiful.’

She smiles at that, looking pleased with the compliment. I tuck a loose strand behind her ear, my knuckles brushing her cheek.

‘It’s one of my favourite things about you,’ I admit before I can stop myself.

There are a thousand things I like about her, but her hair is a favourite. I let my hand rest on her shoulder, my fingers threaded lightly through the copper strands. She leans into my touch, and my chest tightens with something close to reverence. Her hand finds the one in my lap, and I look down to our fingers tangled together between us, feeling something settle in my chest.

I move my hands to her waist, touching her like I’m afraid she’ll break. My thumbs slide underneath the fabric of her singlet, and she leans into me, her forehead pressing against my chest. Something creaks in the hallway, and I freeze. So does she. We stay like that for a few seconds, breathing each other in, listening to the footsteps pass down the hall. They’re light; I’m assuming they belong to her sister.

When the sound fades, she exhales and presses her face into my shoulder, laughing quietly. The sound vibrates through me. I continue to slide my thumb over her bare skin.

‘You’re going to get us caught,’ she whispers.

‘Worth it,’ I murmur.

She tilts her head up to look at me, her eyes shining. There’s something fragile in her expression now, something softened by what I said. Her

fingers curl tighter around my shirt.

‘You don’t say things you don’t mean,’ she says, more to herself than to me.

I nod, because it’s true. Bryn leans closer, her forehead touching mine. Her eyes close, just briefly, and when they open, she pulls me so that we both collapse back onto the mattress. It dips beneath us, and the breath whooshes out of my chest at the feeling of her limbs tangling with mine. She shifts, hovering over me, her hair falling forward, like fire framing her face. The room feels smaller all of a sudden, hotter, as if the oxygen has been snatched from my lungs.

I reach up and catch her by the back of the neck, sliding my fingers into her hair, and pull her down toward me. Our mouths crash together in a warm, urgent kiss that I’ve been waiting weeks for. I roll over slightly, just enough to deepen it, my thumb brushing her jaw as my mouth finds hers again. She makes a soft sound that goes straight through me. I’m painfully aware of the house around us – the quiet, the rules, the people who’d tear us apart if they knew – but it only makes me hungrier for her. Our time together feels forbidden, and it’s making it all the more fun.

I break the kiss just enough to breathe, but our foreheads stay touching. My hand’s still in her hair, caressing the back of her neck. I can feel her heartbeat where our chests meet, fast and wild, matching mine.

‘Jesus,’ I murmur, my voice barely audible.

Bryn smiles, her cheeks flushed, eyes wide, and hair messy. She swoops down and kisses me again, slower this time, like she’s taking her time now that she’s got me here. I melt into it, into her, every wall I’ve built sinking lower with each second.

Her confidence is spurring me on. My fingers dip over her bare back where her singlet has risen up. I trace the line of her spine, pressing my hips against hers. Considering she’d never kissed someone before me, she sure seems to know what she is doing.

‘Bryn? Are you all right in there?’

We break apart. Helen. My heart hammers, a mix of adrenaline and panic, and I shove myself off the bed.

‘Shit,’ I mutter under my breath, moving faster than I can think, finding the bathroom and slipping inside just as Helen opens Bryn’s bedroom door.

‘Going to bed soon?’ Helen says, her voice calm, completely unaware.

‘Do you need anything before I head off?’

Bryn answers softly, careful not to give anything away. 'No, thanks, Helen. I'm fine.'

I crouch behind the bathroom door, heart still racing, trying to control my breathing. I can hear Helen moving in the bedroom, humming a soft tune as she tidies up, unaware that Bryn and I were just moments from crossing a line we're both not supposed to.

The seconds stretch, and I fight the urge to peek. Every creak of the floorboards is an alarm in my head. My hand curls around the edge of the sink for support, my knuckles white.

'All right, I'll be off then. Don't stay up too late!'

I exhale slowly, relief mixing with lingering heat from what we'd just been doing. I step out of the bathroom, heart still hammering, and see her on the bed, cheeks flushed, hair messy around her face. She looks at me and smirks.

'Close call,' she whispers.

I grin despite myself, crawling back toward her.

'Yeah,' I murmur. 'Too close.'

The tension hasn't left. If anything, it's worse now. The house is empty, quiet, and all ours for the moment. The risk makes Bryn taste even sweeter. Our mouths collide in another kiss before I finally peel myself away from her, my heart still racing, and head into the bathroom for a shower.

The hot water runs down my body and for a moment, I let myself just stand under it, eyes closed, inhaling the steam. My muscles relax, and the ache in them finally starts to ease. When I step out, a towel wrapped around my waist, Bryn's sitting on the edge of the bed, her eyes trailing down my torso. I brush a loose strand of hair from her flushed face, tucking it behind her ear, and she leans into my hand.

'Why do I feel like you love that we almost got caught?' She smiles.

I smirk despite myself, leaning closer until my forehead rests against hers.

'Maybe,' I murmur. She has hit the nail on the head with that assumption – not that I want her to get in trouble. It's just a bit more fun when there's a feeling of 'we shouldn't be doing this'.

She slides her hand up my arm, her fingers tracing slow circles on my skin. I inhale, feeling her warmth settle into me. I kiss her again, simply because I can, and I can't get enough of her. She responds immediately,

tilting her head, her lips pressing mine harder, her hands threading through my hair.

When we finally pull back, breathless, she smiles, her eyes bright with something unspoken.

‘You make it impossible to be sensible,’ she whispers.

‘Good,’ I reply, and I don’t even try to hide my grin, because with her, sensibleness isn’t part of the equation.

My phone pings and I check it. The monitor I’ve set up in my room has alerted me that someone has entered. I pull up the app and open the live camera to see my brother looking around my room, clearly wondering where I am. I wait to see whether he will go through my things, but he turns and stalks out. A relieved exhale leaves me and I lock my phone, tossing it onto the bedside table.

‘You okay?’ Bryn asks softly.

‘Yeah.’ I nod, dropping onto the bed beside her, still damp and warm. She moves closer instinctively, resting her head against my chest, and I drape an arm around her, pulling her in. Her fingers trace little patterns along my side, light and gentle, grounding me. For a long while, we just lie there in a comfortable silence. I press a kiss to the top of her head, inhaling that lavender scent I could get lost in forever.

‘I’m glad to be here,’ I murmur.

Her lips brush against my chest in a tiny, almost shy kiss.

‘Me too.’

We shift until we’re tangled together, arms wrapped around each other, bodies pressed close. I feel the weight of her settle against me. Slowly, sleep tugs at me, the kind that comes after being truly, utterly spent. I let myself drift, holding her close, her breath soft against me.

For the first time in a long while, I feel like I’m exactly where I’m supposed to be.

20

BRYN

Now

My eyes open slowly. I stretch my arms up and a yawn escapes me, as if my body knows it has nowhere to be. There's no alarm. No schedule clawing at my brain. Just the pale morning light seeping in through the thin curtains of the spare room, and the quiet murmur of the street outside Tess and Elodie's apartment. For a few seconds, I stay still, pressed into unfamiliar sheets, and let relief wash over me. No work. No study. No deadlines.

I exhale and stare at the ceiling, tracing a small crack that runs along its corner. Last night replays in my mind: the way Ash loomed over me, his voice deep, teasing, and familiar in a way that made my skin prickle. I squeeze my eyes shut, but it doesn't help. I can still see the way he looked at me, like he'd been holding his breath for years and finally let it out. Like he already knew I'd never really forgotten him, even when I desperately tried.

Ash. My former best friend. The boy I used to talk to about everything. The only boy – now a man – who I have ever loved. The one who hurt me in the most personal, crushing way that someone could. I should have seen it coming. I should have expected it, but I was young and naive. I thought the best of every person I met. I really had no clue what was happening right before my eyes. I was oblivious and clueless – two things I hope to never be again.

I never thought I'd see him again. There were times I wished I'd never have to face him, but other times I'd hoped he would turn up, climb through my window, and kiss me until I saw stars. No matter what my thoughts were, I was undoubtedly obsessed with him. I always have been.

Rolling onto my side, I pull the blanket tighter around me, even though the morning sun bleeds into the room. My phone sits on the nightstand. I stare at the dark screen, knowing what I want to do, but not wanting to give in to the temptation.

The way he watched me last night wasn't casual or curious. It was intense and focused, like he was memorising me all over again. Like I was something he'd lost once, and refused to lose twice.

And God help me, because I feel the same way.

Years have gone by. Our lives have changed. We have become strangers. But standing there in the dark, with the endless maze around us, it felt like time hadn't passed at all. Like the obsession never burned out and has been waiting, dormant, for us to reunite.

I sit up slowly, touching my feet to the cold floor, and laugh under my breath. Relaxing was the plan. That was the promise I made myself when I came to stay here. Instead, I'm haunted by a boy I used to know in a mask, and the man who is now underneath it.

I poke my head out into the hallway, finding the apartment silent. I quietly pad down the hall and use the bathroom, doing a sweep of the area to confirm the girls are both still asleep in their rooms. Slipping back into my room, I collapse back onto the mattress, my head turning to stare at my phone again. Chewing my lip, I reach over and I unlock it. I hesitate for half a second, my thumb hovering over the screen, then type his username into the search bar, just as I have countless times recently.

His profile picture shows him in shadows, as though he's deliberately staying just out of reach. I tap on it and zoom in, studying the picture, as if I haven't already done this. There are many videos and photos of him at the park in costume, mask on, sliding on his knees and looming over scared visitors with his impressive height. There are few photos not at the park, though some are taken late at night with city lights behind him, his hoodie pulled up, mask still on. Some are with his back to the camera, or him dressed in all black on his motorbike.

I watch his latest upload. It's a video of him shirtless, wearing dark pants and his mask. His fingers fiddle with the bottom of the mask, as if teasing us with a face reveal, and his muscles flex deliciously with the slight movement. I scroll on to the next, which is a photo of his hands resting on a railing; his veins are faint, fingers long. The next is a mirror shot where his mask is half in shadows, his body taut and perfect, and a dim, red light

glows behind him. People in the comments don't hold back, and I can't seem to stop reading them. Fire emojis. Heart eyes. Dirty one-liners.

I shouldn't feel possessive – I don't have the right – but I do anyway.

My thumb flicks downward, taking me back to the most recent video. It should be cringe that he has posted a thirst trap, but he's simply too sexy for it to be considered an ick. He's leaning against what looks like the employee entrance at the park. The lighting is low, like the video was filmed after closing. He isn't posing, exactly. He's just standing there, as if waiting for innocent bystanders, his shoulders relaxed, head tilted slightly, eyes lifting to the camera at the very last second.

It's the look that ruins me. My breath catches, embarrassingly sharp, and I glance toward the door like someone might have heard it. The apartment stays quiet. I turn the volume up a notch despite myself. He doesn't say anything. Just shifts his weight, jaw flexing, and then the video ends.

I stare at the frozen frame. This version of Ash feels dangerous in a way I don't completely understand. I swipe to the comments again, forcing myself to read them as exposure therapy. People thirst openly, joking about wanting to be scared by him, asking where he works, when he's on shift. My stomach twists. They don't know him. They don't know he used to hate attention. That he preferred sitting beside me in bed with our backs against the wall, drawing and writing passages in our notebooks. That he preferred to be somewhere secluded with me than out in public. That he liked fiction over reality, had his head always stuck in a book, and could quote the most beautiful words, from modern to classic literature.

They don't know the boy underneath this man. Not like I do. Maybe that's what unsettles me the most: that he's letting the world look at him now, when once he only let *me* see him. I tap his profile again, scrolling slower this time. The mask never comes off.

My phone buzzes suddenly in my hand. I nearly drop it. My heart hammers for some unknown reason and I look down, knowing already, even before the screen lights up.

AshofNight posted a story.

I tap the notification straight away, not caring that he'll see that I've watched it instantly. I clearly have no shame right now. The story loads after a long, painful moment. It's dark, then the camera shifts, revealing the

familiar curve of the park's gates at night. The caption is in simple white text against the shadows.

Some things don't stay buried.

My teeth sink into my lower lip as another story loads. This time, the camera's on him. His black hoodie is on and mask in place, and his piercing eyes stare straight into the camera, as if he is looking right at me from behind the screen.

Come see me.

Another photo appears, and this time it is of his hand – that gorgeous, veined hand of his – holding the mask. Silver glints underneath his sleeve and the corner of a cherry charm peeks out, confirming he *does* have my bracelet that I lost all those years ago. I don't understand how he has it, and the fact he is still wearing it blows my mind. Five years is not a short amount of time. The thought of him holding onto it, wearing it, like I have a claim over him still ... it sends a shiver down my spine.

It's so much more fun when we are together.

I blink down at the words, my breath laboured, unable to stop myself from assuming this is his attempt to communicate with me. He is inviting me back to the park again. My throat feels dry as I reload the stories and play through them again.

Rolling my lips inward, I click back onto his latest video. My free hand moves to my stomach, my fingertips lightly dancing across the bare skin where my shirt has come up. Slowly, my hand lowers into my shorts. My finger grazes my clit, and I arch my back at the sensation of it. Exhaling softly, I reach for my vibrator and switch it on, hoping it won't be heard through the door. My eyes dart to it a few times as I press the vibrator into me. I place my phone down against my pillow, facing the screen toward me as my other hand slips between my thighs. I exhale, slipping a finger inside myself.

He's broader than I remember. Solid in a way that speaks of time spent at the gym and a lot of physical work. His shoulders slope, strong and relaxed, and his collarbones are sharp. There are faint lines of muscle along his

stomach, deep v-lines above his pants. It shouldn't feel this intimate to look, but it does, because this isn't some stranger online. This is the boy who called me every day, travelled hours on a train to visit me, who snuck into my house sometimes just to hold me. This is Ash, grown into himself, into something quieter and more dangerous, and still as utterly intoxicating. He might seem dark to everyone else, but I've seen the softer side of him – the side his viewers never get to see. They could watch him forever and still never understand him the way I do.

I zoom in before I can stop myself, my eyes tracing the story's details like they might tell me something I don't already know. There's a small scar near his ribs. His posture is loose and confident, like he's comfortable in his skin now. The thought makes my chest ache. I want his face. Suddenly, I want it desperately, like it's something vital I've been denied for too long. The last time I saw him without the mask there were tears in my eyes, and my heart was in my throat.

I need to see him properly. I need to know if his eyes still soften when he looks at me, even in a crowded room. If he's still handsome in the way that used to undo me. Logically, I already know the answer. He wouldn't have changed that much, and bone structure doesn't disappear. Familiarity doesn't either, yet there's this restless need in me to see it all right now.

I don't want the version of him he gives the internet.

I want *him*.

Mask off. Guard lowered. Eyes on mine.

My fingers move faster, and the vibrations hit me with just the right amount of pressure. My breath is releasing in short, sharp spurts as I feel my orgasm rising. Throwing my head back, I let out a cry as it courses through me. Sagging back into my pillow, I return my gaze to the screen, staring at him once more. It scares me how fast my obsession with him came back, how easily he has claimed me again, as if I have been waiting for him to step back into my life and take up the space where no one else ever quite fit.

Locking my phone, my heart racing, I press my face into the pillow, slightly mortified at what I just did. I haven't had much sexual desire for anyone since him. In fact, there were times I thought there might be something wrong with me, but my hunger is back in full force, flooding through me with a power strong enough to knock the air from my lungs.

Seeing his body only makes one thing clear. I need to see his face again, as soon as possible. There's something strange about seeing him like this: adored, watched, wanted. Ash was always intense, even back then, but this version of him feels different.

My thumb hovers over the message button. I don't press it. Instead, I lock the screen again and stare up at the ceiling, my thoughts tangled and messy. I tell myself I'm just tired. That this is nostalgia. That I can relax today like I planned, but I know better. Ash is no longer a ghost from my past. He's real, he's nearby, and he's been watching me just as long as I've been watching him. I don't know what that means yet.

Getting to my feet, I stretch, attempting to tell myself this doesn't mean anything, but no matter how much time passes, no matter how many versions of ourselves we become, some connections don't fade.

I also pretend that I'm not going to go tonight.

But even I know that is a complete lie.

The park looks different in the afternoon light. Less intimidating. Less menacing. Less theatrical. I hover near the entrance, my hands shoved into my jacket pockets, telling myself I'm just here because I have nothing else to do today. I step up to the ticket booth, already reaching for my wallet. The girl behind the glass barely glances at the screen before looking up at me.

'Oh – Bryn, right?'

Another story, whenever you're ready.

Come to [Lokepub](#) to pick your next novel.

I blink in surprise. 'Yes?'

'You're good.' She smiles, pressing a button that makes the gate swing open. 'Go on ahead, you're on the list.'

'The list?' I repeat.

She nods like this is the most normal thing in the world. 'Yeah. Just head on in.'

Murmuring a thank you, I walk through the gates on legs that suddenly feel unsteady. The metal clicks shut behind me, sounding final in a way that sends a shiver up my spine.

He knew I'd be here. That I'd come back.

Part of me bristles at the assumption, slightly irked by his certainty. Another part feels thrilled that I was right in assuming the story was his way of communicating with me.

The park stretches out ahead of me, sounds of distant laughter and mechanical whirrs filling the air. I walk slowly, surveying my surroundings without meaning to, half-expecting him to step out from behind a prop or ride to scare me.

Every masked figure makes me look twice.

'Here you are, yet again.'

His voice comes from behind me, deep and unmistakably his. I turn. Ash stands a few feet away, mask in place, dressed in a dark hoodie, his hands loose at his sides. His stare is locked on me, and I can tell he's been anticipating this moment just as much as I have. Then, he removes the mask, and I barely dare to breathe. He's still handsome. More than handsome, and familiar in a way that hits straight to my core. His gaze is unchanged, steady and a little too intense. His mouth too, the lines around its corners, the annoyingly sexy smirk curving his lips.

For a long second, neither of us moves.

'You—' I start, then stop, swallowing. 'You set it up so I could get in for free?'

His mouth twitches. 'Figured you'd want to come back. Thought I'd make it easier.'

'You were talking to me? Through your stories?'

He nods, the corner of his mouth lifting ever so slightly. I'm painfully aware of the space between us. How easily it could be closed. How much history there is hovering between us, unresolved and heavy.

'I wanted to see you,' I admit, the truth slipping out before I can stop it.

His expression shifts then, something dark and soft all at once passing through his eyes.

'I know,' Ash says quietly. 'I was hoping you would.'

The late afternoon light filters through the park, a golden glow painting everything deceptively gentle. Groups start to trickle in, lots of people in their late teens and early twenties. They enter in waves, laughing, the

normalcy of it all almost jarring after the intensity of last night. The park is waking up again, shedding its stillness piece by piece.

Ash glances around, then back at me.

‘It’s about to get busy,’ he says, slowly inching his mask back onto his face. I feel an irritating flutter between my thighs because God damn, I did not realise I had a mask kink until now. ‘You okay sticking around?’

‘Yeah,’ I answer. ‘I don’t have anywhere else to be.’

His gaze lingers on me, that smirk still slanted across his mouth.

We start walking, not really deciding where we’re going. We fall in step easily, like we’ve done a thousand times before. I notice the way people look at him, nudging each other and speaking behind half-curved hands. He’s certainly famous around here, and I bet many people attend these Fright Nights simply to see him.

‘So,’ I say, needing to break the silence. ‘You just knew I’d come back, hey?’

‘Sure did.’

I glance at him. ‘You sound pretty confident there.’

‘I know you better than you know yourself, Bryn,’ he says, simply.

My mouth opens to respond, but no words come out. As the sun dips lower, lights flicker on one by one. The shadows stretch longer, the atmosphere becoming extremely eerie. Ash slows near the edge of a dark path. He stops walking. I do too, my heart thumping faster, as if it’s anticipating something.

‘I’m on shift now,’ he says.

I nod, though a strange disappointment sinks in my chest. ‘Do you want me to leave?’

His eyes lift to mine immediately. ‘No.’

The answer is instant and certain, and I fight back a smile.

‘I’ll just hang out then.’

‘You’re mine after midnight,’ he says, just like he used to, when he would get to my house so late.

People brush past us now, laughter rising. The park is officially alive, and yet, in this small pocket of space, it feels like it is just us again. Like nothing else really matters.

‘I’ve missed you,’ I say suddenly, the words escaping before I can stop them, and my cheeks burn at the confession. I should be angry with him, but the resentment I once carried has faded. I’m too tired to keep clinging to

the past, especially when we never even got to speak about it. I try not to think about it at all. It hurts too much.

It's impossible to see Ash's reaction behind the mask. He doesn't respond right away. Instead, he tugs his sleeves down from his elbows to his wrists, covering his ink-laced arms. He didn't have tattoos like that when I knew him. He now has two full sleeves.

'I never stopped,' he says at last.

His honesty makes me breathe easier. There were so many times I wondered if he still cared for me. Now, he confirms he always did. Just like I did for him, even though I'm the one who pushed him away.

Lights flash brighter overhead. Somewhere nearby, a bell rings, announcing the start of the night's attractions. Ash takes half a step back, like he's forcing himself to create distance.

'I need to go,' he says.

I nod, though part of me wants to reach out, grab his sleeve, and keep him here in the light, where I can steal him for a little longer. I resist the urge, still feeling flustered from our words of honesty.

He turns back to me, the corner of his mouth lifting. 'Stay close to the haunted maze.'

'Why?'

His eyes darken just a fraction. 'So I can find you.'

Then he's gone, swallowed by the crowd and the growing darkness, leaving me standing there with the echo of his words and the unmistakable feeling that tonight is the first of many that I will be spending in the shadows with him.

21

BRYN

Five Years Ago

My feet strike against the track, still damp from the morning dew. Magpies sing from along the fence line, and I give them a cautious look, praying they're not in a swooping mood. I round the bend, my ponytail brushing my neck. Coach's whistle cuts through the air somewhere behind me, but I don't slow. I know my pace. The school oval opens up around me. A couple of girls from my year stretch near the sidelines, talking about assignments and parties and things that feel strangely unimportant. I pass them without stopping, my lungs burning.

This is my life now. Early mornings. Training before class. Ice baths, protein bars and teachers who tell me I've got 'real potential' if I just keep my head straight. When Coach finally calls time, I slow to a jog, then a walk, my hands braced on my hips as I catch my breath. Sweat drips down my spine, the sun already warm on my back even though it's barely past eight.

The bell rings loudly and the oval starts to empty. I sling my bag over my shoulder and head toward the lockers, legs pleasantly sore, mind already shifting to the rest of the day. I miss Ash. I wish he was here with me, and my two best friends were too. This place is incredibly lonely. I've made a few friends, but nothing's quite the same as it was back home.

My gaze drifts across the oval, where I catch sight of Isla at the far edge of the field. She's crouched down near a tall, scruffy guy I don't recognise, his hat pulled low and his shoulders hunched. I curve my hand over my eyes to shield them from the sun. She glances over her shoulder as he hands her something.

‘What the?’ I say aloud, watching her with a scrutinised stare. The entire exchange looks sketchy, and I have a bad feeling about it.

The guy leans closer to Isla and whispers something into her ear, and she tenses up, giving a firm nod before shoving to her feet and stalking back toward the main building. My heart thuds against my ribs. The guy glances around like he’s making sure no one else is watching, then straightens and hops into a dark dented car parked just beyond the fence. The engine roars to life, tyres crunching on the gravel.

He’s definitely not a student – definitely not someone who belongs here. Isla lingers outside the school building for a moment, glancing after him, hands fidgeting with whatever he gave her.

Tahlia, the closest friend I have here so far, catches up to me with her usual easy grin. She’s shorter than me, wiry and fast, the kind of runner who always seems just a step ahead, even when she’s matching my pace.

‘Heya,’ she says breathlessly, nudging me lightly with her shoulder.

We’ve been running together for a few weeks now, ever since she invited me to join her on these morning laps. Tahlia’s easy to talk to and seems very chill, which is why we have clicked.

‘Hey,’ I reply distractedly. I jut my chin towards the car as it drives off. ‘Do you know that guy?’

Tahlia follows my line of sight, her eyebrows drawn together. ‘No, that’s not a kid from our school,’ she says flatly, voice low. ‘I’ve seen him hanging around before. Totally dodgy.’

I nod, keeping my hands tight in my pockets. ‘I thought so. Something about him seemed off.’

The car disappears around the corner. Isla fidgets with her bag, looking around nervously before she heads to class. I want to go to her, to grab her hand, to make sure she’s okay, but she is too far away, and I doubt she would ever let me do that. Her shoulders are tense, and she’s walking strangely, unlike herself. Something’s off. She’s not the same sister who used to talk boys with me, or laugh late hours into the night, trading secrets and brushing each other’s hair.

Dragging my feet toward the classroom, each step slower than the last, I can’t seem to focus. Dropping into a seat, I rest my chin heavily on my palm, trying to pay attention to what the teacher is saying. My thoughts keep drifting back to Isla and the stranger, the handover, and the way she looked over her shoulder like she knew she was being watched.

My phone buzzes in my pocket. When Mr Harrison turns to write on the white board, I quickly pull it out, seeing Ash's name on my screen.

Ash: Looking forward to seeing you on the weekend. Can't wait x

My chest lightens, a weight I didn't even realise I was carrying lifting at once. I bite my lip, a smile tugging at my face before I can stop it, and tuck my phone back into my pocket.

I can't wait either.

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22

ASH

Now

I move quietly, my shoes crunching just loudly enough to hear over the ambient screams. I'm careful to stay in the shadows where the light doesn't reach.

She's here. I can feel the tension in the air, and the scent of her shampoo is faint but unmistakable, a scent I've memorised. I don't need the sound of her footsteps to know she's ahead.

I round a corner, catching a glimpse of her strawberry-blonde hair in the weak, flickering light of a lantern. She freezes, like she senses me too. A thrill runs through me as I follow her deeper into the maze, letting the shadows mask me. She laughs as I duck behind an archway, watching her scan the path ahead, her shoulders tense.

'Cherryyyy,' I whisper under my breath, and it's enough for my lips to twitch into a ghost of a smile.

I step out from the shadows and Bryn startles, a small gasp escaping her. She spins, searching, and the look on her face makes me pause, losing focus for a moment. That smile can stop my heart in my chest. She moves again, faster this time, and I match her stride, careful to let her think she's leading the chase. She throws herself into a dark corner, pressing against the wall, careful to quiet her breathing. Turning her back to me, she peers down the corridor, in the opposite direction to where I am.

Smirking, I step closer. 'You can't hide from me.'

She gasps, spinning to face me. The thrill in her eyes matches mine, making my pulse jump. The fog swirls around, barricading us from the rest of the world. She darts left. I follow. She freezes. I freeze. We play this

game – predator and willing prey – and I wouldn't have it any other way. Every step, every turn, every shadow between us is charged. I'm close enough to taste the tension, the longing, the electricity neither of us can deny.

She rounds the corner, and I'm there before she can take another step, catching her wrist in my hand, holding her in place.

'You can't get away,' I murmur, my thumb brushing along her skin.

She grins, breathless. I pull her toward a section of the wall that looks like part of the maze, but I know better. My fingers press against the hidden latch, and the wall clicks, swinging open into a narrow room behind it.

The door shuts behind us with a soft thud, cutting us off from the noise and the world outside. In an instant, my hands are on her waist, pulling her flush against me, and she's trembling with what I assume is part nerves, part want, and it only makes me hunger for her more. Her eyes search mine, and I don't give her time to think. I lean in, brushing my lips across hers. Bryn's hands press into my chest, and she arches into me as I deepen the kiss. It's fierce, heated, and desperate all at once. I can feel her pulse in her neck, racing against mine, and it makes the fire between us burn hotter.

She's mine, and I'm not letting her go. Every second apart from her, every year, every stupid misunderstanding we've carried with us, they all crash out with this kiss, raw and unrelenting. Her fingers thread through my hair, tugging me closer, and I respond with the same intensity, kissing her harder, our teeth grazing, tongues brushing. She gasps, and it's a sound I can't resist. My hands slide up her back, pulling her impossibly close, and I feel her press into me, soft and firm all at once. The world outside the hidden room ceases to exist. The screams of the haunted maze, the distant footsteps, they all fade away, and I don't care that not being out there means I might lose my job.

'Have you been thinking about me, Cherry?' I drawl, capturing her lower lip between mine and sucking on it until she moans.

'Yes,' she admits, her breath barely above a whisper.

'Oh yeah?'

'Yeah. I've been watching those videos of yours.'

I pause, drawing back from her to stare down at her flushed cheeks and coy smile.

'Oh?' I ask. 'Is that so?'

‘Mmmhmm,’ she murmurs, her hand slipping underneath my shirt. I tense, loving the feeling of her hand on my muscles. ‘I’ve been imagining all the things I want to do to you.’

Oh, fuck.

‘Do share.’

Dropping to her knees, she pops open my pants in one fluid movement. My eyes widen as I gape down at her, honestly quite shocked by her confidence. Her eyes bounce up to mine as she shimmies my pants down my thighs. I grip the wall, barely able to keep myself upright as she tugs my briefs down.

‘Bryn,’ I half say, half moan, because at that moment, her lips wrap around my tip and I lose all control of my thoughts. My eyes are trained on her as she peers up at me, sliding her tongue up and down my length.

‘Fuck,’ I groan, leaning heavily onto the wall behind me and bucking my hips.

Her mouth feels good. Incredible, actually. My eyes flutter closed as she continues to move her mouth against me, adding a hand, too. As she grips me, a sound I’ve never heard from myself fills the room.

I’ve imagined this moment many times over. Dreamt it, daydreamt it, pleased myself to the thought of it, but none of it compares to the real thing. My grip on the wall tightens as my breath quickens, and my legs begin to shake as a familiar feeling curls inside me. Bryn takes me deeper into the back of her throat and a guttural groan leaves me.

‘I’m – going to – ahh!’ I warn her and attempt to pull back, but she plunges my cock deeper into her mouth and I can’t stop it. I release into her mouth, thrusting against her, my fingers tangled in that gorgeous hair of hers as she continues to take me, swallowing every last drop. With one final lick, she leans back, smirking up at me as I slump against the wall, a post-orgasm high ebbing through me with dizzying force. She quickly stands, meeting my gaze.

‘See you around, Ash of Night,’ she teases, and before I can react, she’s gone in a flash of strawberry-blonde hair, weaving through the fog, and slipping between the twisted corridors of the maze.

I’m frozen in place, attempting to understand if that really just happened or if I hallucinated it.

‘Wait!’ I call, but my voice is drowned out by the distant screams of people exploring the maze. I pivot, moving quickly down one corridor, then

another, straining for the sound of her breath or the shuffle of her shoes against the floor, but she's gone. Every turn I take, every corner I round, I find empty fog and shadows.

Damn her. Damn her for smiling like that, for teasing me, for vanishing into the maze like a ghost I can't catch. I slow, scanning the swirling mist. My chest hammers, not just from the chase, but from the ache of wanting her, needing her, now more than ever. The maze feels bigger suddenly.

I mutter under my breath, low and rough. 'You can't hide from me, Bryn.'

I'm left in the shadows, searching, knowing it's only a matter of time before I find her again. The maze finally quietens behind me. I lean against the wall for a second, dragging my knuckles across it, trying to catch my breath.

Exhilarated. That's the only word that comes close. Her laugh, that flash of mischief, the way she took over like that. It's a rush more forceful than any scare I've ever pulled off in this park. I can feel it buzzing through my veins, dangerous and addictive. Fuck, that was hot. I shake my head, forcing it down. I can't let it get to me. Job first. Game face on. My shift isn't over yet. Whenever she is here, my job and responsibilities vanish, and I need to get back into the zone.

People start wandering into the maze in groups. I step back into the shadows, adjusting the mask to cover my face, my heart still racing. A group of young-looking girls rounds the corner, hesitant and unsure. I spring from the shadows, my growl echoing through the corridor, my mask inches from their faces. Their startled screams feed me, making me grin, which I can't hide under the mask.

Another group follows, and as though I'm on autopilot, I perform the same routine. Every scream, every flinch, makes the lingering thrill of Bryn fade just enough to let me focus. My body moves, ducking, lunging, and I whisper from the dark. I slide up to people on my knees, appearing out of nowhere. I love watching the terror fill their eyes. I thrive in the chaos.

The night drags on. I work my way through every corridor, stalking, scaring, and playing the part, but my mind is still consumed with Bryn. By the end of the shift, my muscles ache, sweat drips down my neck, and a heavy fog settles around the park. I peel off the mask and toss it onto the counter, running a hand through my hair, letting exhaustion hit me.

I still feel high from what happened with her, though. No matter how much I try to lose myself in the job, she's still there. Still untouchable, teasing me, and somehow, still mine in a way no one else has seen. I lean against the wall, letting the silence of the empty park soak in. I know one thing for certain: I'm not letting her slip away again.

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23

ASH

Five Years Ago

The morning light seeps in through the curtains. I've snuck in like I always do when no one is watching, careful not to wake anyone. She's asleep on her side, her hair a tangle of strawberry-blond waves. My heart thumps a little with the thrill of it, like it always does, but it's nothing I haven't done a dozen times before. I've become quite the professional at entering undetected.

I crawl into the bed beside her. She stirs, yawns, and shifts a little, nestling deeper under the covers.

'Morning, sleepyhead,' I whisper, stroking my knuckles along her temple. She smiles in her sleep, murmuring something unintelligible. I poke her shoulder lightly, and she blinks her eyes open and squints up at me.

'You're here,' she mumbles, voice thick with sleep.

'Sorry I couldn't be here last night. Passed out when I got home and missed my train.'

She smiles. That sleepy, mischievous smile I've fallen in love with.

'Totally okay. I know it's a late trip for you after a busy week,' she whispers.

We lie there for a few minutes, talking quietly. Her hand brushes mine, and I squeeze it, feeling much more relaxed now that I'm back with her, even though I'm always on edge here, waiting for the moment I get caught and banished from the house, to never see her again. Every moment is sacred.

A creak on the floorboards snaps me out of my daze. My eyes widen. I hear footsteps, slow and deliberate. I have come to recognise the differences

in the footsteps of the people in this house. These belong to Bryn's stepdad.

'Bryn! We're heading into town, get ready! Your mother wants us all to come along to the markets.'

I dive under the covers, hoping my long legs are completely concealed, just as the door swings open. My mouth clamps shut as I hold my breath, flattening myself into the mattress. Bryn sits up.

'Come on,' Grant says, sounding thankfully oblivious to the boy hunched underneath Bryn's fluffy doona cover. 'We've got to get a move on if we want the best pick of the fresh fruit.'

'Okay,' Bryn replies, her voice still laced with sleep.

The door shuts, but I still don't move as she swings her legs over the side of the bed. I can feel my pulse in my throat as I stay perfectly still, counting to ten with each slow, deliberate breath.

'Don't be long,' he calls before heading back down the hall.

I peek out from under the bed. Bryn glances around the room, giving me a sly, guilty smile. 'Good hiding.'

I release a quiet laugh, flopping back against her pillows, adrenaline still coursing through me. 'Quick reflexes. Like a cat.'

She giggles, brushing her hair out of her face. I watch Bryn move around the room, the soft shuffle of her feet on the carpet, the jangle of hangers clashing together as she picks out clothes.

She turns to face me. 'Sorry I have to leave after you've travelled all this way.'

I wave my hand dismissively. 'Don't be silly. Seeing you now is more than enough. I'm happy to wait for you, or I can leave, if that's easier.'

'No!' she blurts, looking alarmed. 'Please don't leave.'

I smile, feeling touched by her words. 'I'll be here then, waiting for you to get back.'

'Don't get into too much trouble while I'm gone.'

I tuck my arm behind my head, leaning back onto it and flashing her a grin. 'No promises.'

She laughs quietly as she pulls on her shoes. Swinging her bag onto her shoulder, she trots over to me, planting a soft, lingering kiss on my lips.

'I'll miss you,' she whispers.

'I'll miss you more.'

She heads for the door and disappears through it. I watch her go. I stay in her room for a while, just soaking in the quiet. It feels like my home away

from home, although I'm not naive enough to think I could ever live in a place like this.

Car doors open and shut, the engine starts and they leave. I stay in Bryn's bed, scrolling on my phone, then switch to reading. After almost two hours, my stomach growls loudly. I haven't eaten today, and it's starting to catch up to me.

My eyes shift to the door a few times before hunger wins over my rational thoughts. Taking a deep breath, I slip quietly toward the stairs, careful not to make a sound. Maybe there's something good left over from breakfast in the kitchen. I bet they eat a big breakfast every day, unlike me, skipping meals simply because I can't afford food.

The kitchen smells like oranges when I enter, and my stomach growls again. I tiptoe toward the counter, scanning for anything that's easy to grab. My search snags on a loaf of bread, a jar of peanut butter, and some bananas and apples in a fruit bowl. Reaching for a banana, I peel it and begin eating, looking out the window at the quiet street before me. For a second, I pretend this is my life. I imagine what it would be like to come home to a warm house with food in the fridge, a clean space that isn't polluted with smoke and loud music that makes my ears bleed.

I've just grabbed an apple when a throat clears. I spin around, dropping the apple to the floor as I lock eyes with Isla, Bryn's older sister. She's standing in the doorway, arms crossed, one eyebrow arched as she scans me from head to toe. I freeze, a weird dipping sensation in my stomach. I thought she'd gone to the markets with Bryn. I thought the coast was clear.

'Hi ...' I eventually say.

She steps closer, her eyes glinting with curiosity. 'And who might you be, sneaking around my kitchen?'

I open my mouth to answer, but nothing comes out. My heart is hammering, and I can feel warmth creeping up my neck. She's tall, confident, and radiates that 'I know everything and you don't' energy that only older sisters seem to have. I've heard a lot about her, but never had the pleasure of meeting her in person. I've seen her from a distance before, but now that we're standing face to face, she's just as Bryn describes.

Isla is tall, slimmer than Bryn, with cheekbones you notice straight away. Her gaze cuts into mine with unsettling intensity; she wears her confidence like armour. Her beauty is obvious, the kind that demands attention whether you want to give it or not. Bryn is nothing like that. Bryn is shorter, with

muscle packed into soft curves and the strength of a track runner who spends her time doing many laps of a field. Her eyes are kind, warm, and her strawberry-blond hair is always a little messy, like she's been moving too fast to tame it. Isla's beauty hits you head-on. Standing here, looking at her, I can see why the world responds to Isla the way it does, but I don't understand why Bryn thinks she comes second. To me, Bryn is the most beautiful girl in the world.

'Ash,' I reply, deciding that honesty is probably the best approach. I'm not sure what Bryn has told her, if anything.

A knowing smirk curves the edge of her lips. 'I see. You're the infamous Ash I've heard so much about.'

A jolt runs through me. Bryn's talked about me? I don't know what she's said, or how much, but the idea that my name exists in her world even when I'm not there makes me feel warm. I feel oddly exposed, like I've been seen from a distance without knowing it.

Isla is intimidating. Not so much to me – I've dealt with much worse – but I can see why Bryn feels the way she does around her. She has the kind of presence that fills a room. The sort of confidence that makes people gravitate to her. She carries it effortlessly, as if she's always known she belongs at the centre of things. The way she stands there, relaxed and self-assured, makes me realise how growing up beside someone like that would make anyone feel smaller, even someone like Bryn, who shines in quieter ways. Isla has the type of energy that tries to overshadow people – or at least that's how Bryn feels, and just from this brief encounter, I don't blame her for feeling that way.

I understand why Bryn second-guesses herself, why she sometimes shrinks when her sister steps into the room, but standing here now, seeing Isla closely and through my own eyes, I know something Bryn doesn't always believe. Power like this can be loud and overwhelming, but that's not something I find attractive in a person. I love Bryn's gentle, quiet presence, and the way she lights up in her own way. That's what pulled me toward her in the first place.

'I didn't realise you were here,' I admit. 'I thought you left to go to the markets with everyone else.'

She scoffs, rolling her eyes. 'Couldn't think of a worse way to spend my Saturday.'

‘Free samples of food, fresh air, music?’ I shrug. ‘Sounds pretty good to me.’

Her brows lift again, surprise flashing across her face before she smooths it over with that same effortless confidence. She wasn’t expecting pushback. I can tell that she’s used to people bending to her. Well, she hasn’t met me before.

She drifts closer, clearly entertained, her smile edged with condescension. ‘I imagine a boy like you wouldn’t be hard to impress.’

I let the silence sit for a second longer than necessary, just to watch the confidence on her face flicker before I bark a short, dry laugh.

‘Maybe,’ I say, shrugging. ‘But you’re trying a bit too hard for someone who acts like they don’t give a shit about anything.’

Her smile falters, showing her irritation. ‘Oh, is that right?’

I straighten, finally meeting her gaze properly. ‘Bryn acts like the sun shines out of your ass, but personally, I don’t think you’re all that.’

For a split second, she looks genuinely caught off guard. Then she recovers and lifts her chin, her eyes glinting with something between irritation and intrigue.

‘You’ve got a mouth on you,’ she says.

‘So I’ve been told,’ I reply. ‘Usually by people who don’t like being challenged.’

She studies me now, in an assessing, critical way. I can tell she’s enjoying this, even if my words offend her. Being denied the upper hand isn’t something she experiences often. Somewhere beneath the bravado, I catch a flash of something human. She is a damaged girl, and I’m reminded of my suspicions about what’s been happening to her, making me feel guilty about speaking to her like that. I can’t deny she can be conniving, and doesn’t treat Bryn how she should, but there is definitely something going on between her and Grant – something that has fundamentally changed her – and I think she’s acting this way to protect herself. I get it. I’ve seen and experienced some fucked-up things. It messes with you.

I think, not for the first time, that Bryn has spent too long believing she lives in her sister’s shadow.

‘So, what, you snuck in here?’ she asks. ‘How often do you do this, Ash?’

She says my name like it’s a dirty word, deliberately. I can tell she’s trying to pull a reaction out of me.

I arch a brow. ‘Why do you care?’

Her lips twitch, annoyed that I didn't offer her the answer she wanted. She straightens, folding her arms as though regrouping. She looks calculating, and a bit too interested in me for my liking.

'I have a right to know if a poor boy from the streets is sneaking around my house. God knows what you might have gotten up to if I didn't catch you down here.'

I stare at her for a second.

Another story, whenever you're ready.

Come to [Lokepub](#) to pick your next novel.

'Right,' I say. 'Because I was seconds away from robbing the place blind. Caught red-handed eating a banana. Real criminal mastermind stuff going on here.'

Her eyes flash in annoyance; she clearly doesn't find my response very humorous.

'Relax. I'm not here for your house. Or your things.'

Her chin lifts. 'Then what *are* you here for? A bed to sleep in? A hot shower?'

I don't hesitate, ignoring her constant jabs and accusations that I'm homeless. I have a home, just a shit one. 'Bryn, obviously.'

Something flickers across her face. Surprise, irritation, maybe even a hint of jealousy, and I see it clearly then. Isla likes having control over Bryn, and the satisfaction of getting what – and who – she wants. She likes having the ability to take things from others, especially when they don't belong to her.

'I didn't sneak in to cause trouble,' I continue. 'And I definitely didn't sneak in to case the house. All I care about is Bryn.'

That annoys her. I can tell from the way the corners of her mouth dip like she's eaten something sour. An unsettling silence stretches between us as she studies me again, as if she's recalculating. I think she's realising I'm not intimidated by her attitude – or her looks.

Finally, she smiles, eyes glinting like she's just discovered something. 'You're interesting, Ash.'

I give a half-smile back, not rising to it. 'You too, Isla.'

A quick spark of surprise flashes across her face. 'You know my name.'

'I do,' I reply. 'Names are important. Especially when you want to keep track of someone.'

Her lips twitch, and that same teasing glint is in her eyes, but now there's something else too. A hint of calculation. 'Oh? And what exactly *have* you been keeping track of, Ash?'

I lift one brow, matching her curiosity without giving much away. 'Enough to know what Bryn doesn't.'

Her expression shifts just slightly, her amusement edged with intrigue. She's not used to this. Usually, she gets the upper hand just by walking into a room, but right now, she's genuinely wondering how much I know, how much I notice, and what I might be referring to. She tilts her head, studying me, trying to gauge if I'm bluffing. I can see that she is used to being in control, that she wants to predict what's coming next, and her small irritation at knowing that she can't quite read me.

'What is it that you think you know?'

I hesitate. There's tension there under the surface, something she doesn't want me to see. My gut twists. I know she's hiding something from Bryn, from everyone around her, but I see through the bullshit. I suspect she knows what I know and doesn't want to admit I'm right.

Isla circles the counter slowly, studying me like I'm a puzzle she's decided to solve. 'You're different to how Bryn described you.'

I shrug again, deliberately casual. 'People always sound better in someone else's stories.'

I can see it now: this is her thing. She steps into Bryn's space, taking what she can just because she can. Not out of malice exactly, but more out of habit. It's as though she's never had to ask for attention before, because everyone gives it to her willingly. It's easy for her. But I'm not a prize to collect. A pretty face and confidence won't soften me. I hold her gaze steadily, unimpressed, and let the moment stretch until she shifts first. That seems to annoy her almost as much as it intrigues her.

She tilts her head, letting her hair fall just right across one shoulder. Her smirk is teasing and full of mischief.

'Maybe,' she says, her voice flirtatious, a clear deflection. 'Or maybe I just want to see if you can handle someone like me.'

Isla is good at charming people. She has a fluid ability to switch instantly from serious to playful and magnetic. She knows how to lure people in. How to press the right buttons.

‘Come swimming with me,’ she says suddenly, like it’s the most natural thing. Her fingers curl around the edge of her shirt before she peels it off, revealing a lacy bra underneath that barely contains her breasts.

I’m not surprised. I should be, but I’m not. After what Bryn has said about her and things she has done in the past, this is very predictable behaviour. I let my lips curl into a faint, sardonic smile.

‘Oh, I see how it is,’ I say. ‘You want what Bryn has. You always do.’

‘Maybe I do,’ she says lightly, teasing me to see if I’ll rise to it.

‘Good luck with that. I’m not someone you can take from her.’

She laughs, brushing past me as if daring me to follow. ‘Come on, Ash, you can’t deny that you want to come in with me,’ she says, glancing over her shoulder, clearly enjoying that I’m matching her fire. She reaches around and unclips her bra, and I stay where I am, shocked she’s gone this far. Crossing my arms across my chest, my jaw flexes, and I keep my eyes on hers. She’s exactly the kind of person who thinks they can charm their way into getting whatever they want.

‘I hope you’re ready for disappointment,’ I tell her dryly.

Her grin widens as she turns to face me, planting her hands on her hips, completely unashamed.

‘Disappointment? Oh, Ash, I don’t know the meaning of that word.’

‘We’ll see about that.’

Her eyes dart to mine, challenge blazing in them, and I can tell she’s a little thrown off.

‘You’re cocky,’ she says.

‘Not cocky,’ I reply, smirking. ‘Just sure of what I want. I’ve been warned about you.’

She scoffs, stepping closer and invading my space.

‘Warned about me? Oh, please. You’ll be begging for more before the day’s over.’

‘Doubtful.’

Her eyes narrow and I don’t flinch. I don’t step back, and I certainly do not move my eyes from hers, despite how desperately she wants me to look at her body.

‘Doubtful?’ she repeats, amusement creeping into her tone. ‘Oh, I like that. You think you’re untouchable, huh?’

I shrug. ‘Not untouchable. Just not easily impressed, despite the assumptions you have about me.’

Her smirk falters for a fraction of a second – a crack in her flawless confidence – before she recovers with that same sly tilt of her head. ‘Is that a challenge, Ash?’

I meet her gaze evenly. ‘Call it a fact. This,’ I lazily gesture to her half-naked body, still keeping my eyes on hers, ‘doesn’t work on me.’

Isla looks downright frustrated now. I step a fraction closer.

‘Listen carefully, Isla. You can try all the games you want, all the teasing, all the ... whatever this is.’ I let the words hang between us, so she feels the weight of them. ‘But Bryn? She’s not yours to mess with, and I’m not going anywhere.’

Her eyes flash with a mix of surprise and annoyance.

‘You push her around, and you’ll answer to me. Got it?’ She opens her mouth, but I cut her off. ‘Try something like this again, and you’ll see exactly what I mean.’

Her posture stiffens, the confidence she flaunts so easily suddenly tempered. I can see that she knows she’s met her match, and for the first time, she’s not in control.

Turning, I stalk back up the stairs and into the safety of Bryn’s room. It was a risk reacting like that to Isla, who can easily expose me, but something tells me that she enjoyed the interaction, and that she will enjoy dangling this secret over our heads. I’m not worried about Isla. She doesn’t scare me. She is a piece of work, but she’s nothing in comparison to what I’ve dealt with before.

A splash cuts through the air. I move to peek out the window. Isla is in the pool, her hair slicked back, still partly undressed. She emerges from the water, turning to stare up at me, knowing already that I’d be there. She looks straight at me.

‘I’m not done with you yet,’ she mouths, and I let out a short, dry laugh under my breath. Of course she’s not done. Of course she’s going to push. She’s relentless. Raising my middle finger, I turn my back to her and pull the curtains closed.

She has no idea who she is dealing with.

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24

BRYN

Now

The restaurant is vibrant with chatter, the clink of cutlery and laughter bouncing off the walls around us. I push my hair behind my ear and glance at Tess, who's poking at her salad. She's quiet tonight, clearly still carrying the weight of her recent breakup. Elodie, on the other hand, is loud enough for all three of us, swinging her fork like a conductor's baton and spilling half her wine onto the table.

'Honestly,' she says, shaking her head at nothing in particular. 'Boys are so predictable. They're either amazing but don't want to commit, or they're idiots and the ones who want to settle with you.'

Tess nods. 'Agreed.'

'Despite that, I think you need to get back out there,' she says, pointing her fork toward Tess. 'Your boobs are too big, and your face is too pretty to be wasting away. You're in your prime.'

'Or she can take a breather and time to heal,' I point out.

'No, that's boring. The best way to get over someone is to get under someone else.'

I let out a snort of laughter. 'Maybe you're right.'

'I'm always right.' She grins.

Tess smiles. 'Honestly, I think it would help me stop thinking about it. It would be a nice distraction.'

Elodie leans in, elbows on the table, eyes sparkling with mischief.

'How's your sexy masked man going, Bryn? I know you've been going back to the park almost every night. You're clearly obsessed. We need details!'

I cough into my wine glass. 'Excuse me? I am *not* obsessed.'

Tess scoffs softly, and I glance at her. She's shaking her head, but there's a small smile tugging at her lips. 'You are so obsessed, Bryn.'

Elodie laughs, and I can't help but grin. 'Okay, okay, maybe a *tiny* bit,' I admit, shrugging. 'But can you blame me? He's hot as hell.'

'Don't blame you at all,' Elodie says. 'So? Has anything happened?'

The table falls into silence, and my mind can't help but drift to Ash and what we did in the maze. That stupid, infuriating, ridiculously distracting Ash, the boy who has haunted me since the moment we met. I relive the memory of last night: the way he hunted me through the maze, how he tasted on my tongue. I shake my head, trying to push it away before Elodie notices I've gone quiet.

'Bryn?' Elodie leans forward, looking far too eager. 'Something has happened, hasn't it?'

I shrug, hoping to look nonchalant. 'Maybe.'

Tess raises an eyebrow and Elodie smirks, leaning back in her chair. 'Go on.'

Heat burns at my cheeks as I relay a play by play of the night. Tess's mouth hangs open in shock and Elodie's smirk has widened to the point it looks a little creepy.

'Wait. *What?*' Tess says, shocked.

'Oh, this is way better than I expected. Tell us everything, Bryn.' Elodie claps her hands together, rocking back and forth on her chair.

Rolling my lips inward, I tap my fingers restlessly on the table. 'There's just one thing.'

The girls exchange a glance.

'So, you remember Ash?'

Tess blinks. 'Yes, we all remember Ash and that vile brother of his.'

'No ...' Elodie trails off, eyes widening. 'It's not him, is it?'

Slowly, I nod.

Tess's hand flies to her mouth. Elodie nearly chokes on her wine, leaning forward so quickly she knocks over her glass, crimson spreading all over the table. She quickly rights it and begins to dab at the stain with her napkin as a waitress rushes over to help. Once it's cleaned, her eyes dart back to mine as she gapes at me.

I nod, my cheeks flaming hotter.

‘Wait, why are you entertaining it? He really hurt you and you cut him out of your life for good, right?’

Tess stares at me. ‘Yeah ... why? After what he did?’

‘Ohhh, this is messy. I love messy. Spill, Bryn. What happened? You were mad at him, right? What changed?’

I glance between them, trying to measure their reactions. They clearly did not see this coming. Neither did I.

‘I don’t exactly know. One minute I think about all the things that happened, the next, it’s like none of them matter. I’ve missed him ever since he left my life and after loss after loss ...’ I pause, the words getting stuck in my throat. ‘I don’t know. I got swept up in the fun of the haunted maze and the thrill of the chase. I haven’t thought much beyond that.’

The corner of Tess’s mouth drops as sympathy fills her expression. ‘I get that. You really loved him and you’ve never loved anyone like that since. It makes sense that he still has a hold over you.’

Elodie is nearly bursting with glee. ‘I think this is so hot. Him chasing you around, still obsessed after all this time. Like, have you *seen* those thirst traps?’ She waves her hand. ‘Can I look past his obsessive, stalker boy flaws?’ Tapping her finger against her chin, she sighs theatrically. ‘Pretty privilege is blinding.’

I shake my head, laughing despite myself. ‘I know I shouldn’t have ever gone there, but I’m like a moth to a flame when it comes to him.’

Tess leans back, rubbing her temples. ‘Bryn, I get the appeal, but you were so hurt by him. What he did was a betrayal and the other stuff was just damn creepy! You said he admitted to watching you sometimes, right? When you weren’t aware? He literally stalked you. Are you really willing to let him back into your life after all of that?’

Elodie, meanwhile, is grinning like she’s watching a live drama unfold, ignoring Tess, who is trying to be the reasonable one. ‘I mean, I’ll try to kick his ass if I ever see him again, but I still think it’s hot. For you.’

‘I don’t know ...’ Tess trails off, looking uncomfortable. ‘He’s from a bad family, Bryn. I know that wasn’t his fault, but he and his brother are bad news. I think you need to be really cautious.’

‘Maybe I’m being foolish, but it feels right. Even if it doesn’t make sense to anyone else,’ I say quietly.

The girls stare at me.

‘Well,’ Tess says, exchanging another glance with Elodie. ‘I hope you know what you’re doing.’

Averting my eyes, I take a long swig of my wine, finishing the glass. I certainly do *not* know what I am doing.

I rub my hands up and down my bare arms as the cool breeze brushes my skin. My headphones fill my ears with music. The air smells faintly of barbecue smoke drifting from someone’s backyard. I let my legs carry me without thinking too much, just wanting to clear my head after dinner. Tess and Elodie had a lot to say, and part of me still can’t believe I told them everything. My chest still burns from memories of last night. I will never forget it. One of my hottest, wildest fantasies came to life and I can’t stop thinking about it. I also can’t wait to see Ash again.

A buzz in my pocket interrupts my thoughts. I pull my phone out, seeing a new email from work. Dread accumulates in my gut at the thought of returning to my boring life back in Mariner’s Bay.

Hey Bryn, can I confirm whether you’re back next week?
There’s a client meeting we need you for.
Let me know if that works.

I frown, thumb poised over the screen. A client meeting. Back in Brisbane. Back to the chaos of deadlines and traffic and expectations that I’ve been trying to forget since I got here. Stepping off the path, I turn my music up louder and lean against a lamppost. I don’t want to go back yet. I don’t want to leave this quiet street, its soft buzz of cicadas. More accurately, I don’t want to be away from Ash or my friends again.

Swiping the email app closed, I stick the phone back in my pocket. Responsibilities can wait. For now, I need a time out. The wind picks up and I push forward, letting the rhythm of my steps match the beat in my headphones.

My phone vibrates again and I exhale, a little reluctant to check it, but to my surprise, it’s a direct message from *AshOfNight*. I pause mid-step, unsure if I want to open it or pretend I didn’t see it. Ultimately, curiosity wins.

Ash: So, how's the weather where you are?

My cheeks warm despite the cool night air. I scroll down, fingers trembling slightly, and there's another message.

Ash: Did you wear that colour for me?

I glance up suddenly, scanning the area around me. Ash always used to say how much he loved me in red, though I'd always avoided the colour as I thought it clashed with my hair. My eyes drift down to my crop top and gym shorts – a matching red set. Resisting a smile – because of course I wear a lot of red now – I sweep the area again, trying to see where he is.

Bryn: Still doing that whole stalking thing, then.

‘Only for you.’

Spinning on my heels, I turn to see Ash standing right behind me, close enough that I have to tilt my head back to look at him properly. He's turn-your-head-to-look kind of tall, with broad shoulders beneath a black tee that clings to his hard body. He used to be lean, whereas now he has a lot of muscle. His hair is darker than I remember too, now falling messily across his forehead, and his jaw is sharper, more defined. He's only gotten more attractive as he's aged. His bright blue eyes are still intense. There's a broody edge to him that has always been there.

‘Jesus, Ash,’ I breathe, clutching my phone to my chest. ‘Do you ever announce yourself, or is giving people a heart attack something you enjoy doing?’

A lazy grin curves his mouth. ‘Where's the fun in that?’

I swallow, suddenly very aware of how close he is, and the way his gaze dips down to my red outfit before meeting my eyes again.

‘You didn't answer the question,’ he drawls. ‘Did you wear it for me?’

I scoff, crossing my arms, but my heart is racing, and I know my cheeks are flushed. ‘Don't flatter yourself.’

His eyes flick to my crossed arms, then back to my face. ‘You always do that when you're lying.’

I bristle. 'You don't know me anymore.'

Something shifts in his expression. It becomes softer and darker all at once. I think I hit a nerve.

'Maybe not,' he says quietly. 'But I know *that*.'

The air around us feels hard to breathe in, charged with the familiar crackle of tension that's always between us. This is the first time I've seen him like this in years. As himself. Not the person who hides behind a character. Not the person lurking in shadows, chasing me through dark corridors. Memories and anger and unresolved everything crash together in my chest.

My mouth tightens into a thin-lipped smile. I take a step back, forcing distance between us so I can breathe.

'So what, you followed me? I mean, I shouldn't be surprised. You've stalked me before.'

He shrugs, unbothered. 'You do insist I'm a stalker. I didn't want to disappoint.'

Despite myself, a breathy laugh slips out, and his almost-smirk widens, like it was exactly what he was waiting for.

God help me.

Seeing him like this makes one thing painfully clear: whatever this is between us is just as strong as before, and it definitely isn't over.

We are wedged onto stools at a small bar. The air is warm, and everything around us is loud. The timber bar is sticky beneath my elbows. Glasses clink around us as people crowd in close, their voices overlapping each other. It's the kind of place where conversations blur together, where you have to lean in to be heard, and I'm painfully aware of how little distance there is between Ash and I. We sit side by side at the counter, close enough for me to be hyperaware of the heat coming off him and the way his knee keeps finding mine like it's accidental, even though we both know it isn't.

He slides a drink toward me, and I take a cautious sip.

'So,' I say, breaking the silence. 'What have you been up to all these years?'

Ash huffs out a quiet laugh, his eyes dropping to the glass in his hand. 'Working. Mostly.'

'That tells me nothing.'

He glances at me, the corner of his mouth lifting. 'Still demanding.'

‘Still evasive,’ I shoot back.

‘I work at the theme park. You know that part.’

‘Yeah,’ I say. ‘The scaring-people-for-fun thing you’ve got going on.’

He smirks. ‘Pays the bills, but mostly I just enjoy scaring the shit out of people.’

‘What do you do when it isn’t Fright Night season?’ I press.

‘I tattoo.’

‘You tattoo?’

He finally looks at me properly. ‘I’m a tattoo artist.’

My mouth falls open before I can stop it. ‘You are?’

‘What?’

‘That’s perfect for you. I’m so glad that you’re able to put your artistic talent to good use.’

His brow furrows slightly. ‘Yeah?’

‘You were always drawing,’ I say, warmth flooding my chest at the memories. ‘Every notebook. Every scrap of paper. You used to sketch and write all the time.’

A flicker of something crosses his face, but it’s gone before I can quite decipher what it is.

‘Yeah,’ he says quietly. ‘Turns out I didn’t grow out of it.’

I laugh, shaking my head. ‘I should’ve guessed. Of course you’d turn out to be insanely talented.’

His gaze lingers on me, unreadable. ‘You always believed in me.’

Taken aback by his intensity, I look down at my drink, suddenly very aware that despite how much time has passed, some things haven’t changed at all.

‘I still do,’ I say, softer.

He takes a slow sip of his drink, then glances at me. ‘What about you?’

I grimace, swirling the ice in my glass. Me, my least favourite topic to discuss.

‘What about me?’

‘What have you been up to, before you came back?’ he asks.

‘Work and study.’

‘Sounds thrilling.’

‘Yeah, totally.’

He waits, patient in that infuriating way of his. I sigh. ‘I work in marketing. At a firm in the city. I’m also doing a degree in graphic design.’

His eyebrows lift slightly. 'Oh?'

'Mhmm.' I nod.

'Impressive.'

I shrug, suddenly uncomfortable, well aware that my reality is far from what I wanted to do five years ago when we would daydream about our futures. I wanted to travel and teach overseas, but my stepfather insisted I do something more business-orientated because, direct quote, 'that's where the money is'.

'But?' he presses. His eyes are cold, blue, and unflinchingly steady, like he can see every thought I'm trying to keep tucked away.

'But I hate it,' I admit, the words spilling out. 'The job, the office, the people there. I sit at a desk all day and stare at a screen and wonder how this became my life.'

Ash studies me quietly, his expression unreadable. 'And outside of that?'

I hesitate, suddenly feeling quite embarrassed. 'There isn't much outside of that.'

His jaw tightens. 'You were destined for more than this, Bryn.'

I laugh softly, hating how he sees right through me and forces me to face all the thoughts I've been trying to push away. 'Funny. I ended up being boring instead.'

He doesn't smile. He just looks at me as if he's cataloguing my every word, every crack in my voice.

'Boring doesn't describe you,' he says finally.

A flush creeps up my neck, and I glance down at my glass. He slowly circles his own drink on the table, and my eyes shift over to his hands. They're big and veiny, with a light tan from the sun.

'I'm doing something else too.'

I glance at him. 'Yeah?'

'I'm writing.'

'Writing what?'

'A book.'

'You're writing a book?'

He's amused by my surprise. I mean, I shouldn't be surprised. He was always drawing and writing notes in his journal. When he wasn't doing that, his head was in a book.

'Didn't think I had it in me?'

‘No, I just ...’ I trail off and smile. ‘I’m just happy you’re doing so much with your artistic side. What’s it about?’

‘Two people,’ he murmurs softly. ‘They are sort of childhood sweethearts. Know each other better than anyone else ever could.’

Something tightens in my stomach at his words. He won’t meet my eyes.

‘They don’t end well,’ he continues. ‘Something happens. They lose each other.’

I swallow. ‘Sounds heavy.’

‘It is. The boy is distraught and heartbroken. He thought he was doing the right thing, but he lost the person he loved most in the world,’ he says quietly. Then his eyes lift to mine, and the breath gets trapped in my lungs at the pain in them. I see exhaustion, too. Regret. Things survived rather than processed, as if he’s been carrying the weight of a hundred unsaid words, a thousand nights spent replaying the same moments over and over in his mind, wondering how everything went so wrong. I know he feels this way, because I’ve felt the same.

‘Years later, they find each other again.’

I can barely hear the noise of the bar over the thud of my heartbeat in my ears.

‘And?’

‘And they’re different people now,’ he says. ‘But they’re still in love with each other. They could never quite let each other go.’

‘I see. So, it’s a romance?’

His gaze is dark and unreadable. ‘I suppose so. I guess it’s a romance.’

‘You suppose?’

‘A dark romance, maybe.’

‘Right. Do they get back together, then? The couple?’

‘Depends.’

‘Depends?’

‘I haven’t written the end yet. They’ve only just reconnected.’

His words sit between us. I curl my fingers tightly around my glass, my knuckles whitening.

He’s writing about us.

A strange mix of emotions swirl inside me: warmth, fear, and a yearning that I’ve tried to push away for so many years. I feel exposed, as if he’s holding up a mirror and asking if I recognise the reflection.

‘And how’s that going for them?’ I ask lightly, forcing a smile.

His gaze stays on me. ‘Complicated.’

I nod slowly, staring at the condensation sliding down my glass. ‘Sounds familiar.’

There’s a moment of silence as he studies me, waiting to see if I’ll say it. If I’ll acknowledge the truth he’s laid bare between us, but I don’t. I still don’t know what I want, or what I’m ready to face, because admitting it – that I’m standing at the beginning of a story yet to be finished – is terrifying.

‘Sounds like you’ve got a lot to work through,’ I manage to say, the words feeling thick in my throat.

His lips twitch. ‘You could say that.’

A desperate part of me is wondering how the story ends. How I want it to end.

Reaching for my glass, I tip my head back and finish my drink in one greedy gulp.

25

BRYN

Five Years Ago

I slip through the front door behind Mum and Grant, my arms aching from carrying bags. Mum is complaining about how overpriced the honey stall was, while Grant heads straight for the kitchen, keys clattering as he tosses them onto the counter.

‘I’m going to my room,’ I say quickly, already backing down the hallway before either of them can ask questions.

‘Don’t forget dinner is early tonight because we’re going out!’ she calls after me.

‘Yeah,’ I shout back as I disappear down the hall.

Only once I hear cupboard doors opening and the murmur of their voices drift from the kitchen do I let myself breathe. I push my bedroom door shut behind me and turn, excitement bubbling up instantly.

‘Ash?’ I whisper, already smiling. He looks up from my bed where he’s sat, his back against the pillows, journal abandoned beside him. Relief flickers across his expression when he sees me.

‘Finally,’ he says, wearing an easy smile.

‘I know.’ I drop my bag and cross the room in a few quick steps. ‘But I brought you something.’

I dig into my tote bag and pull out a small paper bag and hand it to him. Inside is a metal keyring from one of the stalls, etched with a hand-drawn raven. It reminded me of his sketches as soon as I saw it.

He takes it, turning it over in his fingers. ‘You got this for me?’

I shrug, suddenly nervous he might not like it. ‘I saw it and thought of you.’

For a second, he just looks at it, then his eyes dart to meet mine, and something soft settles in his expression, almost disbelieving.

‘I’m keeping this forever,’ he says quietly. ‘Thank you.’

I drop beside him on the bed, tucking my legs underneath me.

‘So,’ I say lightly. ‘Everything went okay while I was gone?’

He exhales, fiddling with the keyring in his lap. He looks troubled for a moment. ‘About that ...’

‘What?’ I ask, immediately concerned.

‘I thought everyone had left,’ he says. ‘I was hungry, so I went downstairs.’

My stomach drops. ‘Ash ...’

‘Yeah,’ he mutters, bitterness creeping into his tone. ‘Isla caught me.’

I freeze. ‘She *what*?’

He nods. ‘Yup. Found me in the kitchen.’

Heat flares up my neck in panic, worry, and an unsettling protectiveness over Ash all at once. Isla likes to take everything from me. She’d absolutely adore Ash’s looks, especially knowing how much he means to me. I never planned to tell her about him, but she saw my phone lighting up with notifications one day and went through our messages.

‘Oh my God. What did she say? What did you do?’

‘Ah ... it was weird.’

‘Weird? Weird how?’

‘She’s an interesting person. Exactly like you described her.’

‘Oh,’ I say, my voice a little flat. He must have thought she was absolutely stunning, just like everyone else does. He probably wishes he met her first. Jealousy flares inside me, almost violently, at the thought of the two of them here alone. I study his face, trying to read what happened while I was gone – what was said, how she acted, how he responded – but then I scold myself for thinking so little of him. This is Ash. My Ash. He’s with me, and what we have is deep on a level that Isla could never touch. At least, I hope so.

‘I’m so sorry. I swear I didn’t realise anyone was home.’

‘It’s okay. It’s done now. I don’t know what to do. She’s been acting so strange lately. Before, I trusted her with my life. Now, I don’t even know who she is or what she’s capable of.’

‘It’s okay,’ he says, his tone like he’s trying to smooth things over.

‘Nothing will happen. I’ll handle it.’

I nod, even though my chest still feels tight, unsure what exactly he means by that.

‘So, what did you think of her?’ I ask, aiming to be casual.

He hesitates for a second, as if searching for the right words. ‘She’s beautiful. Obviously.’

My stomach dips at his words.

‘But,’ he adds quickly, noticing my expression, ‘she’s intense. In a way that puts you on edge. I felt like she was psychoanalysing me.’

I force a small smile. ‘She has that effect.’

He glances at me, like he senses the shift in my demeanor. ‘Not my kind of intensity,’ he says, almost offhand. ‘She’s just a lot.’

I nod again, swallowing. Of course he thinks she’s beautiful. Everyone thinks that. It’s not news. Still, hearing it from *him* feels different.

‘She always has been,’ I say quietly.

Ash leans back against my bed, running a hand through his hair. ‘I get why she intimidates people.’

The word makes something twist in my chest. ‘She doesn’t intimidate me.’

He looks at me, doubt crossing his face. ‘You don’t have to pretend with me.’

I look away, my jaw tightening. I’m suddenly aware of all my old feelings rushing back. I’ve always felt as if I exist in her shadow, no matter what I do to try better myself, to try to match her.

‘She’s my sister,’ I say, sharper than I mean to. ‘I’m used to her.’

Ash goes quiet, realising he has struck a nerve.

‘I didn’t mean to—’ he starts.

‘I know,’ I cut in, softer now. I refuse to let my tears spill, even though they are desperate to. ‘I know you didn’t. You are the most important person in the world to me, and I don’t want her to take you.’

Ash stills, appearing surprised by my confession. His hands find mine where they’re clenched in my lap, and he squeezes them softly and reassuringly.

‘Hey,’ he says quietly. ‘That’s not how this works. There’s no world where I choose her,’ he continues, his stunning blue eyes locked on mine. ‘Not now. Not ever.’

A lump forms in my throat, and I’m unable to reply.

‘You’re it for me, Bryn,’ he says, like it’s the simplest truth he knows. ‘No one else even comes close.’

I shake my head slightly, doubt still clawing at me. ‘But you said she’s beautiful—’

‘She’s your sister,’ he interrupts gently. ‘Of course she’s beautiful, you share the same genetics. You’re beautiful. More so, in my opinion, but none of that matters.’ His thumb brushes my knuckles, grounding me. ‘What we have – that’s not something anyone can take.’

The steadiness in his voice does something to me. It quiets the insecurity, the years of comparisons, the fear that I’m less than her. That if given the choice, everyone would always choose her over me.

‘I didn’t come into your life only to leave it,’ he adds. ‘It’s always going to be you.’

The words crack something open in my chest. I lean into him, pressing my forehead against his shoulder and breathing him in. He wraps his arms around me without hesitation. For the first time since Isla’s name entered the room, the knot in my stomach loosens, because right now, with Ash’s arms around me, I believe him, even if a small part of me is already afraid of how much it would hurt if he were wrong.

I lie sprawled on the grass, a paperback balanced on my stomach. The pages flutter as the breeze moves through the trees, carrying the smell of summer and freshly cut grass. Ash is beside me, cross-legged, hunched over his journal. He’s completely absorbed, tongue caught slightly between his teeth as he scribbles furiously, then pauses, then scribbles again. His knee bumps mine every now and then, absent-mindedly, like he doesn’t even realise how close we are. I glance over the top of my book, pretending to read while really just watching him.

‘What are you writing?’ I ask.

He doesn’t look up. ‘Stuff.’

‘That’s not an answer.’

He finally lifts his head, eyes bright. ‘Ideas. Sketches. Stories.’ ‘Can I see them?’

‘No.’

‘Rude,’ I mutter, turning a page.

He grins and goes back to his journal, moving the pencil quickly and confidently. I love watching him like this: focused and quiet. He doesn’t

find much of this kind of peacefulness at home. It makes me happy he can with me.

‘You’ll see it when it’s ready, but it’s just a mess right now.’

Every now and then he flips the page, and I catch a glimpse of drawings tangled between long paragraphs of scribbled notes. The sun filters through the branches above us, dappling his dark hair with spots of light. I shift onto my side, my book forgotten.

‘You’re going to be famous one day,’ I tell him.

He scoffs. ‘Yeah, right.’

‘I’m serious,’ I say. ‘You’re always creating something. You should do something with all of it.’

‘Who would read what I have to say?’

‘Me,’ I say. ‘But only if you put me in it.’

He looks at me. ‘You’re already in everything.’

My stomach feels funny, in that strange, fluttery way it does when he says things like that. I roll onto my back again, staring up at the sky, pretending it doesn’t mean as much as it does.

‘I’m in love with you, Bryn,’ he murmurs. ‘You know that, right?’

Heat spears down my neck. ‘I love you, too, Ash.’

He closes his journal and rolls toward me, trailing his finger up my arm. ‘Nothing will tear us apart.’

‘Nothing,’ I promise, burying my head into his chest.

26

ASH

Now

I can't stop staring. She's sitting beside me at the bar, her shoulder brushing mine every time she moves, and I can't stop cataloguing every detail, as if it's something I might lose again if I blink. The light catches in her strawberry-blonde hair, which is longer than it used to be, but just as gorgeous. I study the familiar curve of her mouth when she smiles into her drink.

She is undeniably the most beautiful girl in the room.

I drag my eyes away before she catches me. Being this close to her again feels dangerous and exhilarating. My obsession with her has not faded over time. I want her now more than I ever have before.

'You're being quiet,' she says, glancing my way.

'Just thinking.'

'Uh-oh,' she teases. 'That's never good.'

'Just thinking about how good you look in that outfit,' I say.

She glances down at her activewear. 'Oh?'

'And how much better it'd look on my bedroom floor.'

'Wow,' she says, laughing softly, like she's not sure whether to be surprised or impressed. 'You've gotten bold.'

'Always am when it comes to you,' I counter, watching her from the corner of my eye. 'You were much the same, if I recall correctly.'

She scoffs, but there's colour creeping into her cheeks now. 'Is that so?'

'Very much so.'

Her gaze lingers on me a second longer than necessary. She lifts her glass without breaking our eye contact. 'Careful, Ash. You don't want to start

something you can't finish.'

I grin slowly. 'Oh, don't worry,' I say, voice low and teasing. 'Finishing is kind of my specialty.'

She laughs, a soft, surprised sound that makes a warm feeling ooze through my chest.

'Is that an invitation?' she asks.

I shrug, leaning closer so that my shoulder brushes hers. 'If you want it to be.'

Her eyes flash playfully, and I feel the electric tug of tension between us.

'Hmm,' she murmurs, tipping her head as if weighing up the answer.

'You're dangerously confident, Ash.'

'Confident that I want you, Bryn.'

She shakes her head, but there's no hiding her smile, nor the faint blush on her cheeks. I stand, pulling out my keys, and her eyes drop to them, noticing the keychain – the one she gifted me all those years ago. She looks at me, stunned.

I hold the keys up like a trophy, smirking. 'Thought I'd keep this little reminder with me. You know, in case I ever forget who I belong to.'

'You kept it all this time?'

'Of course,' I say. 'Wouldn't dare part with it. Some things are too important to let go of.'

She shakes her head, still caught between disbelief and amusement.

'Even after I forced you out of my life?'

I don't know what to say to that.

'You never thought about throwing it away?' she asks.

I shake my head. 'No.'

'Why?'

'Because even when you wanted nothing to do with me, I still wanted you.'

She blinks, clearly taken aback by my honesty, and unsure what to do with it. A sad smile tugs at her lips. 'That doesn't seem fair.'

I tilt my head. 'When has anything ever been fair for me?'

Bryn reaches out, her fingers brushing the keychain, then my hand, my skin heating as if she burned me. With that simple, familiar touch, I feel it again. The stir of obsession, lust, and years of yearning that I have never been able to shake, no matter how hard I tried.

Her thumb grazes my knuckles. For one reckless second, I imagine telling her everything, watching that softness vanish from her face as it is replaced with understanding ... or horror. The thought alone should make me let go. Instead, I close my hand around hers, and when she doesn't pull away, I almost convince myself that maybe the truth won't matter when it finally comes for us.

The night air is cool when we spill outside. The street's quiet tonight, and the occasional car passes, its headlights washing over us and disappearing again. We walk side by side, close but not touching. Bryn shoves her hands into the pockets of the hoodie I gave her. Her eyes are fixed ahead, her long hair trailing down her shoulders. She looks better in my clothes than I do.

'So,' she says conversationally. 'Guess tonight's been unexpected.'

'That's one word for it,' I reply.

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I glance at her, at the way the streetlight catches the profile of her face. Bracing myself, I push a hand through my hair, hesitant to start this conversation, even though I know we need to have it.

'We need to talk about it,' I say.

'Ash—' She bristles, her jaw hardening.

'I know,' I cut in gently. 'You don't want to discuss it, but you didn't see what you think you saw.'

She exhales through her nose, a tired sound. 'It doesn't matter anymore.'

'It does to me.'

She stops walking, turning to face me, her arms crossed now, guard fully up. 'What happened back then ... I've made peace with it. I don't want to go backwards.'

'I'm not asking you to,' I say. 'I'm asking you to hear me out.'

'You were paying attention to her. Anyone could see that. You wanted her and had to settle for me.'

I stare at her, incredulous. 'You surely still don't think that. You know that is the furthest from the truth you could get.'

'My eyes don't lie.'

'You did not see what you think you saw,' I growl. 'I only had anything to do with Isla because I was worried about her,' I say, my words coming out quickly now. Bryn flinches at the mention of her sister's name. 'Not because I wanted her.'

She scoffs softly, looking away. 'You don't need to explain yourself. I get it, she's beautiful. You said so yourself.'

'I do need to explain myself,' I insist, feeling a sense of urgency well up inside me. 'Because what you thought was going on – it certainly wasn't that.'

She shakes her head. 'It doesn't change how I felt.'

'I know,' I say quietly. 'But if you let me explain, it might change your entire perspective on everything.'

Bryn glances at me, and there's something raw in her eyes. Something unresolved that has been festering there for a long time. The hurt has never gone away.

'I don't want to relive it,' she says. 'I've forgiven you. Isn't that enough?'

The word *forgiven* hits me like a slap in the face.

'I don't want forgiveness for something I didn't do,' I say.

Silence stretches between us, filled only by the sounds of night: insects, leaves rustling in the wind, the distant sound of traffic.

'She wasn't okay,' I continue. 'Your sister. I was just trying to help.'

'That's the thing with Isla. She draws you in and makes you feel like she's the victim in every situation. She makes you feel sorry for her.'

'Maybe,' I admit. 'But this time she really was. I wasn't interested in her, Bryn. I was scared for her, and I was concerned that you didn't understand what was going on.'

Bryn shakes her head like she's trying to rid all the thoughts from inside it. 'The past is the past,' she says firmly. 'I don't want it dragging us down again.'

I step closer, feeling a sudden urge to shake her, as if that might make her listen. 'I'm not trying to drag us anywhere. I want you to know the true story.'

'Ash ...'

‘I never chose her over you,’ I say. ‘Not then. Not ever. I was just trying to help someone who really needed it.’

She exhales, long and slow, and for a moment it seems as if she might let me finish. Then she looks away again, toward the dark stretch of road ahead.

‘All of this is too painful. I don’t feel ready to talk about it. Just drop it, okay?’ she asks quietly. ‘Please.’

Exhaling impatiently, I nod, feeling irritated by the situation. I’m grateful to be here with her right now, after pining after her for so long, but I need her to understand the truth about what happened. There are so many things she doesn’t know.

We start moving again, our shoulders brushing now and then. The truth still sits between us – unsaid, unfinished, waiting to be aired – but she’s not ready to hear it.

I simply have to accept that.

For now.

27

ASH

Five Years Ago

I get home just after dark, my shoulders aching from my shift at the library. The moment I step onto the front porch, a sense of dread fills me. Considering there are cars lined up the street and the music thumping from the house can be heard from ten minutes away, it's safe to say my brother is throwing one of his infamous gathos.

Smoke hangs in the air as I step through the front door. People I don't know sprawl across the couch, the floor, and the kitchen counters. Empty bottles line every surface, many of them stuffed with cigarettes. Someone's sitting on the arm of the lounge chair, grinding ash into the fabric without a care. Grimacing, I wave my hand in front of my face, barely able to breathe. The place is thick with cigarette smoke, weed, alcohol, and sweat from people who are well overdue for a shower.

'Oi!' someone yells when they see me. 'Who's the librarian?'

A couple of people laugh as they glance over at me. My bag is hanging off my shoulder, a couple of paperbacks are tucked under my arm, and my reading glasses are still perched on my nose. I don't often use them, but they do help a lot with my headaches. I keep my head down and push further inside, scanning for my brother. I find him in the kitchen, shirt off, red cup in hand, surrounded by people holding shot glasses. He notices me standing there.

'Well, look who finally came home,' he remarks, eyeing me up and down in that way that used to make me feel like dirt on his shoe. Now, I couldn't care less what he thinks. 'Didn't know you were still alive.'

'I am, unfortunately,' I say dryly.

‘Have a drink and relax. You might actually have fun for once.’

I stiffen. He once said that exact line to me, fed me a drink, and I woke up the next day with no memory of the night before and a bunch of things stolen from me. I have no idea what else happened that night, but I knew from that moment on I could never trust my brother. The mind games he played with me afterwards were fucking disgusting. He made jokes, insinuating some horrific things happened to me while I was blacked out, but I woke up unharmed, so I truly think the whole thing was a game to him, just to make me wonder what happened.

‘Can think of a thousand other things I’d prefer to do.’

He steps closer, and his smile, if you can even call it that, is cruel. ‘Is that so?’

Someone bumps into me from behind, sloshing beer down my back. I grit my teeth. The music gets louder and wolf whistles tear through the air when two girls begin passionately making out against the wall. I feel trapped, like the walls are closing in and I’m helpless to stop them. I think of Bryn: of her laugh, of our time at quiet parks with grass under my back, of the way she looks at me, as though I’m more than what my life really is.

Turning away before my brother can say anything else, I stalk to my room, ignoring everyone I pass. Throwing my clothes into my bag as fast as I can, I toss it out the window and climb out, knowing my brother won’t let me off that easily. It’s best to disappear and avoid a scene. I glance back at the house, feeling a heavy rage settle in me. My father is probably passed out in his room, unaware of anything going on around him.

This shit is getting old.

I walk fast, the noise of the house still ringing in my ears as I stomp loudly down the street toward the station. My bag, heavy with library books, bumps against my hip with every step.

The train platform’s mostly empty. Fluorescent lights buzz overhead; moths throw themselves against the glow. I sit on a cold metal bench and stare down the tracks, taking slow breaths until the train finally rattles in.

By the time I jump off near Bryn’s place, the night’s gone quiet. Suburban quiet. It feels like stepping into another world. I move through familiar streets without thinking. The house is in darkness except for one room – the downstairs lounge room.

Moving around the side as I’ve done a hundred times before, I’m almost at my entry point when I sense movement to my left. I turn sharply.

‘Thought you might turn up,’ a voice says.

Isla’s leaning against the back fence, a cigarette between her fingers and a cloud of smoke drifting beside her. She looks older in the dim light, and haunted, too, like everything has suddenly caught up to her, and she can no longer maintain the facade.

‘Relax,’ she adds, taking another drag. ‘They’re not home.’

‘I’m surprised you haven’t told them about me.’

Isla exhales smoke through her nose, her eyes never leaving mine. ‘It’s interesting how every time I see you, you look like you’ve run from something.’

I don’t answer. I don’t owe her anything.

She flicks ash into the garden bed and straightens.

‘She’s in her room,’ she says casually.

‘Thanks.’

‘I’m going to figure you out, Ash,’ she murmurs, scrutinising me through narrowed eyes. ‘There’s something not right about you.’

We stare at each other for a long moment, and then I turn my back to her. I don’t care to understand what that means, but if I’m being honest, I feel much the same about her.

‘I saw you once,’ she says quietly.

Hovering at the door, I glance over my shoulder, curious.

‘Outside our house. Looking at us from across the road. Were you stalking me?’

I laugh without meaning to. ‘Me? Stalking *you*? Don’t flatter yourself.’

She raises a brow. ‘You expect me to believe you were watching Bryn? That innocent, doe-eyed girl whose personality is as bland as a piece of stale bread?’

I spin back to her, anger flaring inside me.

‘You don’t get to talk about her like that.’

Isla smiles like she’s pleased with herself. There’s a smug glint in her eyes, and it’s clear she’s enjoying rubbing me the wrong way.

‘I don’t believe you truly think that about her. If anything, I think it’s *you* who is scared of being overshadowed by *her*.’

Isla barks out a humourless laugh. ‘Overshadowed by Bryn? She wishes.’

‘She is kind and beautiful.’

‘Am I not kind?’ she counters.

‘You’re cruel,’ I fire back. ‘You’ve been hurt, so you hurt others.’

For a split second, something ugly flashes across her face before she schools her expression.

‘You don’t know her the way you think you do.’

My hands curl into fists at my sides. ‘I know she’s kind. I know she trusts people who don’t deserve it. She’s much stronger than you give her credit for.’

Isla laughs again. ‘Careful, Ash. You talk like you’re in love with her.’

‘I am,’ I say without hesitation.

‘Good for you, then.’

‘Isla—’ I start. ‘Drop the act. You’re not fooling me.’

‘Fooling you?’ she echoes, attempting to look innocent. ‘Enlighten me.’

‘I see the way you deflect. The way you turn everything into a game.’

‘Do I?’

‘You’re angry at the world. Angry at him. Jealous of her. You don’t understand why he chose you.’

She scoffs, looking away. ‘You don’t know anything about me.’

‘I’m not pretending to know you.’

‘You really don’t know anything at all,’ she growls, fury flashing in her eyes. They are so similar to Bryn’s.

I hesitate. Maybe I shouldn’t say it. I know the second the words leave my mouth, there’ll be no taking them back, but I have to try to help.

‘I saw him,’ I say.

She freezes. The colour drains from her face.

‘Saw who?’

‘Your stepdad,’ I murmur. ‘Going into your room.’

Isla lifts her chin, the mask she wears snapping back into place.

‘Don’t be ridiculous,’ she says, her voice betraying her with a slight tremble. ‘You shouldn’t lie about something like that.’

I don’t miss the way her eyes dart toward the house.

‘I’m not,’ I say flatly. ‘It was late. Everyone else was asleep. I suspect it wasn’t the first time it happened. Look, here’s my number. I want you to call me if anything like that happens. Okay?’

I planned to do this, scrawling my number onto a scrunched-up train ticket while on the train. I pass it to her, and she snatches it out of my hand. Her cheeks grow more red with each passing moment. Another cigarette shakes slightly as she brings it up to her lips. She doesn’t meet my eyes.

‘You’re fucking delusional.’

‘Nobody should experience something like that. I’m sorry.’

Isla pushes to her feet and jabs her finger in my direction.

‘You keep your mouth shut,’ she bites out. ‘You say a word to Bryn, I’ll fucking kill you. Stop making shit up.’

‘I’m not making anything up,’ I reply smoothly, not letting her anger deter me. ‘I can help you.’

Her jaw flexes. For a second, she looks scared, but it’s only a second before the walls slam back into place and she is glowering at me like I’m a stain she can’t get rid of.

‘You can help?’ she sputters. ‘You can fuck right off, that’s what you can do.’

‘I’m serious.’

She takes a step closer, and her tone grows threatening. ‘You think you’re helping? You think you can be some kind of hero? You don’t know how things work in this house.’

‘You deserve to be safe. You both do.’

Something flashes across her face then. I can’t quite tell if it’s anger or fear, but it’s something raw and vulnerable. I’ve exposed her in ways she isn’t ready to face yet.

‘Stay out of it, Ash,’ she snarls. ‘If you care about her at all, stay out of it.’

Silence stretches between us and I glance up to Bryn’s window, where a warm light has been turned on. I exhale, combing my fingers through my hair, feeling drained and exhausted from this conversation. This girl is impossible.

‘I can’t,’ I say quietly. ‘It’s not right. I can help.’

Isla exhales a shaky breath, crushing her cigarette into the dirt with more force than necessary.

‘Then you’re an idiot,’ she mutters. ‘And this is going to end badly.’

‘I’m much more capable than you think.’

She leans in so close to me that our noses brush against each other. I realise how bent over I am, and that she must be standing on her tiptoes, considering our height difference.

‘You’re nothing,’ she says.

I feel her before I see her. There’s a shift in the air. Isla’s gaze moves past me, for just half a second, but long enough to tell me someone else is there. I turn to find Bryn hovering by the door. My stomach drops.

She stands a few metres away, frozen in place. Her eyes are wide, her face pale under the dim backyard light. She's looking at us: at how close Isla is to me, at the way my body's angled toward her, at the space that must look charged and intimate from the outside.

Fuck.

'Bryn,' I say quietly, stepping back instinctively, but it's already too late. The damage is done. I can see it in her eyes, the way they gather moisture. Her face contorts, and it's like watching something fragile splinter right before me. The panic that wells up inside me is immediate.

I glance at Isla, a smug smile sliding onto her face. She looks at Bryn, then back at me, acting guilty, like she has been caught doing something she shouldn't. Anger flares through me over her audacity.

'Relax,' Isla says lightly, her voice dripping with false innocence. 'We were just talking.'

Bryn swallows. 'It didn't look like just talking.'

My heart slams against my ribs. 'It wasn't what you think—'

'It's fine,' Bryn cuts me off abruptly, forcing a smile. It looks out of place. 'I'm going to bed.'

Turning on her heels, she strides back into the house, disappearing just as quickly as she arrived.

'Bryn,' I cry quietly, panic creeping into my voice. I take a step after her, but Isla's hand shoots out, her fingers brushing my wrist.

'Since you and Bryn are probably going to call it quits, you know which room is mine.'

I yank my hand back, fury burning through me in a violent tide.

'Stay away from me.'

She only smiles. I glare back at her, furious she's still playing this game when she knows what I know. I've offered her genuine help, but she can't even face the reality of what's happened. She pushes people's buttons to force them away, so they can't get close enough to see the truth. Underneath my frustration, there's something worse: recognition. I know what it looks like when someone is terrified of being seen too clearly.

Turning my back on Isla, I rush inside. My heart slams painfully fast. I feel like everything has come crashing down around me. Like I've broken something delicate, and if I don't fix it fast, it's going to cost me everything.

BRYN*Now*

The door clicks shut behind us and I pause, taking it all in. Ash's place is a studio with dark timber floors, charcoal-coloured walls, and dim lighting that casts shadows over everything. There's next to no clutter. A lounge sits opposite a ginormous TV. A compact kitchen runs along one wall; all his appliances are matte black. It's dark and minimalistic. It feels very *him*.

I drift further inside. My gaze skims the dark artwork lining the walls. It's strikingly beautiful, but completely impersonal. There are no photos, no keepsakes, nothing that hints at a past or a life beyond this room. It's as if he's carefully erased any trace of himself.

'This is where you live,' I murmur, more to myself than to him. He drops his keys onto the counter. 'Yeah.'

I run my fingers lightly over the back of the lounge, imagining him here late at night, sketching, writing, or coming home exhausted from shifts at Shadow Land. There's something intimate about seeing the quiet version of someone, the one no one else gets to witness. I can't help but think about how many strangers online would love to be in my position right now, alone in his apartment.

'It's nice,' I say, turning slowly, still drinking it in. 'Very minimalist.'

A corner of his mouth lifts. 'That's a polite way of saying empty.'

I smile. 'I like it.'

My gaze drifts to his bed tucked neatly into the corner, the dark linen pulled tight. A single pillow rests against the headboard. My cheeks warm at the thought of all the nights he's spent there. A selfish part of me hopes those nights have been spent alone, yearning for me, like I have him.

It's a studio apartment, so everything is in the one room, minus the bathroom and laundry, which are tucked away behind two large dark saloon doors that remind me of western bars I've seen in movies.

'You've got a thing for dark colours,' I tease lightly. 'Always have.'

He watches me closely as I move around his space. He leans back onto the kitchen counter, his arms folded across his chest.

'Yeah. Some things never change.'

There's something calm and easy about the place, but also something lonely and cold.

I turn back to him. 'I like seeing this side of you.'

'Do you?' he asks, his eyes dipping over me.

'Mmhmm.'

I take a slow step closer, emboldened by the way those eyes trace my body. My fingers trail along the edge of the counter.

'Your masks,' I say softly, almost a whisper. I lift my eyes to his. 'Can I see them?'

'My masks?' His tone is teasing, and I can tell he is thrilled by the question, as if he'd been hoping I'd ask.

'Yes,' I breathe, taking another step closer. 'I want to see the one you work in the most.'

He swallows, his jaw tensing. The tension is palpable, crackling in the space between us, making my stomach flutter in anticipation.

'Careful what you wish for,' he murmurs, a crooked grin tugging at his lips.

I smirk, matching his energy. 'I like a little danger.'

He exhales, long and slow, and finally steps toward the cupboard, where there's a shelf of masks lined up. Each one is a dark, twisted work of art. My smirk widens when I see a *Scream* mask in the centre. Watching him handle them is mesmerising; I see the way his fingers linger on the edges, the faint flex of his muscles. I can't stop noticing things about him: how unbelievably tall he is, how broad, and how intense his brutal eyes are.

'Pick one,' he says.

Tingles erupt in my belly. Every instinct in me says to reach out, to touch him, and to lean in, but I hold back, letting the years of yearning simmer between us.

'How can I possibly choose?' I murmur.

His grin widens, looking devilishly sexy. 'You'll get to try each one out, don't you worry.'

'Each one?' I echo, trying to keep my voice steady.

Ash steps closer, and I can feel the heat radiating off him.

'Depends how brave you're feeling,' he murmurs. His eyes, though beautiful, are a little unsettling as he watches me like he's trying to get inside my head.

An itch runs through my fingers as I stare at the masks, the urge to reach out almost unbearable – to touch him – to feel everything I've been wanting to for so long.

'I'm feeling pretty brave.'

He laughs. 'Mmhmm. That's what I like to hear.'

My stomach lurches as he grabs the mask – the one he wears most nights and in his viral videos. Without a word, he peels his shirt over his head. My eyes roam over him: broad shoulders, lean muscles, the faint ridges of his abs. The dangerous energy I've always felt with him curls around us like a physical touch.

Ash lifts the mask to his face, sliding it on in a slow, deliberate motion. His eyes glitter. He tilts his head toward me, and I can't look away. Every nerve in my body feels like it's on fire.

'You want me, Bryn?' he drawls.

I nod, realising I've been holding my breath, suspended between excitement, fear, and the ache of years spent wanting him. This is Ash – dangerous, magnetic, and utterly consuming – like he has been since the moment I met him.

Taking another step toward me, Ash reaches out and drags his thumb across my lower lip. 'These lips have haunted me for years.'

'Have they?' I whisper.

'Mmhmm.' He nods. 'There're many things I've wanted to do to you.'

My heart is pounding at an almost nauseating level. 'Oh? Do tell.'

'I'm more of a show rather than tell kind of guy.'

Ash curls his hands around my hips and tugs me toward him, our chests colliding. He tilts my head back, swooping his mouth toward mine and devouring my lips. His arm slips underneath my ass, hoisting me up. My legs instinctively wrap around his waist. One arm snakes around his neck, and the other hand moves to his chest, tracing the hard lines of it.

He carries me backwards, and we fall onto his bed in a tangle. He claws at my crop top, pulling it over my head. He moans when my breasts tumble free, bouncing slightly at their release. He buries his face between them, his free hand massaging one as I throw my head back, grinding lightly against his erection. He draws back and closes his mouth around my nipple, and I release a breathy moan. His tongue circles it while his fingertips trail down my spine. When he pulls back, I slam my palms into his chest, flattening him onto his back.

He gazes at my chest appreciatively before meeting my gaze once more. Leaning forward, I press a heated kiss to his mouth before leaving a trail down his jaw, then moving to his neck, and down to his collarbone. As my mouth moves over his chest, my hips grind sensually onto his, and his erection hardens beneath me. My body throbs with need as his hands grope me possessively, his fingers digging into the skin of my hips, spurring me to rotate them in a way that turns him feral.

I reach down, tracing the length of him, my touch as light as a feather.

‘You little tease,’ he grunts, bucking his hips at the sensation.

‘You love it.’

A rumble leaves him as he shifts from underneath me. The world tips as he flips me, slamming me down onto my back. I gasp in shock at the speed and strength of him. His fingers dip under the seam of my bike shorts, yanking them down my thighs, then tossing them over his shoulder. His gaze catches on my lacy thong. He spins me onto my side, his eyes raking over my bare ass cheeks. He releases a deep moan.

‘That is very hot,’ he murmurs.

‘Is it?’

‘It is.’

Leaning forward, he pushes his mask up to the top of his head and bends over me, sinking his teeth into the soft flesh of my ass. I yelp at the sensation and feel a pulsing between my thighs. Reeling back, he slaps his hand across it, making me moan. I rock my hips, urging him to give me more. His eyes seem to darken as he brings his hand down again, the sharp sound filling the room.

‘Again,’ I whisper.

I flinch at the sting when he spans me once more, seeing a fresh red mark on my pale skin. With two fingers, he lightly pushes me onto my back again. I arch my back, pushing my body toward him as he presses his

delicious weight on top of me. His skin on my skin is everything I've been craving.

He drags his hand up my stomach, circling my breast before he palms it in a firm, possessive way that has me craving more. His other hand pushes my thong to the side. His fingers trail excruciatingly slow down my body before he slides them into me.

'You've always been mine,' he rasps, his voice thick with lust.

'Always been yours.'

Falling onto me, he groans, kissing down the base of my throat as his fingers continue to work in and out of me. He slowly withdraws them and pulls my thong down, discarding it on the ground. He places himself between my thighs, his eyes meeting mine. I nod, and he lightly brushes his knuckles across my cheek, pressing his mouth into mine as he pushes inside. My breath stutters as he sinks deeper into me, stretching me more than I expected. My fingernails dig into his shoulders. Ash thrusts slowly at first, allowing me to get used to him. I slide my hands down his back, loving how his muscles flex underneath them.

'Okay?' he murmurs.

'More than okay.'

His thrusts become quicker, building momentum as he kisses me again, our tongues clashing against each other. The kiss is urgent and desperate, like we have both been longing for this moment. I know I certainly have. My legs tighten around his waist as he picks up speed again, pressing his thumb into my clit. I squirm underneath him, almost unbearably sensitive under his touch, it feels so good. A familiar rush builds inside me.

'I'm about to ...' I trail off, gasping, unable to get the words out.

'Come for me, sweetheart. Come all over this cock.'

Groaning, I throw my head back as my orgasm crashes through me with a force that makes my eyes roll into the back of my head. My body goes limp and my legs tremble, loosening their grip around his hips.

'That was amazing,' I whisper.

'Oh, gorgeous, I'm not finished with you yet.'

My breath gets trapped in my lungs as he reels back from me. He pushes the mask back down, covering his handsome face. It's as if he's switching to his sexy alter ego. Curling a hand around my ankle, he pulls me down the bed so that I'm at the edge of the mattress. Stepping off it, he looms over me, and the dim lighting makes him look quite menacing, especially with

the mask. It's so damn hot, I can barely process that it's my reality right now, and not just a daydream.

He pushes my legs up to my head and slams inside me once more. A sharp cry leaves me, and my hands move to his bulging biceps as he fucks me mercilessly. I've never had rough sex before, but I'm starting to realise I quite enjoy it.

'Fuck me like you own me,' I say breathlessly.

'I do own you.'

Groaning, I turn my head into the doona, muffling the cries that leave my mouth. My legs quiver as his pace increases. He fucks me so hard that the bed frame slams against the wall in a rhythmic thump.

Another orgasm rises in me. He thrusts harder, his hand moving off my leg to slap my clit. A scream escapes me as the orgasm hits me harder than any one has before. I'm choking on my own breath, hardly recovered, when he suddenly pulls out, flips me onto my stomach, and grips my hips. He yanks me back towards him and enters me from behind. Leaning forward, he wraps his hand around my ponytail and lightly but firmly yanks it back. I mewl at the feel of it. No one's ever done this to me before, but it's fucking hot.

I push myself back into him, meeting his pace as I bow my back as much as I can, my face flush against the doona cover. My finger slips between my legs and I apply pressure in the exact right spot. A third orgasm washes over me, faster this time, making my pussy clamp around him. Ash releases a deep, guttural groan as he finishes with a few deep thrusts.

He pulls out of me, and we both collapse onto the bed, breathless and sweaty. I push back the loose bits of hair that are framing my face, my chest heaving.

'Fuck, I've wanted to do that for a long time,' he pants.

'Worth the wait.'

'I'll say.'

I trace my finger up his muscled arms and travel over his shoulder to the edge of his mask. I lift it slowly. His dark hair falls into place first, then I see a scatter of light freckles dusting the tops of his cheeks, softening what should be an almost too-perfect face. His jaw is strong and sharp, as if you could cut yourself on it. His eyes meet mine, startlingly bright and blue up close, and striking in a way that feels too much for a man. I study him

longer than I should, cataloguing every detail, aware he's letting me, aware he knows exactly what this face does to me.

'I'm so happy you're here,' he whispers. 'I've been so lost without you.'

We're still tangled together, and the room is lit only by a sign across the street, its glow slipping through the windows, casting everything in red. Ash is close enough that I can feel his breath against my flushed face. I shift to look at him. His blue eyes are softer now, stripped of their fire, but a steady intensity is still there. Being needed like this sends an ache through me. No one has ever wanted me as much as Ash has. I lift my hand and rest it against his chest, feeling his heartbeat under my palm, pounding just as fast as mine.

'You don't seem lost,' I murmur. His arm tightens around me in response.

'That's because you're here,' he says, barely audible now.

He takes the mask from my hand and sets it aside. Slowly, he peels himself off the bed and offers me his hand, pulling me to my feet. The room feels smaller once we stand. My eyes roam over the dark walls. The place is bare and shadowy, with nothing out of place. He gestures toward the bathroom.

He turns on the shower and steam fills the room. When he steps under the water, I hesitate for half a second before joining him. Warm water slides over my skin, and I recognise the slight ache between my legs. It's similar to the first time we slept together, years ago. I'm acutely aware of him beside me: his height, the heat radiating off him, the way his presence fills the space. Water droplets cling to his dark hair, catch briefly in his eyelashes, trace the line of his jaw, before disappearing down the rest of his beautiful body. His blue eyes linger on me, as if he's memorising this version of me: flushed, bare faced, with wet hair. My fingers trace up his dark tattoos, curling over his muscles.

I pretend I'm not affected by how close he is, or by the way the water runs over his shoulders and down his chest, glistening across his muscles. Ash spends a generous amount of time rubbing body wash over me, massaging my shoulders and back. His hands move past my hips and down to my ass. Leaning back into him, I sigh, feeling sleepy and content.

We both step out of the shower and he passes me a towel, which I use to pat myself dry and then wrap up my hair. I pull on his black t-shirt, which hangs mid-thigh on me. It's soft from wear and smells like him – his body wash, and that warm scent that is uniquely him. Wearing his shirt feels

intimate, and part of me doesn't want to give it back. He used to always leave me a shirt when he'd go back home, and I'd sleep in it through the week until he came back to give me another.

Ash disappears into the kitchen while I hover in the bathroom doorway, barefoot on the cool tiled floor. The apartment looks even darker at night. He moves with his sleeves pushed up, his hair still damp. He cooks just like he does everything else: quiet, precise, and completely unhurried.

'Sit,' he says without turning around, like he already knows I'm watching.

I slide onto the counter instead, swinging my legs. I study the way his jaw tightens when he tastes the sauce, his faint freckles still visible despite the dim light. There's something disarming about watching him cook for me, the domestic softness contrasting everything dangerous I associate with him. It's jarring to see the teenage boy I fell in love with all those years ago, now a man, cook for me after he just threw me around his apartment (in a super-hot way).

He plates the food carefully and sets it next to me, then watches while I take the first bite. He tracks my reaction.

'Good?' he asks.

I nod, swallowing. 'Really good.'

A corner of his mouth lifts. It's not quite a smile, but more like a smug acknowledgement, like he knows his cooking is good. He leans against the counter across from me, looking at me like I belong here, as if this scene fits into a future he's already imagined. The thought sends a shiver through me.

I take another bite.

'Lemon?' I ask.

'Mmhmm.' He nods. 'Lemon and garlic pasta with seared chicken.'

'And what else?'

'Shaved parmesan and cracked pepper.'

'It's delicious.'

Considering Ash never had anyone cook much for him, I know he must have taken a lot of time to learn how to do it, and how to do it well. As he has likely lived alone since moving out of his dad's house, he probably experimented with his cooking and got even better at it.

His gaze doesn't waver. 'You look comfortable,' he says.

I glance down at myself wearing his shirt, seated at his counter, my hands around the bowl. 'It's easy to feel comfortable around you.'

He smiles at that – a warm, genuine smile – appearing young and boyish, like the Ash I remember.

'I feel the same way.'

He pushes off the counter and steps closer, slowly enough that I have time to stop him. I don't. He reaches out, his thumb brushing a wrinkle from the hem of the shirt where it bunches at my thigh, the touch casual, familiar, like he's done it a hundred times before.

'Eat,' he murmurs.

'You too.'

Smiling, he reaches for his own bowl and begins to eat. When he sets it down, he doesn't move away right away. He just looks at me, like he's weighing something up, then steps in close, settling himself between my knees.

His hands slide to my waist, and his mouth finds mine. He devours my lips with his. My breath stutters, and I lean into him without thinking. Kissing him feels natural, like muscle memory never forgotten. That's when it hits me: how much I have missed this. Not just his mouth, or his hands, but the way he makes me feel like nothing else in the world exists. Everything has felt slightly off without him. The emptiness I've tried not to name curls tightly in my chest, sudden and aching.

I kiss him harder, needing him to feel it too. He makes a sound against my mouth and slides one hand up my back, holding me there like he's been waiting for this exact moment.

When we finally pull apart, I rest my head against his collarbone. His heartbeat is fast underneath my cheek; he is just as affected by me as I am by him.

'I didn't realise how much I missed you,' I admit softly.

His grip tightens around me. He presses a kiss to my temple, his lips warm and soft.

'I did,' he murmurs.

The way he says it, calm and certain, makes me understand that the emptiness wasn't one-sided. That whatever this is between us has been stretching taut the whole time we were apart, desperate for us to finally close the distance again.

'You look tired,' he observes, stroking my cheek.

‘You wore me out.’

He breathes a laugh, stepping back. ‘Let’s get you to sleep then.’

It doesn’t occur to me that I have nothing with me. I simply don’t care and don’t want to leave. Ash takes my hand and leads me back to his bed. We crawl into it, and he pulls the covers up around us and hugs me in close, my back fitting easily against his chest, exactly how we used to sleep. His arm wraps around my waist, firm and steady, his hand resting just below my ribs. His chin settles at the crown of my head, and I feel him breathing me in. My fingers curl around his wrist – a small, instinctive gesture – and he responds by pulling me closer.

I feel safe – deeply, undeniably safe – in a way that I haven’t for a long time. Contentment spreads through me, soft and heavy, sinking into my bones. If this is what it feels like to belong somewhere, I understand why I’ve been restless without him. As sleep creeps in, his thumb traces slow, absent circles against my side, as if he’s making sure I’m real. Wrapped in the dark and his warmth, I drift off into a deep, restful sleep for the first time in what feels like forever.

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BRYN*Five Years Ago*

Ash sneaking in is more common than not, but right now the thought of him following me makes my stomach knot. I'm halfway up the stairs when I hear the back door open.

'Bryn,' he whispers urgently.

I don't stop. I reach my room, close the door behind me, and move to my bed, trying to breathe. A second later, he's there, slipping inside my room like he's done a hundred times before.

'Hey,' he says, keeping his voice low. 'Please. Let me explain.'

'I saw enough,' I snap, turning to him. 'You were about to kiss, Ash.'

He runs a hand through his hair, frustration written all over him. 'We weren't about to kiss. I swear. We were arguing, actually.'

I shake my head, jumping off the bed and backing away, as if distance might help. 'I don't want to hear your pathetic lies. I know what I saw.'

'Bryn, please,' he says, following me anyway. 'You have to understand, it's not what it looked like. It's really not my place to say, but ...'

She bristles. 'Oh, so you two have secrets, do you?'

'No, but I'm worried about her. There are things you don't know.'

I laugh under my breath, the sound sharp and humourless, uncharacteristic for me. 'Yeah, I'm starting to realise that.'

He steps closer, looking desperate now. 'No, that's not what I mean.'

Clenching my jaw so tight my molars hurt, I glare at the wall with my hands on my hips, trying to calm my heaving chest.

'Look at me,' he begs. 'You're the one I came here for. I wouldn't do that to you. I'm genuinely worried about your sister, and you need to listen to

what I'm about to tell you.'

He touches my arms as he guides me to my mattress. He pulls out his phone, tossing it onto the bed.

'So, you remember when we met?' he asks, his eyes searching mine, his hands gathering up my own.

'Yes.'

A floorboard creaks, and we both turn to the door. Holding my breath, I wait for the door to open, but it doesn't.

Ash's phone vibrates and I glance at it. My eyes widen when I see the number. It's unsaved, but I know it. Yanking the phone from the bed before he can react, I click on the text and stare down at an image of my sister, topless, in a mirror selfie.

Isla: Almost got caught this time. Isn't it fun?

My jaw drops open so wide, I'm surprised it doesn't hit the floor. I don't move. I just stare at the phone as everything clicks into place in the worst possible way. So that's what it was outside – the closeness. I know why Isla looked like she'd won some sort of prize. She's done it again: taken what's mine for herself, simply because she can.

Ash's eyes land on his phone in my hand. 'What's wrong?'

With shaking hands, I hold it out to him. 'It's not what I think, huh?'

His face drains of colour. He looks as shocked as I do at the photo. Wow, he's a damn good actor.

'It's not—' he starts, then stops, breathing hard. 'I don't know what the fuck that is. We don't text each other.'

'Right,' I whisper brokenly. 'Because she just happens to have your number.'

'I gave it to her because I'm worried about her. Let me talk to you, and it will all make sense.'

He reaches for me then thinks better of it. His hands curl into fists at his sides when I reel back from him, stepping off the bed and hugging my arms around myself.

'Please,' he says, his voice pained and raw. 'Please just listen to me. It's not true. Nothing happened. I didn't—'

'You didn't what?' I cut in. 'You didn't mean for it to happen? Or you didn't mean to get caught?'

‘That’s not fair,’ he says, his desperation bleeding through. ‘I’d never hurt you. I wouldn’t ever do that to you.’

‘I’m not a fucking idiot, Ash!’ I growl, not caring how loud I’m being. ‘I saw you two with my own eyes, and now this? You told me you think she’s beautiful. Those were words out of your mouth. You expect me to believe you now?’

He shakes his head, eyes shining, panic written all over him. ‘I need you to believe me, and I need you to listen to what I have to say.’

I stare at him for a long second, my thoughts tangling. Every instinct tells me to walk away, to shut this down before it hurts me more, but I know myself too well. I know not knowing would haunt me. There would always be a *what if*.

‘Okay,’ I say finally, my voice quiet. ‘Talk.’

Relief crashes over his face so fast it almost hurts to see. He exhales shakily and nods, like he’s afraid the moment will vanish if he doesn’t move carefully. I sit down on the edge of the bed, folding my hands in my lap to keep them from shaking. He opens his mouth just as the door slams open. The sound is violent in the quiet room, and the door hits the wall so hard I’m surprised it doesn’t crack as it rebounds. I jump to my feet instinctively. Ash spins around to find Grant there, filling the doorway, broad and furious, his eyes pinned on Ash and how close he is to me.

‘What the hell is this?’ he snaps.

My stomach plummets to my feet. I hadn’t heard them come home.

Ash takes a step back. ‘Sir, I—’

‘Out,’ my stepdad growls, cutting him off. ‘Now.’

‘He was just—’ I start, panic flooding my chest.

‘Bryn,’ he barks without looking at me. ‘Do not speak a word right now.’

Ash looks at me, his eyes wide with desperation. He doesn’t argue. He doesn’t try to explain. He just gives me one last look, like he’s begging me to remember that I chose to listen, and then he moves past Grant and through the door.

‘You piece of shit,’ Grant snarls, curling his hands into the fabric of Ash’s shirt and slamming him into the wall so hard that the photo frames down the end of the hallway come off their hooks. I’m surprised he manages it, since Ash is significantly taller than him, but anger must explain Grant’s burst of strength. ‘How long have you been sneaking into *my* house? Huh?’

‘Grant!’ my mother hisses, appearing at my bedroom door. Her hair is a mess, and she has a silk robe wrapped around her. She must have gone to their room as soon as they got home. ‘Let him go.’

Reluctantly, Grant steps back, his neck reddening. ‘If I *ever* see you near my family again, I’ll kill you.’

Ash stands there calmly, his hands at his sides. I know he can fight, I know he has had to fight off his own family members, but he chooses not to retaliate right now, and I’m thankful. It would only escalate things. He pauses just long enough to throw me one last pained look before disappearing down the stairs. The front door slams shut a moment later, and the silence that follows is suffocating.

I notice movement at Isla’s door. She looks me up and down before melting back into the darkness. I stand there, my heart racing, knowing with sick certainty that whatever Ash was about to say, whatever truth or lie or explanation, will now live forever in the space of things I never got to hear.

‘We will deal with you in the morning,’ Grant says gruffly, a look of pure anger and disappointment on his face.

When they’re all gone, I lean heavily against the wall, hunched over. I feel as if my heart has been gutted and is bleeding all through me.

Everything is over.

30

ASH

Now

She's here.

Bryn is curled into me, her back warm against my chest, her hair fanned across my arm. My hand is still resting at her waist as though I never let go, like some part of me refused to loosen its grip, even in sleep. The weight of her against me settles something deep in my chest that's been restless for years.

I've waited for this for a long, long time.

I press my face lightly into her hair and close my eyes, letting contentment spread, slow and steady, filling all my hollow places. For years, I told myself I was fine. That I'd moved on. That what happened back then didn't still sit under my skin like unfinished business, but waking up like this, feeling her breaths in time with mine, makes the truth impossible to ignore.

She's always been it.

I shift just enough to pull her closer, careful not to wake her, and she melts against me, her body fitting perfectly into mine. My thumb traces lines along her arm. She stirs quietly before her lashes flutter. Her eyes open halfway, and when they find me, she smiles, the small kind she only wears when she hasn't put her guard back up yet. I lean in and kiss her.

'Hey,' she murmurs.

'Hey,' I say, just as quietly.

She tucks her face into my chest. I kiss her temple. I simply can't stop kissing her. She shifts again, more awake now, propping her chin on my chest.

‘So, what’s the plan for today?’ she asks.

‘You’re asking me this before the sun’s even up?’

She smiles. ‘I like to be prepared.’

I think about it for a second – about everything we *could* do, everything waiting outside this room – then I glance down at her pressed against me, her hair a mess.

‘Honestly?’ I say, brushing my thumb along her jaw. ‘I’d be pretty happy just being here. Like this. All day.’

Her eyebrows lift a little. ‘Oh yeah?’

‘Yeah. Just you, this bed, and maybe coffee.’

She laughs quietly, stretching her arms above her head. ‘You’d get bored.’

‘Not a chance.’ I lean in, resting my forehead against hers. ‘I don’t get bored of you.’

She studies my face. ‘You think so?’

‘I know so.’

She snuggles closer, hooking her leg over mine. ‘I wouldn’t protest to a slow morning.’

‘See?’ I murmur. ‘I’m very convincing.’

She closes her eyes, her breathing evening out again.

‘Okay,’ she says. ‘We’ll stay here then.’

I tighten my arm around her. ‘Best plan I’ve heard all day.’

My fingers trail up her bare thigh. It’s driving me wild knowing that she is wearing only my t-shirt and is completely bare underneath it. Bryn looks to my lips. I can’t resist kissing her. She sighs into me, and my fingers dig into her hips. She thrusts toward me, encouraging me to continue. She moves her lips to my neck, lightly biting my skin. Everywhere her lips touch, I feel my skin burn. My eyes flutter closed as I tighten my grip on her. She drifts down my neck, sucking and biting softly.

I move my hand between her thighs, groaning at her warmth as I dip my finger in. Slowly, I pump it in and out of her, enjoying the gentle way we are exploring each other. When she rolls onto her back, I slowly inch the shirt up her stomach. The fabric catches on her breasts and makes them bounce as it tugs over them. I groan at the sight of it, watching them move as her chest rises and falls.

Bryn moans, moving her hips as I work my fingers faster, rubbing myself against her, the friction between our bodies feeling incredible. Rolling

myself between her legs, I look in her eyes as I lick up her centre. Her fingers tighten around the sheets as I run my tongue up and down it, circling it around the little nub. She whimpers, squirming beneath me as I lap her faster and with more pressure. Wetness floods my mouth, dampening the skin around my lips. She inhales a sharp breath as I plunge my tongue deeper into her while pressing my thumb into her clit and moving it in slow rotations. I remember she used to like that, and it pleases me to see that's still the case.

Bryn's fingers move to my back and drag down my shoulder blades. I hiss at the stinging sensation, enjoying the pain a little too much.

'Yes,' I encourage her, applying more pressure. 'Come for me.'

She cries out as she orgasms, and I continue licking furiously, enjoying every second of it. Still breathless and looking a little dazed, she reaches for me, pulling me up her body.

'Make love to me, Ash,' she whispers. 'No mask. Just you.'

Searching her eyes, I take note of the adoration in them. The lust, the hunger, the overwhelming obsession. My eyes would mirror the same.

My cock is rock hard, aching with the urge to fill her up. I push inside her, gasping at how tight and warm she feels around me. I pause, bracing my arms either side of her as I breathe away the urge to release. I'm so pent up, I could spill inside her without even having to move. With a feather-light touch, she glides her hands down my back, slipping them over my ass and giving it a squeeze. I thrust deep into her and she moans, digging her nails into the soft tissue of my ass cheeks.

'Eyes on me, Bryn,' I whisper, noticing she likes to close her eyes.

They flutter open as she gazes up through her lashes.

'More,' she whispers.

'Gladly,' I croak. 'You feel so fucking good.'

She moans over and over again as I begin to fuck her with hard, pounding thrusts. Her hand runs up my arm and slides over my neck to lightly touch my face. Our eyes are locked on each other as she arches her back. I press harder into her, allowing the friction of my body against hers to take over. Within a few seconds, I feel her legs tighten around my hips. Bryn cries out at the same time my orgasm crashes through me, pulsing intensely through every part of my body. I collapse on top of her then roll off carefully, panting hard, with sweat dotting my forehead.

'Still happy to stay in today?' I ask her with a smug smirk.

‘Oh fuck yeah,’ she grins, pulling me toward her once more.

I’m pretty sure I’m going to hell.

My eyes rake over Bryn, who is calm and quiet beside me. If only she knew the things I knew and what I’d done. Would she ever forgive me? I force myself to look away before my thoughts spiral. I slide out of bed slowly, careful not to jostle her, and pull on a shirt I find draped over a chair. The room feels colder the second I’m not touching her.

The light flooding the kitchen is too bright. I wince and shove the curtain closed, preferring the darkness. I move around the kitchen. Coffee first. My hands know what to do even if my head doesn’t. Leaning against the counter, I chew the side of my thumb. Guilt has a weight to it. It sits heavy in my chest; it presses down on my lungs. I think about all the moments I didn’t make the right choice. All the things I justified because I thought I had to, because I thought I was protecting someone, because I thought I was already past saving.

The kettle clicks off abruptly.

‘She deserves better,’ I mutter to the empty room. ‘She deserves more than me.’

With a heavy exhale, I pour the water into the coffee plunger. I crack eggs into the pan, scramble them slowly, and add bread to the side. The smell of coffee fills the space and my stomach grumbles. I certainly have worked up an appetite this morning. I’m plating everything when I hear soft footsteps behind me.

‘Smells good,’ Bryn says, her voice still sleepy.

We had a fuck session this morning. On the bed, all over the floor, the bathroom, back to the bed. We both passed out again and now half the day has passed.

I turn. She’s standing there in the doorway, wrapped in one of my hoodies, her hair tied in a loose knot on the top of her head. The sight of her hits me straight in the chest. God, I don’t deserve this. When she finds out, I don’t know if we will have any mornings like this again.

‘Thought you might be hungry,’ I say.

She pads closer, her arms slipping around my waist from behind. Her forehead presses into my back and I lean into it.

‘You didn’t have to do all this.’

‘I wanted to,’ I say. ‘I like doing things for you.’

She smiles, satisfied, and lets go of me to pour herself coffee. I watch her take the first sip, her eyes closing briefly. She smiles. 'This is perfect.'

'You're perfect,' I whisper.

She smiles up at me, looking relaxed and carefree. I look away, my jaw tightening, and busy myself at the counter. She doesn't notice. I tell myself I'll say something soon. I'll tell her everything. Just not yet. Not this morning. Not while she's standing in my kitchen, drinking my coffee, wearing my clothes, and letting me believe that this could be our reality.

For now, I let the moment just exist.

For now, I pretend I'm not already on borrowed time.

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31

ASH

Five Years Ago

I barely register the sound of someone behind me before a hand grabs my jacket and yanks hard. I lose my footing, stumble, and the next thing I know I'm hitting the stairs, back first, breath knocked clean out of me as I slide down to the bottom, landing in a painful sprawl.

'Get out of my house,' Grant snarls down at me. He's a short man and since I'm not, the only way he could ever loom over me like this is by shoving me to the ground.

I stay where I am for a second, flat on the harsh concrete, my lungs burning as I suck air back in. When I look up, he's at the top of the stairs, still staring down at me in disgust.

'You don't get to be here,' he says, coming down a step. 'You don't get anywhere near my family.'

I push myself upright, wincing, but forcing a crooked smile anyway.

'Relax,' I mutter. 'I'm leaving.'

'You were never welcome,' he snaps. 'And you're done sneaking around like this. You hear me? You stay away from Bryn. From both of them.'

My jaw tightens at her name. 'That's not really your call.'

His face darkens instantly. 'It's my house. My daughters. It's absolutely my call.'

His daughters? He fucking wishes. The words are on my tongue, bitter and waiting.

'Funny,' I say quietly. 'You only seem to notice what's happening under your own roof when it inconveniences you.'

He freezes. 'What did you say?'

I meet his eyes. 'You've got a real selective sense of outrage.'

His steps are heavier now as he comes further down the stairs. 'You don't know a damn thing about my family.'

I shrug. 'I know more than you think.'

He bristles, his jaw muscle popping. 'You keep her out of this,' he growls. 'You have no idea what the fuck you're talking about.'

'I didn't say what it was, or her name, but you knew exactly who I meant.'

His hands curl into fists. 'You're crossing a line.'

'You crossed it first. Long before I ever showed up.'

'If I ever see you near my family again—'

'You'll do what?'

His jaw flexes, but no answer comes as his face reddens. I stand up, not backing down. 'You don't scare me, and you should watch your back, old man. You have no idea who you're dealing with.'

Turning, I leave before he can say anything else. The night air hits my face, cold and biting, but it doesn't clear the feeling that's settling in my chest. I know I've just made things worse. I know I've put a target on my back. Glancing back to the house, I see Isla hovering at the window, her stare pinned on me. She steps back into the darkness, disappearing completely. I round the corner, the weight of everything hitting me like a tonne of bricks.

I don't slow down. If I do, I'll go back, and that'll only make things worse.

The train ride home is a blur of lights and trees. I sit slouched in my seat, hood up, staring at my reflection in the glass. I look exactly how I feel. Wrung out, with dark circles under my eyes. Every stop pulls me further from her street and further from the only person I want to be around.

By the time I get off the train, I expect to feel exhausted, but I don't. I attempted to call Bryn countless times, each call ringing straight to voicemail. My guess is that it was taken off her.

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I can already hear music thumping from halfway down the block. I don't even need to see the house to know it's mine. The same shitty playlist that was on before I left is still blaring from the speakers. I push inside the half-open door and nearly trip over an empty bottle. The place is wrecked. Cups are everywhere, potent smoke hangs in the air, and people I don't recognise are sprawled across furniture and the floor. I stand there for a second, my bag still slung over my shoulder, watching the chaos around me.

'Yo, yo!' a voice says. A guy who's been here many times before appears by my side. I can't for the life of me remember his name. 'Little bro is here. How's it going, dude?'

'Yeah, good, man. You?'

'That's the way!' he cheers, not detecting the stoniness in my voice. It's not possible for him to tell there's numbness spreading through me like poison. 'Here's a beer.'

I stare down at it, my auto-response hot on my lips, but I stop myself. I think back to the mess that just went down at Bryn's place, and part of me simply can't handle it.

'Fuck it,' I mutter, swiping it from him.

Whatever-his-name-is moves on from me quickly enough. I head to my room, dropping my bag by the door, glad to see there is no one naked in my bed this time. Tipping my head back, I finish the beer quickly. The bubbles sizzle in my belly, but I ignore the feeling. I peel my hoodie off and head back into the chaos, shoving my way through the crowd and grabbing the first drink I see. I don't even ask what it is. I down half of it in one go, welcoming the burn in my throat.

Someone claps me on the back. A random hands me a cup. The music gets louder, and so do the conversations around me. I sweep my eyes around the room. I can't see my brother anywhere, which is always a good thing. I let myself smile, the pain soaking through me, thick and suffocating.

Tonight, I don't want quiet. I don't want to face all the shit that just went down. The only good thing in my life has been taken from me, and I feel powerless to save it.

I wake up to bright sunlight and a stabbing sensation in my skull. For a second, I don't know where I am, just that everything hurts and my tongue feels like it's glued to the roof of my mouth. The grass beneath me is cold

and damp, seeping through my clothes, and when I try to move my arm, it catches on something plastic and hollow. A cup rolls away.

‘Shit,’ I mutter, my voice hoarse.

I blink up at the sky. It’s too bright and too blue, like the universe is mocking me. There’s music still playing somewhere inside the house. My backyard looks like a war zone: bottles lay tipped over, ashtrays have been spilt, and the fence that had been hanging on its hinges is now completely broken, as if someone leant on it and finished the job.

I must’ve passed out here. At some point I decided fresh air was a good idea, but I don’t remember anything after that. I sit up slowly and immediately regret it. My stomach rolls and my head pounds. There’s dirt on my palms and grass stuck to my jeans.

My memory comes back in pieces: Grant kicking the door open, shoving me down the stairs, forbidding me to see Bryn again. Isla at the window, staring down at me knowingly, as if she had planned the entire thing. I scrub a hand down my face and let out a breath.

The back door creaks open behind me and someone steps out. I don’t look right away, as I don’t really care or feel like talking.

‘Uh,’ she says awkwardly. ‘Good morning.’

‘Not really,’ I reply, still staring at the ground.

She hesitates. ‘You’re Kaine’s brother?’

‘The one and only.’

‘Even sprawled out in the grass, you’re pretty cute,’ she says, flirting shamelessly as she leans on the door. She looks like she just rolled out of bed, still wearing most likely what she wore last night. I vaguely remember her trying to strike up a conversation with me.

I push myself to my feet, swaying a little, and dust off my clothes, even though it’s pointless.

‘Not interested.’

Her mouth falls open as she blinks at me before scowling. ‘Fuck you, then.’

‘Fuck you, too,’ I say, pushing past her and heading into the mess inside.

Making my way to my room, I send a silent thank you to anyone listening, since my bed is miraculously empty. I slam the door behind me and fall into it, my eyes heavy and sore. Before I close them, I try calling Bryn again with no luck. There is no way for me to contact her, and it’s

driving me crazy. I don't know how I'm going to survive this world without her.

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BRYN

Now

I don't realise how late it is until the light in Ash's apartment starts to change. The afternoon glow fades into something darker. He's in the bathroom, getting ready for work. My phone vibrates on the coffee table, turning back on after being flat for most of the day. The screen lights up with a flood of notifications, one after another: multiple missed calls, text messages, and over a hundred unread messages in the group chat. There are multiple work emails following up on emails that I still haven't returned.

Tess: Where are you?

Elodie: Please tell me you're alive.

Tess: Bryn??

Elodie: Where you at?

Tess: Call me when you can please xx

My stomach drops as I thumb through each notification. 'Shit,' I whisper.

Ash appears in the doorway, towel slung low around his hips, his hair damp. 'What's wrong?'

'My phone died,' I say, already typing. 'There are a lot of messages.'

'Everything okay?'

'Yeah,' I say, guilt flooding through me. 'I just lost track of time.'

Bryn: I'm okay, my phone died.
I'm so sorry! Coming home soon x

It doesn't feel like enough, but they see it instantly, replying with words of relief.

Ash disappears back into the bathroom while I get myself organised. He comes out dressed for work in black jeans, boots, and a black tee that stretches tight across his muscles. He drops down beside me on the couch and pulls out a sleek black bag from underneath the coffee table. Quietly, he sets up a mirror, and then places another bag beside it, this one significantly smaller. He opens it, revealing bottles and brushes inside. Curiously, I watch as he dips his finger into the black makeup and drags it beneath one eye, slow and practiced. It creates dark shadows on his skin, sculpting his handsome face into something more sinister. He does the other side next, blending the makeup just enough to look messy.

'I didn't initially realise you painted on makeup,' I murmur.

He glances at me in the mirror, the corner of his mouth twitching. 'The mask covers most of it, and sometimes I don't bother, but it usually looks better when I do.'

I watch the way his expression changes as he finishes painting, as if he is settling into character. Ash pulls on the mask next, tests the strap, then lifts it again to adjust the makeup once more, darkening some areas just a touch. He inches the mask up and nestles it on top of his head. He glances at me.

'What?'

'Nothing,' I say, attempting and failing to hide my smile.

He leans forward, arching a brow, the black around his eyes making his gaze scarily darker.

'You're committed.' I reach out and brush my thumb just beneath his eye, careful not to smudge anything.

'For the record,' I say softly, 'you look sexy as hell like this.'

'Yeah,' he replies with a smirk. 'I know.'

Rolling my eyes, I drop my hand and stand, my phone buzzing again in my pocket, another reminder of all the messages and life admin I've neglected. Behind me, Ash puts the mask back into place, looking brutal and deadly.

'You heading out?' he asks, standing to his full height and towering over me. 'You're welcome to stay. That would be my choice.'

'I'd love to, but I need to go back to the apartment and the girls,' I say, reluctant to leave, even though I know I need to. 'I didn't mean to worry anyone.'

He steps closer, lowering his voice. 'You don't owe anyone every minute of you.'

I look up at him. 'Maybe not, but they care.'

He holds my gaze, something I can't quite decipher flickering across his expression before he nods slowly.

'Text me when you get home?'

'Sure.'

We stand there for a long moment, reluctant to leave each other, as if for some reason we may never get this again. Ash leans in and presses a soft kiss to my temple.

'Hey,' he murmurs. 'You'll come back again, right?'

I smile, nodding. 'Yeah. I plan to.'

He sweeps his mouth across mine and I moan into it. The kiss turns heated quickly as he presses me back against the wall, his hands cupping my face. My fingers trail down his chest and stomach before he reluctantly steps back, breathless.

He walks me to my car, despite the fact I'm probably going to make him late. As I drive off, he stands and watches, becoming smaller and smaller in my rear-view mirror. I don't look away until I have to. The drive back feels longer than it should. My phone keeps buzzing in the cup holder – Tess, Elodie, missed calls stacked on top of messages – but I let it ring, deciding to deal with it all later when I have more motivation. I pull up in front of the apartment. Home. Or close enough. I barely get one foot inside the door before Tess appears.

'Oh my God,' she says, relief and irritation colliding on her face. 'Bryn.'

Elodie appears behind her, arms crossed. Her expression is calmer, but her eyes are sharp.

‘I know,’ I say quickly, dropping my bag. ‘I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to disappear.’

Tess pulls me into a hug. ‘You scared us.’

‘I know,’ I repeat, softer now. Guilt settles heavy in my stomach.

We migrate to the living room, and I collapse onto the lounge. Tess perches on the arm of the couch. Elodie curls into its corner, watching me with narrowed eyes.

‘So,’ Tess says. ‘You gonna tell us where you’ve been?’

I twist my fingers together, averting my gaze. ‘With Ash.’

Elodie’s eyebrow lifts. ‘That part we guessed.’

‘It turned into an overnigher,’ I admit. ‘Then most of today.’

Tess exchanges a look with Elodie. ‘Uh huh.’

‘It wasn’t planned.’

Elodie leans forward. ‘Was it good?’

‘Yes,’ I say immediately. ‘Very good.’

‘And?’ Tess asks.

‘And ...’ I trail off, shrugging. ‘Now I’m back.’

Elodie tilts her head. ‘Did something happen?’

‘It was intense in the same way it always is with him,’ I reply.

Neither of them speaks for a moment.

Tess reaches over and squeezes my knee. ‘Do you want to be with him again? After everything?’

‘I don’t want to think too much about anything right now. We’ve only just come back into each other’s lives. I never thought I’d see him again.’ I shrug, leaning forward and rubbing circles into my temples. ‘Part of me wants to stay here and forget about everything else, but I’m not sure that’s the smart thing to do.’

Elodie nods. ‘Only you know what’s the right thing to do. We’d both love to have you here, you know that. Just be careful with him. He’s broken your heart before.’

‘I know. I will.’

Later, when I’m alone in my room, I lie back on the bed and stare at the ceiling. I turn my head toward the window. From here, I can see the streetlight that flickers every few seconds. Awareness ripples down my spine and I sit up abruptly. I look to the door, toward where Tess and Elodie are laughing somewhere down the hall. I can hear the murmur of a TV show playing in the living room. Swallowing, I drift over to the window

and peer out of it, scanning the dark street. I know he's out there. He always watches. Across the street, in the shadows between trees, there's movement. Slowly, I slide the window open. Cold air spills in, kissing my bare legs beneath the oversized shirt I'm wearing – the one I took from his place. The street is quiet, almost empty. My eyes stay trained on the spot between the trees, where I saw the movement. There's a silhouette leaning against the tree, head tilted slightly upward, hands in a dark hoodie.

You're not supposed to want the person who ruined you, I remind myself.

The wind tugs at the branches above him. For a second, he's swallowed whole by shadow. Then he moves. He steps forward into the streak of the streetlight, and the yellow glow catches the sharp line of his jaw. The hood slips back slightly, revealing dark hair that falls exactly the way it used to when he'd run a hand through it. His mouth curves into something that is not quite a smile, but more of a smirk.

God.

Five years have carved him into something harder. He has broader shoulders, and thicker forearms where the sleeves push up slightly. He looks less like the boy who used to kiss me behind closed doors and more like a man. He has always seemed older and bigger to me, but now even more so. His eyes find mine easily. Heat rushes through me, fast and disorienting. My fingers tighten against the window frame. I tell myself to step back. To close the curtain. To pretend I don't feel the pull, this invisible thread wound tight between us. He tilts his head slightly. A question without words.

Are you going to pretend you don't want this?

I could end it right now. One sharp movement of fabric and he'd be shut out. It'd be the safe choice – the sane choice. I should pack my things and leave, return to the life I ran away from because this – whatever this is – was never normal. The way he looks at me isn't casual. It isn't the same way other men have looked at me over the last few years, polite and curious and easily distracted. He looks at me like I belong to him. Like the years we spent apart were a pause, not an ending. He stalks me. That should terrify me. There's something unbalanced in it. Something possessive, dangerous, and unhinged.

His shoulders square slightly when a car drives past too slowly, headlights sweeping over me where I stand in his shirt. The movement is subtle but unmistakable.

Protective. Territorial. As if to say: *she is mine.*

This isn't healthy, but I like knowing he'd burn the world down before he let anyone touch me. When he drags his gaze down the length of me, I don't feel like I'm in danger. I feel chosen – wanted in a way that's absolute.

My breath fogs up the glass again. I let him watch me watching him. His hands come out of the hoodie pocket. He taps two fingers lightly against his own chest, then he points to me. The gesture is small but claiming.

I nod. The faintest dip of my chin.

Yes, I see you.

Yes, I feel it too.

Yes, I'm still yours in whatever broken way we never managed to fix.

The corner of his mouth lifts. It's as if he's restraining himself from something: coming closer, crossing the street, breaking whatever fragile boundary we're pretending exists. He doesn't move. Ash stands there under the flickering light, his eyes locked on mine.

I stay at the window, my pulse racing, my skin burning beneath his shirt. I crave the weight of his gaze, the feeling of possession I know I shouldn't want. There's a part of me that still relives the memory of him close to Isla and the pain he caused me, but in my heart, I am choosing to believe him. If he crossed the street right now, I wouldn't stop him.

BRYN*Five Years Ago*

The sand is so bright it hurts my eyes. The water is clear enough to see straight through to the pale ribs of coral beneath the surface. The air smells like salt and sunscreen. I'm standing on a beach that belongs on a postcard. We're in the Whitsundays at a luxury rental my stepfather booked the day after he threw Ash out of my bedroom like he was dragging out rubbish. I should feel lucky. That's what Mum keeps saying.

'Bryn, look at this place. Isn't this incredible?' she says each time she catches my surly expression. I nod when she looks at me, because that's easier than explaining how truly broken I feel. The way Ash was ripped out of the house replays on a loop in my mind. I'm going crazy not speaking to him, even though I'm so angry and confused.

Within ten minutes of Grant's explosion that night, my phone was confiscated. My laptop, too; my tablet; even my watch. All were packed into one of Grant's safes in his closet. Of course no one knows the combination but him. As someone who is admittedly addicted to their phone, I don't know myself without the constant scrolling, messaging, and photo uploading.

Now I'm here with my toes buried in sand. The sun bakes my shoulders while tourists laugh somewhere down the shore. Mum and Isla are waist-deep in the water. My sister splashes her, shrieking when Mum retaliates. They look untouched by the mess left behind. I watch my sister for too long – the way she pushes her wet hair back, the way she smiles over at me from time to time. Those ugly, festering thoughts creep in again.

What if she liked him? What if he liked her? My mind is stuck on how close they were standing, and the image she sent him after I saw them, her words on his screen. I replay it all, over and over, until my head feels like it is going to explode. Humiliation crawls up my throat like bile. My stomach twists so violently I have to sit down. The ocean sparkles in front of me, endless and blue and perfect. People save up for years to come here. Couples walk hand in hand along the shoreline. A proposal is probably happening somewhere on a boat just beyond the reef, and yet I feel like I've been exiled from one of the only things in my life that made me happy.

I wrap my arms around my knees and press my forehead against them. The wind whips strands of hair across my face, and they stick to the tears running down it in tracks. He hasn't been able to reach me. I wonder if he has tried. Part of me knows he would have. Has he contacted her, too?

I know my thoughts are irrational – Ash doesn't have my hotel details, nor any clue where I am or how to reach me – but that doesn't stop me from glancing down the beach, hoping he will appear. I picture him back home, angry, probably deciding that neither of us is worth the chaos. Or even worse, I wonder if he wants her and has forgotten all about me.

Isla looks happier than she has in weeks. She enjoyed taking this from me. Proving she's better than me is an addiction to her. It's something she does to show me she'll always win. It's not enough for her to have her own things, her own friends, her own life, she has to want mine too. Or maybe she doesn't want it – maybe she just doesn't want *me* to have it. It's always been like that.

When I was twelve and finally made the netball team, she suddenly 'missed the sport' and joined the next season. When I cut my hair short, she cut hers shorter. When a boy in year nine started sitting next to me in science, he appeared at our house the next weekend asking if Isla was home. She sucks up everything around her like it's oxygen, until there's none left for anyone else to breathe, and everyone lets her, because Isla is easy to love. Her beauty is what entrances people. She smiles at the right moments. She knows how to tilt her head and look wounded when she's called out. Mum calls her sensitive. She is the victim in every story. No one ever calls her competitive, but I see it. I always have. She gets a look in her eyes when something good happens to me.

Ash was the only thing that ever felt untouched. He was mine in a way that felt unreachable by competition. I thought he didn't notice her, which

might have been his worst offense of all. What if she couldn't stand that? The thought slithers through me slowly, poisonous like venom. Maybe she didn't want him at all; maybe she just needed to prove she could have him.

The ocean sparkles in front of me, endless and blue and perfect. Isla is laughing at something Mum says, throwing her head back like she hasn't orchestrated the quiet collapse of my life. She doesn't look guilty. In fact, this is the most like herself she has looked in a while. She looks relieved, almost, as if taking something from me makes her world glow brighter.

I imagine them talking when I wasn't there: her leaning against the kitchen counter, pretending she didn't know he was watching; him noticing her beauty for the first time, finally getting to be close to her without me around. The images won't stop. Isla has always wanted what was mine. Friends. Attention. Praise. Love ... the word makes my throat burn. If she took this too – if she took him – then what is left that's actually mine?

The ocean rolls in and out, steady and indifferent. I wrap my arms tighter around myself. Maybe this is what she's proving – that she can step into my place whenever she wants. I'm the one left sitting alone on this perfect beach, reminding myself I'll never be enough. The sun is hot on my back, but I feel cold underneath it. I dig my fingers into the sand until it's packed hard beneath my nails.

The day slips by and I grow more numb as the minutes drag along. The sun climbs higher, bleaching the world into something unbearable. Mum insists on photos, and Isla throws an arm around her waist. I stand just outside the frame until Mum calls my name. I step in, forcing a smile that feels wrong on my face.

I can feel my light dimming.

The tide rolls in and out. I wade in eventually, because sitting still seems to make the people around me angry. The water is warm, clear, and beautiful, but I feel nothing. Isla swims ahead, her hair fanning out behind her like ink in water, strands of it catching gold in the sunlight. She doesn't look back to see if I'm following. I tread water a few metres behind her, watching the clean slice of her arms through the surface. Even here, even somewhere as wide and endless as the ocean, she still takes up all the space. The salt clings to my lips.

She turns slightly, laughing at something Mum calls from shore. The sound carries across the water. She looks like someone who hasn't lost anything. The current shifts subtly beneath us, tugging at my legs. For a

second I imagine letting it pull me farther out. Far enough that no one expects anything from me. Instead, I stay where I am, watching her silhouette against the glittering blue, thinking how easy it would be to hold her down and not let go.

I sink under for a second, letting the salt sting my eyes. For a singular but suspended moment, I imagine what it would be like if she didn't exist. I imagine a reality with no older sister casting a shadow over me. In this version, it's just me. The thought loosens something ugly inside my chest. If she didn't exist, maybe I wouldn't always feel slightly misplaced.

My lungs start to burn. I kick toward the surface before the ache in my chest becomes panic. Air hits me and I inhale urgently; I've been under longer than a few seconds. I wipe salt from my eyes and glance toward the shore. Mum is waving and calling something about lunch. Isla is closer to her now, heading back to the sand. I'm still between them and the reef, between wanting to disappear and wanting to be seen. The water rocks me gently, lifting and lowering my body in a slow rhythm. I float on my back. The sun presses against my closed eyelids, red, warm, and heavy.

If I vanished, would anything actually change? The thought isn't supposed to be dramatic; it's just how she makes me feel. Isla would take up the extra space without effort. A swell rolls under me unexpectedly, tipping me sideways. Water rushes into my ear. I right myself quickly. I start swimming in, each stroke more difficult than it should be. By the time my feet touch sand, I feel scraped raw from the inside out. Isla glances at me as I emerge, her expression unreadable for half a second before it smooths into something that seems pleasant to the untrained eye. When I look at her, I see him, and the weight in my chest feels too heavy for me to carry.

I trail behind them back to the house, sand clinging to my damp feet. Mum chatters about boat tours for tomorrow. By late afternoon the sky begins to soften, blue bleeding into an apricot orange. The heat lifts just enough to make the air feel breathable again. Cicadas start singing in the trees around the house.

The night drags on and I move robotically. Showers run. Doors open and close. The scent of coconut shampoo and grilled fish fill the house. Cutlery clinks against plates. Grant pours wine for himself and Mum, casting many frowns in my direction.

The first time I feel like I've breathed all day is when I'm finally alone, in bed, surrounded by darkness. Ash used to crawl into my bed and whisper that he couldn't sleep without me, that I was his after midnight. But now I'm the one who can't sleep. In this beautiful house overlooking the water, I lie awake listening to waves crash against rocks, my mind utterly consumed by him.

I hate him. He hurt me in the worst way he could. But what's worse is that I still miss him. I'm afraid I will miss him for the rest of my life, but I'm even more afraid that he won't miss me at all.

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ASH

Now

I'm perched on the edge of the pier, legs dangling over the water, my notebook open on my knees. The tide laps at the piles below me, the rhythm almost hypnotic. Seagulls circle above, crying loudly. My pen scratches across the page. Words bleed into sketches of her eyes and her glossy hair. I stop every few lines to stare at the water, letting the motion of it pull at thoughts I can't quite pin down. I'm writing a book, though perhaps a better description would be a confession within a memory catalogue. I'm trying to understand everything that happened. Trying to understand us and the things I've done.

The air is cool and damp, but I hardly notice it. My focus is entirely on the page. I scribble furiously when a thought hits me, the pen scrunching the paper with my frustration. Sometimes I tear a page out and ball it up, starting it all over again.

Her face haunts the margins; I sketch it over and over. Each version is a little different: the Bryn I first met, the Bryn I'd sneak in to see, the Bryn who left me. I imagine her now as I just saw her, watching me from her window. I try to capture the weight of it all – the longing, the anger, the way she always seems just out of reach. The sun dips low in the sky. Shadows stretch across the pier and the world turns orange, but I barely notice. I keep writing and sketching.

I pause, hovering the pen above the page. I lean back, my legs still swinging, and let the quiet envelop me. For a moment, I lose myself in the memories of all that we used to be. I write them down, scared that if I don't, they will vanish for good. I sketch her hand on the page, my lines shaky and

uneven. I write about the first time she looked at me like I was the only person in the world. I write faster, almost frantically, and the words spill out of me. If I don't capture her, if I don't record every touch, every fleeting glance, every moment of quiet intimacy between us, it will all dissolve, and I'll be left with nothing but the ache of remembering.

After hours slip by, I stop, my hand trembling, and stare at the page. I close my eyes, and the image of her at the window flashes through my mind. I see her staring at me, waiting, daring me to cross the distance.

I pick up the pen again, but this time, I don't write. I just sit, letting the words unwritten weigh down my chest. She couldn't forgive me before. When she knows everything, I'll lose her for good.

I see her before she sees me. That's how it's always been.

Bryn sits at a table outside the little coffee shop on Main Street, the late afternoon sun shining on her strawberry-blond hair. She laughs at something Elodie says, and Tess smiles softly into her cup. I stand across the street in the shadow of the old cinema marquee, unseen. Five years ago, I stood beneath her bedroom window, and here I am all these years later, still watching, still obsessing.

Some people grow out of their first love, but not me.

Though she doesn't see me, I know the exact moment she becomes aware of my presence. It moves through her body like a ripple. Her shoulders tighten, her spine straightens, and that smile on her face falters in the slightest way.

Elodie is talking with her hands, bold and brash like always. She's probably gossiping about someone they all know. Tess cradles her cup, nodding along to what Elodie says. Elodie doesn't leave much space for others, but she and Tess are both good for Bryn. They are safe, normal people – exactly who she should be spending her time with.

I lean back against the cool brick wall, my arms folded loosely. If anyone glances my way, I'm just another guy killing time before his shift at the park. They don't see how my gaze maps her and every move she makes. My eyes track the slope of her neck, the delicate hollow at the base of her throat, the way her fingers trace the rim of her cup absentmindedly. She does that when she's anxious. Her eyes dart around the coffee shop, as if she thinks I might be at one of the tables near hers. She should know by now I'm never that close by.

Five years ago, those fingers used to trace patterns on my chest while we lay tangled in sheets. She'd whisper sweet nothings into my skin. Now I have new memories of us from the other night, too. Years may have passed, but our chemistry only burns hotter. We're no longer shy teenagers who don't know what they're doing.

Bryn was the only one I ever desired, but suspicion is a poison. It seeps into everything and turns love into something fragile – something that can be broken.

Across the street, she shifts in her seat. Her gaze drifts, still searching, as if she already knows I'm here. I don't move. I want her to feel it: that prickle at the back of her neck, that awareness of being seen. I've spent years trying to scrape her out of my system, but I had to come back to this town, in case she returned to me. She became a ghost, which I now know is because she legally changed her name. It's as if she sensed I was hunting her and thought distance would keep her safe, but now she's standing exactly where I can see her. Exactly where she belongs.

She finally looks up, and there it is: that split second when her eyes lock onto mine and the world around her goes quiet. She goes still. Five years vanish as time reels back in my mind. We're back in her bedroom, the moonlight shining on our bare skin. Her breath hitches when I shift closer. Her door clicks softly locked, ensuring no one would come in.

I will let her wonder how long I've been here; I'll let her question how often I've watched without her knowing. I stopped watching when she accused me, when she went silent, when I was forced away before I could beg for her to take me back. There is no one else I would ever beg for. There is no one else I would chase. She's carved into me, deep enough to leave a scar.

Dragging my thumb slowly along my lower lip, I resist the urge to smirk. It's a thoughtless gesture, but I know she notices it. She always notices the smallest things about me. Her friends follow her gaze. Elodie stiffens immediately, and Tess's eyes are cautious, assessing me. They see a troubled man across the street; Bryn sees the boy who used to sneak in after midnight, the boy who memorised the creaks in the floorboards outside her room.

I step a little deeper into the shadows, but I don't break eye contact.

I'm still watching.

I'm still obsessing.

I'm not going anywhere. If she wants me gone, she'll have to come say it to my face. I don't cross the street. I don't need to. I know the exact way Bryn wraps her hands around a mug when she's cold. I know the tiny crease between her brows when she's pretending she's fine. I know the sound of her laugh and how it dips at the end when she's nervous. She tucks her hair behind her ear, another nervous habit of hers.

God. Five years ago, she used to do that when I kissed her neck. When she didn't know what to do with her hands and her body was melting underneath mine. She'd whisper my name like it was a prayer and I held all the answers she needed.

Shifting my weight, my shoes scrape faintly against the pavement. No one notices. They never do. Working as a scare actor teaches you that: how to be invisible until you don't want to be, how to watch, how to wait.

Elodie leans forward, animated. I can't hear her, but I can read her mouth enough to know she's asking about me. Bryn's shoulders stiffen, the same way they did when Grant dragged me out of her bedroom by the collar of my shirt. When her mother stood at the doorway like I was something diseased, as though I'd corrupted their perfect girl. Maybe I had. A thin smile pulls at my mouth. There's no warmth in it.

Bryn never understood. She saw something twisted in the way I tried to protect her sister and hovered over her like she was a wounded animal. Bryn couldn't see that I only ever wanted her.

All three pairs of eyes swivel to me. I don't wave. I don't move. I let Bryn feel the weight of my attention, intense and unashamed. Elodie's eyes narrow, her posture shifting into something protective, perhaps even confrontational.

I can almost hear her: *What the hell is he doing here?*

I've always liked Elodie. She's hot headed and easy to provoke. Tess is a little too soft, the kind of girl who lets louder people decide what she thinks. Bryn stands slowly. The corner of my mouth twitches. Is she coming over? The air feels charged with tension, as in the seconds before the lights go out in the maze, and I step from behind a false wall to make strangers scream. Only this time, I'm the one bracing myself. Tess grabs Bryn's wrist gently, murmuring something. Elodie looks ready to march across the street and claw my eyes out, but Bryn doesn't break my eye contact. I tilt my head slightly, asking silent questions.

Do you miss me? Do you want to see me?

Her throat moves as she swallows.

I step backward, deeper into the shadow of the marquee. I let the darkness swallow me, inch by inch, while holding her gaze until the last possible second, so she feels what it's like to lose sight of me.

I wonder if she'll dream about me tonight. I already know I'll dream about her. I always do.

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ASH

Five Years Ago

The house is dark when I get there.

She's gone. Again. I stand at the edge of the driveway, staring at the windows like they might talk back to me and explain where they've gone – where *she* has gone. There are no lights on, and no movement inside the house. It's different this time. The curtains are partially open, revealing the couch through the gap in the blinds. The furniture hasn't been removed, so that's a good sign – they haven't moved again, but they aren't here.

Grant took her phone, laptop, and any other way of contacting me. Or at least that's what I assume. Even after everything, I still think she would hear me out if given the chance. I cross the lawn without thinking, my shoes sinking into the damp grass. I've done this a hundred times – I know exactly how to get in undetected – but the side door isn't unlocked for me as it usually is. Peeling off my shirt like I've done before, I wrap it around my fist and throw my hand through the glass. For half a second, there's nothing, just a sharp sting biting my knuckles and the rain of shattered glass hitting tiles.

Then the alarm blares. A violent, mechanical shriek tears through the house, bouncing off the walls. The sound drills straight into my skull.

'Shit.'

My heart slams hard enough to make me dizzy. The sound doesn't stop. It's as if it's screaming at me, shrill and relentless, pouring out of the house and into the street. I run, cutting across the lawn, jumping the fence easily and landing swiftly on the other side. I slow when I reach the end of the street, my chest heaving, and glance back. I breathe hard, trying to steady

myself, but the panic keeps rising. It crawls up my spine and sinks its teeth into the base of my skull. I need to hear her voice; I don't even care what she says. She can yell if she wants. Hell, she can even tell me she hates me. Pulling my phone from my pocket with shaking fingers, I call her again, like I have hundreds of times already. It goes straight to voicemail.

'Come on,' I mutter, pacing in a tight circle under the streetlight. 'Come on, Bryn.'

The world feels too big and lonely without her in it. Every night I knew where she was, but now she could be anywhere. What if she's somewhere crying and I'm not there? What if she thinks I stopped trying? My breathing turns shallow, releasing in short painful bursts. I start walking again, down streets I now know by heart. I feel untethered, as if I've been hanging on an edge and someone's stomped on my hands, forcing me to fall. I built everything around her: the schedule of my days, the routes I take, the way I think. Without knowing where she is, there's no shape to anything. There's just a hollow, frantic ache clawing at my ribs. I slow near the park, bracing my hands on my knees, trying to pull oxygen back into my lungs.

'I'm not done,' I whisper to the empty dark. 'This isn't over.'

Desperation settles over me. I straighten slowly, my mind spinning. I'm not giving up on her. I'm not giving up on us.

BRYN*Now*

Bass thumps from Tess's speaker while she digs through her closet.

'Wear the black one,' Tess calls, muffled by hangers full of dresses. Her bronze hair is in a half-up and tumbles down her back in waves. 'The short one.'

I stare at myself in Elodie's vanity mirror before reaching for the dress that's laid out on her bed.

'It's very tight,' I mumble. 'And short.'

'The best combination, in my opinion.' Elodie smirks, sprawled across the floor in silk pyjamas as she attempts to put on false lashes. 'It's my birthday. You don't get to be modest on my birthday.'

She's straightened her black hair, which stops just past her shoulders. I've opted to wear my hair out in long waves as well, knowing it would look striking against the black, especially since I'm wearing red lipstick. I step into the dress, sliding it up my thighs and pulling it over the lacy lingerie set I'm wearing underneath.

Tess eyes me with her brows raised. 'Dressing for a particular somebody?'

'No,' I say dismissively, staring down at the dress.

Tess studies me like she doesn't believe it, but she lets it go. Elodie pushes herself up off the floor. Her eyes flick to me for half a second.

'I hope you know what you're doing, Bryn. He's bad news, I'm telling you. It's not normal how he's still obsessing over you after all this time.'

'I mean ... I'm sort of obsessing over him, too.'

‘The difference is you don’t stand across the street stalking him when he’s out with friends,’ she quips.

They both stare at me. I have nothing to say back. How can I admit to them I like it? I like the obsession and the darkness, the way he watches me like the world would end if I slipped out of his sight. Maybe I’m not as innocent as they think. Maybe I don’t want ‘safe’.

Tess is quiet as she starts working highlighter along her cheekbones.

‘You deserve someone who trusts you,’ she says finally, softer now. ‘Not someone who tracks your location like it’s a hobby.’

My stomach dips. How can I tell them it’s not about trust, but about possessiveness. It’s as if I’m a treasure of his to protect, and that’s what makes it so alluring. If I said any of this out loud, they would think I’m crazy. Maybe I am.

Elodie pops up between us, now wearing a silver dress that catches every flicker of light. ‘Okay! Energy shift. We are not doing the Bryn’s Terrible Taste in Men seminar tonight.’

‘I don’t have terrible taste,’ I mutter.

They both look at me again.

I grab my clutch. ‘Let’s just go. We’re going to be late.’

People are spilling out onto the lawn when we pull up. Music thunders through the house, the bass vibrating under my heels as soon as we step onto the pavement. There’s laughter, shouting, and the potent scent of alcohol in the air. Elodie inhales dramatically, like she’s arrived at her coronation.

‘It’s my birthday,’ she declares, throwing her arms wide as if the entire house belonged to her.

The second we walk in, someone screams her name. People rush to her. I’m surrounded by glitter, shrieking, and hugs. A plastic tiara gets shoved onto Elodie’s head. As she moves further into the crowd, her smile lighting up the entire room, I slink toward the back, near the doorway. I scan without meaning to, as if Ash might be here already, waiting for me.

Tess bumps her shoulder into mine. ‘You look like you’re casing the place.’

I force a smile. ‘I don’t come to parties often. I don’t really know anyone here other than you two.’

She grabs two drinks off a tray someone’s carrying and hands me one. It’s pink and glittery.

‘Loosen up,’ she says. ‘You’re allowed to have fun.’

Across the living room, Elodie is already dancing on a coffee table, her laugh cutting through the music. People orbit her like she’s a magnet. I take a sip of the drink and grimace at the sugary sweetness.

‘Bryn?’

Turning, I find Ryan standing a few steps behind me, one hand wrapped around a plastic cup. His brows lift slightly, as if he wasn’t entirely sure it was me until I faced him.

‘Hey,’ he says, a crooked smile pulling at the corner of his mouth. ‘I thought that was you.’

‘Ryan,’ I say, a little surprised. ‘I didn’t know you were here.’

He offers a one-shouldered shrug. ‘Got dragged along by a couple of guys from work.’ His eyes flick over me. ‘You look good.’ He takes a sip from his drink, still watching me like he’s trying to piece together the girl he remembers with the one standing in front of him now.

‘Thanks, Ryan. You too.’

‘You wanna dance?’ he asks, reaching for my hand confidently, as if the thought of me saying no simply has not crossed his mind.

I *should* say no.

I don’t.

He pulls me into the crowd. The music is loud enough to rattle my ribs. Ryan’s hands settle on my waist, tentative at first, like he’s waiting to see if I’ll protest his touch. I lift my arms, letting the rhythm take over me. It’s easier that way, when I don’t have to think. When there’s just movement and heat and bodies pressed close together. He relaxes when I don’t pull away. His grip tightens slightly.

‘Are you back for good?’

‘I don’t know.’

His hand brushes down my arm before shifting back to my hip. A ripple of something rolls down my spine, as if my body knows before I do. Ryan’s saying something else, but I don’t hear it. My pulse spikes, anticipation inching through me like poison. Across the room, through a blur of flashing lights and moving bodies, I see him. Ash is leaning against the wall, and the oxygen leaves my lungs at the sight of him. He’s in a dark shirt, his sleeves pushed up, with one leg propped up against the wall. He tilts his head in the way he often does when he’s analysing me. He’s watching Ryan’s hands on me like he’s calculating the exact force it would take to break them.

Ryan misreads my reaction as nerves. He smiles. 'You're tense.'

He pulls me closer, his confidence growing. His hand slides lower on my waist. Ash moves. He strolls unhurriedly through the room. People dart out of his way almost instinctively, as though something in them recognises a predator entering the water.

He stops directly behind Ryan, close enough to make him stiffen before he even turns around. Ash's voice is calm. A little too calm.

'Take your hands off her.'

Ryan blinks, confused. 'Sorry, man, we're just—'

'I know exactly what you're doing and what your intentions are.'

Ash's eyes flick to me for half a second, and my God, there it is. That look. The heated possessiveness that makes me feel like he owns me.

Ryan squares his shoulders, trying to recover. 'She doesn't seem to mind.'

Ash steps closer. Now there's barely an inch between them.

'She doesn't mind a lot of things,' he says evenly. 'That doesn't mean you get to touch what's mine.'

Ryan looks at me, perplexed, as if he can't picture Ash and I together. 'You know this guy?'

'Oh, she knows me.' He looks at me again. 'Don't you, Bryn?'

My name in his mouth is a warning and a promise at the same time. Ryan's hand drops from my waist. Smart boy.

Ash doesn't cast Ryan a second glance. 'You can go.'

His tone indicates it's not a suggestion. Ryan hesitates one second too long. Ash leans in just enough for only Ryan to hear him, but I catch it anyway.

'If you touch her again,' he murmurs, his voice silky, 'I'll make sure the next time you see her is from a hospital room.'

Ryan goes pale, backing up immediately and disappearing into the crowd without another word. Heat spears through me as the universe becomes just us. At least that's how it feels, even though we're in a crowded room surrounded by all types of people. Ash steps into the space Ryan left behind. His hand finds my waist, and somehow it feels different. He holds me as if he's laying claim to something that was always his. My breath catches, not because he's touching me, but because of how he does it. His palm spreads against my hip, his thumb settling instantly into the dip in my waist like it remembers exactly where to go.

Ryan touched me like he was hoping I'd let him; Ash touches me like he knows I will.

'You shouldn't have done that,' I whisper, but I don't move away.

His other hand slides up my spine slowly and deliberately until his fingers curl around the back of my neck. His forehead brushes mine.

'You let him,' he says quietly.

'I can let whoever I want,' I shoot back, but my voice lacks bite. His thumb strokes my hip once, slowly enough to make my knees weaken.

'You're shaking.'

'I'm not.'

His mouth curves slightly. He tightens his grip just enough for me to feel how strong he is.

'Your body doesn't lie to me, Bryn.'

The music pounds loudly around us but everything feels far away, as though the party is happening in another world entirely. I should push him away. I should remind him that he doesn't get to show up and claim me like I'm his property whenever he feels like it. Instead, I slide my hands down his chest and see the smallest loss of control take over him. That's the thing about us: it's never just him overpowering me; it's the way I undo him right back.

My fingers curl into his shirt. 'You don't get to threaten people over me.'

His jaw flexes. 'He had his hands on you.'

'And?'

'And I didn't like it.'

My lips twitch with the urge to smile at his jealousy. I tilt my head up, my lips inches from his. 'You don't get to decide who touches me.'

His grip shifts. One hand slides higher, settling firmly on my waist, while the other tightens slightly at my neck. It doesn't hurt in the slightest, but it's a claim on me all the same. The pressure feels intoxicating, and I almost dare him tighten his hold more.

'No,' he murmurs, his eyes dropping to my mouth. 'I don't decide.' His nose brushes mine. 'But I do react. You know that. That's why you did it.'

My heartbeat is out of control now. My body leans into his.

'Say it,' he whispers.

'Say what?'

'That you wanted me to do that.'

I swallow. I did, and he damn well knows that.

His mouth hovers over mine, but he doesn't kiss me. He waits, and even though the temptation to close the gap is almost killing me, I don't break, my stare piercing his as we both wait for the other to make the first move.

'You look good in black,' he says quietly after a long moment in which neither of us caves. 'I enjoy it almost as much as the red.'

My heart is slamming against my ribs.

'You don't own me, Ash.'

Something dark flickers through his eyes.

'No,' he agrees, and for half a second, I think he's going to step back. His hand leaves my waist, only to slide down and hook behind my thigh. The world tips. A sharp gasp tears out of me as he lifts me clean off the ground and throws me over his shoulder. The room erupts around us with shouts, laughter, and wolf-whistling.

My hair falls forward, a curtain of red around my face as I pound my fists against his back. 'Ash! Put me down!'

His arm tightens across the backs of my thighs, locking me in place. His other hand spreads possessively over my ass.

'I don't own you?' he asks evenly, carrying me through the crowd like it's the most natural thing in the world. 'I disagree.'

Humiliation burns through me, but underneath the embarrassment, there's heat pooling through my body like liquid fire. God, I hate how he makes me feel and how much I want him, even after everything. People move out of his way instantly; no one tries to stop him. The night air hits my skin as he steps outside.

'Put me down,' I demand again, quieter now.

It's not until we're halfway down the driveway, away from the noise, that he lowers me. My heels hit the pavement, but he doesn't step back. His hands stay on my hips, grounding me in place.

'You're insane,' I breathe.

'Maybe.'

His thumb brushes just underneath my bottom lip. It comes away slightly red. He looks at it, then back at me.

'I do enjoy the red more,' he murmurs.

My stomach flips.

'You embarrassed me.'

His jaw tightens. 'No, you loved it, you just don't want to admit it.'

He squeezes my hips. One hand slides up my side slowly, claiming ground inch by inch, until it's wrapped around the back of my neck again.

'If you think I'm going to stand there and watch another man's hands on you like it doesn't carve something out of me—' His teeth graze his bottom lip. 'Then you don't know me very well.'

'It's been so long,' I whisper. 'So much has happened.'

'I know.'

'You don't get to just—'

His forehead presses against mine, cutting me off.

'I looked for you. Everywhere. I tried desperately to reach you, but you became a ghost.'

The confession knocks the air from my lungs.

'You did?'

'For months.' His voice drops lower. 'You think I didn't notice when you disappeared? You think I didn't tear the town apart trying to figure out where you went?'

'You shut me out. I was desperate to be back in your life. It tore me apart that you shut me out and wanted nothing to do with me.'

I don't know what to say to that. Part of me is thrilled by it. The obsession. The intensity. The fact that I mattered enough to be searched for.

'You don't get to decide when I'm yours,' I say, but it sounds weaker now. 'You made your choice. You wanted her.'

His hand tightens slightly at my neck, forcing my chin up just enough for me to meet his gaze.

'I never wanted her,' he growls, his eyes flashing with anger and burning into mine with a fierceness that makes me want to believe him. 'She was a cruel girl who didn't know how to navigate her trauma, and she took it out on you. You never gave me the chance to explain. I've been obsessed with you since the moment I met you. You know that. You should know there isn't anyone else.' His thumb stays hooked under my chin, forcing my gaze back to his when it wavers. 'There's no one who could ever compare. No one who could ever come close.'

The intensity in his voice makes my knees weak.

'You don't get to say things like that.'

'Why?' he demands softly. 'Because it's too much? Because it's not normal?' His forehead presses to mine again, his breath hot against my lips. 'I don't want normal, Bryn.'

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‘You scare me,’ I whisper. ‘Because you have the ability to break my heart in ways no one else can. I know because you’ve done it before.’

‘But that’s the thing, Bryn, I never did the wrong thing, I never broke your heart. I just never got the chance to prove that.’

I swallow. ‘Easy to say now that it’s only your side I’ll hear.’

His hand slides from my chin down to my throat, not squeezing it, but just resting there, feeling my pulse race. ‘I don’t know what I have to say or do for you to believe me, but I’m not letting you slip through my fingers this time. Not unless you tell me right now that you don’t want this,’ he says, moving my hand to his chest. ‘That you don’t want me.’ His eyes search mine. ‘You’re mine because you feel this too. I know you do.’

My silence betrays me. He exhales slowly, like he’s been holding it in for months.

‘I’ve tried,’ he says, quieter now. ‘I tried to let you go. I tried to tell myself you’d be happier with someone who isn’t me. Someone who hasn’t got issues and isn’t possessive. Someone *normal*.’ His thumb traces the line of my collarbone. ‘But every time I picture you with someone else, it feels wrong. There is no one else for me. There never was. You can walk away again,’ he says, even as his hand tightens slightly at my waist, contradicting the offer, ‘but don’t lie to yourself and pretend what we have is replaceable.’

‘I’ve never been able to forget you,’ I admit, and it feels like stepping off a ledge. ‘I tried to hate you. God, I tried. It would’ve been easier.’ My fingers curl into the front of his shirt again, like they need something solid to hold onto. ‘But every time I close my eyes, it’s you.’ My voice drops to a whisper. ‘I don’t want normal. I tried to want it. I tried to convince myself I should, but normal is boring. Normal is not you.’

‘I don’t know how to love you in a way that’s light,’ he murmurs.

‘I don’t think I’ve ever wanted light,’ I breathe back.

‘So don’t walk away,’ he says, softer now. ‘Not if you’re going to spend every day pretending you don’t feel this too.’

Then he kisses me. His mouth claims mine like he's been starving and finally found something worth devouring. His tongue sweeps across mine, deepening the kiss into something desperate and urgent. When he finally pulls back, my lips feel swollen.

'I can't get enough of you,' he groans, combing his fingers through my hair with enough force to pull my head backwards. 'You can't leave. Not again.'

'I think I have a reason to stay,' I whisper.

He gazes at me with adoration and devotion – everything I've always wanted from him.

His mouth crashes into mine again, hot and desperate. My back hits the side of his truck with a dull thud, the metal cold against the bare skin on the backs of my arms. His body boxes me in. One hand tugs lightly on my hair, tilting my head back to deepen the kiss. The other slides down my waist, gripping it hard enough to leave bruises in the shape of his fingers.

The music from the party is still pounding, laughter carries on the wind, and a car door slams somewhere nearby – clear reminders we are not hidden, and certainly not being subtle. But still he kisses me like there's no one else on this planet, and I moan into his mouth, desperate for more. I drag him closer by his shirt, rising onto my toes as he bends further forward. My mouth moves against his, our tongues clashing. He groans, the sound almost swallowed by the bass thudding from the house. His hand slides around the back of my thigh, lifting it slightly and pressing me more firmly against his truck.

'Ash,' I gasp against his mouth. My fingers dig into his shoulders. 'We're not alone,' I breathe, even as I pull him toward me. He glances toward the house for half a second. The front door is still wide open, and people move in and out. If anyone looks down the driveway, they'll see us. His grip only tightens further.

'Let them look,' he says, his voice rough. 'They can enjoy the show.'

Heat floods my veins. This is reckless. We are in public. His mouth trails down my jaw to the sensitive spot just below my ear. I gasp again, louder this time, and panic flares inside me because someone could hear.

'Ash,' I warn, but it comes out breathless. His teeth graze my skin, not enough to hurt, but just enough to remind me he could.

'You think I care if they see?' he murmurs against my neck. 'You think I care if they know?'

A burst of laughter erupts from the porch. Footsteps sound down the driveway for a second before disappearing. We are close enough to the party to be caught, but I don't push Ash away. Instead, I tug his face back up to mine and kiss him harder. I don't want to admit that I like being chosen in this way, out in the open, without apology. His hands roam over me like they're reacquainting themselves with something sacred and dangerous. They move over my waist, up my ribs, and back into my hair. He kisses me like he's staking a claim, but there's no cruelty in it. Finally, he pulls back, breathing hard.

The party lights flicker behind him, and shadows move across the windows as the music still blares. His forehead rests against mine, his chest rising and falling in sync with my breathing. Ash's eyes flick past me toward the house, calculating. His hand slides from my waist to my wrist.

'Get in the truck,' he demands, voice firm and controlled in that sexy, dominant way of his.

'You don't get to order me around,' I say automatically, even though I like it and he knows it. He knows me better than I know myself.

'Then consider it an invitation.'

Another eruption of laughter echoes down the driveway. Someone calls Elodie's name. I glance toward the house, then back at him.

'Fine,' I breathe.

He opens the passenger door without breaking eye contact. I slide into the seat. The interior light turns on, bathing us in a golden glow. He sits in the driver's seat and then pats his lap. I climb over. His car is exactly what I expected: sleek, with blacked out windows, understated in a way that screams expensive. The leather seats are smooth and dark. The dashboard glows with red lights against matte black finishes.

The door shuts with a solid thud, cutting the party noise down to a low hum. Bass still pulses faintly through the closed door, but in here it feels distant. The car smells like leather and something darker: his cologne. It's subtle and intoxicating but not overpowering. It's unmistakably him. My body reacts before my thoughts do, with a slow, involuntary inhale.

He leans back in the driver's seat, one hand loose on the steering wheel, watching me like he knows exactly what the scent is doing to me.

The interior light dims, leaving us in darkness lit only by the dashboard and the occasional sweep of headlights passing at the end of the street. Ash studies me for a long moment.

‘You’re shaking again,’ he says softly.

‘I’m not.’

His gaze drops to my hands in my lap. There is no denying they’re trembling. He reaches for them, lacing his fingers through mine, holding me gently instead of gripping me this time. His free hand comes up to brush a strand of hair away from my face. His fingers trail from my temple down to my jaw, brushing the corner of my mouth. He moves his hand to caress my hip through the fabric of my dress.

People are right there; anyone could walk past the truck. But my heart is pounding for an entirely different reason now. I shift, rolling my hips back, and he strokes across the thin fabric of my underwear.

‘Absolutely soaked, as I suspected,’ Ash drawls.

A flush climbs up my cheeks. Pushing my underwear to the side, he inserts a finger inside me. He dips in and out, curling his fingers and hitting the exact point he knows will get a reaction. Moaning, I grind shamelessly onto his hand. He pushes himself up, and I help him pull down his pants as he pushes up my dress. He drags his tongue across his lower lip as he gazes at my lacy underpants, inching them down my thighs.

‘These are hot,’ he comments, wrapping the lace around his fingers as he admires them, before tossing them to the back seat.

He adjusts me once more, and I settle over him and gasp as he pushes inside me, filling and stretching me to the point I need to grip the seat. He thrusts up into me, and I cry out with a mixture of shock and pleasure. I continue grinding, matching his movements. The truck shakes as his thrusts grow harder and rougher, making me moan. Pulling the top of my dress down, he palms my breasts before they bounce out of my bra. He massages them, playing with my nipples, his eyes fixated on them as I begin thrusting back. I’m so caught up in him, I no longer care that people around us might see.

His big, strong hands tighten their hold as he relentlessly thrusts into me. The combination of his movements and the friction between us has me coming undone quicker than I care to admit. His name leaves my lips as I reach my climax, and he orgasms at the same time. I slump forward, my forehead sweaty, pressing into the side of his face. He hugs me to him, breathing hard.

Slowly, without breaking eye contact, I move off him. He helps me guide my underwear back on as he yanks up his pants. I begin to move, but his

hands come to my waist automatically, firm and warm through the thin fabric of my dress, forcing me to stay where I am. The interior of the truck feels smaller now, hotter. The windows have started to fog faintly at the edges, softening the outside world into blurred shapes and coloured lights.

‘You’re trouble,’ I whisper, my fingers sliding into his hair.

He huffs a quiet laugh against my skin. ‘I could say the same about you.’

I pull his head back just enough to look at him. His lips are swollen, and my lipstick is smudged faintly along the edge of his mouth. His usually controlled expression is gone and instead his pupils are blown, and his jaw is tight like he’s holding himself back by sheer force. I flatten my hands against his chest, feeling the steady beat of his heart under my palms. A silhouette crosses the window, and I wonder for a second if they might knock on it.

‘They’re right there,’ I whisper.

‘I know.’

The way he says it makes heat coil through my stomach again. Our breathing slowly begins to even out, though the air still feels charged. I slide off his lap slowly, settling back into the passenger seat. I feel the loss of contact immediately. Cold creeps in where his hands were. He watches me the whole time.

‘Go back inside,’ he says finally.

‘And you?’ I ask, a little surprised he doesn’t suggest we get out of here. I always planned to stay to celebrate with Elodie.

His fingers drum on the steering wheel. He’s controlled again. Composed. ‘I’ll be here.’

‘You’re not going to come back in?’ I ask.

‘I’m only there for you and your friends don’t like me.’

‘I’d like you to come in with me. They don’t know you, and you can change that.’

He studies me for a long second, the shadows across his face making it difficult to see his expression.

‘You want me in there?’ he asks quietly.

‘Yes.’

Holding my gaze for a heartbeat longer, he nods. ‘Okay.’

We open the doors and climb out. The cold night air washes over my flushed skin and I draw in a lungful of it, combing my fingers through my hair and hoping I don’t look as dishevelled as I feel. Ash walks beside me,

close enough that our shoulders brush. We're almost at the porch when his hand finds mine, lacing our fingers together, and I'm a little embarrassed by how giddy it makes me feel. The music grows louder with every step. People are still lingering outside, laughing and smoking. The first person who notices Ash goes quiet mid-sentence. His presence spreads in small, subtle ripples.

Ash doesn't look at them. He appears calm, unbothered and unimpressed all at the same time. His family has a bad reputation in this town, so I'm surprised he agreed to come back in with me. My eyes trace down his jaw to where a muscle is spasming, telling me he isn't as calm as he seems. There's something in his posture and the way he stares at people that makes them shift out of his path without being asked.

We step inside, and the heat and noise swallow us, making me feel slightly overwhelmed. For a split second, the entire room seems to recalibrate as conversations around us dip and eyes turn in our direction. Ash's grip on my hand tightens almost imperceptibly. His expression is still unreadable, though he's artfully schooled the cool, distant look, as if he's tolerating the existence of everyone in this house solely because I'm standing next to him.

'I hate this many people,' he mutters under his breath, just loud enough for me to hear.

'I know.'

His thumb brushes over my knuckles. 'But for you, I will endure.'

I can't help but smile, and I hate how easily he makes warmth bloom in my chest. Across the room, Elodie spots me. Her eyes widen when she notices Ash beside me. Tess, next to her, is not subtle at all as her mouth falls open. Her gaze travels from our joined hands to Ash's face. After a moment, he nods at them.

'Hey,' he says when we reach them.

Tess blinks. 'Hi. I didn't expect to see you here.'

'He wasn't invited,' Elodie mutters quietly, as if she'd actually made a guest list and not an open invitation shared on social media.

'I wasn't planning on coming,' he replies calmly, choosing to ignore her comment, just as she ignores my glare.

I squeeze his hand to remind him that I'm here with him, and that I want him to be here. He shifts slightly closer to me – not hiding behind me, not

pushing in front, but aligning himself by my side. It's protective without being territorial.

'I know you don't like me,' he says to Elodie.

Tess's brows lift slightly as she glances between him and Elodie, who is matching his gaze with a challenge of her own.

'I'm not here to cause problems,' he continues. 'Happy birthday.'

There's something dry about the way he says it, as if he's being sarcastic, which I know would grind Elodie's gears. She exhales heavily, glancing at me, not looking overly impressed by his appearance at her party.

'Well, points for self-awareness, I guess.'

A faint flicker of amusement crosses Ash's face.

'I don't dislike you,' Elodie says after a moment, narrowing her eyes as if sizing him up. 'I dislike how she was when things ended because of what you did.'

'I haven't had the chance to explain,' he says evenly. 'But what you think happened isn't the truth. I was devoted to Bryn.' There's a slight pause as his eyes dart to me. 'I still am.'

Elodie blinks. For once, she doesn't have something clever to say, no immediate retort hot on her tongue. She studies him, her eyes flicking to me briefly before shifting back to him. There's still caution there, that protective edge she wears when it comes to me, but his words seemed to have softened her. A tiny bit.

'You realise that from where we were standing, it didn't look good,' she says.

'I know,' Ash replies.

'You disappeared after she did,' she continues. 'No explanation. No grovelling. No dramatic chase. You let her go.'

His jaw tightens, but he doesn't snap back. 'She cut me out of her life, and I had to accept that.'

Elodie understands that part. I kept in contact with the girls, but she knows I went off grid for years, cutting out a lot of people I used to know.

Ash is still looking at her, like he understands that he's answering to her right now.

'I didn't let her go,' he adds quietly. 'I would never have let her go, if given the chance.'

Elodie's expression changes, shifting into something that looks like surprise. She's maybe even a little impressed.

‘Okay,’ she says eventually. She steps a little closer, not quite welcoming him, but not appearing as unfriendly as before. ‘If you hurt her again, I will ruin your life in ways you won’t see coming. I don’t care who the fuck you or your brother are.’

Ash nods, and I know he could do much the same in return, but he doesn’t argue or defend himself. ‘I’d expect you to.’

Elodie holds his gaze another second before. ‘Right. That’s settled then.’ She leans over to me, bumping her shoulder lightly into mine. ‘If he makes you cry, I’m keying that big truck of his.’

I can’t help the small laugh that escapes me. Ash’s mouth twitches; he’s almost amused.

‘I’ll park further away next time,’ he says dryly.

Elodie narrows her eyes at him again, but there’s the faintest hint of reluctant respect there now. She still doesn’t trust him, but I think she believes what he just said.

‘Really cool costume, by the way,’ Tess interjects, a small, polite smile on her face. ‘At your work.’

‘Yeah,’ he says lightly, a hint of amusement in his voice. ‘I like to really commit to the bit.’

Silence falls among the group, a little awkward.

‘I’m getting a drink,’ he says, glancing at me. ‘You want anything?’

‘I’ll have whatever you’re having,’ I say.

He nods and releases my hand, moving toward the kitchen.

Tess leans in immediately. ‘Okay,’ she hisses. ‘He is terrifyingly hot.’

Elodie elbows her, but I know she agrees.

‘What?’ Tess whispers. ‘I mean ... I get it.’

I try to hide the small smile tugging at my mouth. Across the room, someone tries to drag Ash into a conversation. He listens for a few seconds, then politely extricates himself without being rude, and starts walking back toward us. He stops at my side, close enough that our arms touch. The song changes to something more upbeat – one of Elodie’s favourite songs. She gasps dramatically. She grabs my wrist and Tess’s, trying to drag us toward the living room. I hesitate for half a second before letting her pull me away.

The living room is chaotic, filled with people dancing and drinking, swaying off balance and shouting lyrics. I laugh when Elodie nearly knocks into me. I spin, my hair flying behind me. The bass vibrates up through my boots. I glance toward the space we were just standing in, and see him

there, watching. I let myself smile. For the first time, we're not hiding, and it feels like stepping into the fire instead of away from it.

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BRYN*Five Years Ago*

The house sits there waiting for us, pristine and unfamiliar, and I feel as if I'm about to step into someone else's life again. Our suitcases fill the boot. Leftover sand is stuck in the seams of my shoes. A strange, heavy stillness follows my family. We are all pretending that we can stand one another.

Mum and Grant had been discussing the bad traffic and weather for the last hour, and I was ready to bang my head against the window with hopes it'd put me into a coma. But now that we're here, I unpack my things and step inside behind the others. Grant curses, and I follow his eyes to the shattered window, the glass fractured outward in sharp, glittering lines. It's the very window next to the door I used to leave unlocked for Ash. My stomach plummets to my feet.

'What the hell?' Grant mutters, stomping toward it.

We move closer as a unit, like we're approaching a crime scene. Everything else looks untouched. Grant lets out a humourless laugh, planting his hands on his hips, red creeping down his neck.

'Well,' he says, shaking his head. 'I wonder who that was.'

I already know where this is going.

Mum looks confused. 'What do you mean?'

He gives me a pointed look.

'That boy,' he says flatly.

'He wouldn't—I start, but my voice sounds weak even to me.

Grant scoffs. 'Wouldn't what? Show up unannounced? Break into our house? He has that look about him. He probably breaks into houses and steals things all the time.'

He speaks about Ash like he's something feral, as though I brought someone dangerous into their neat little suburban life and it's left a mark on their name.

'He wouldn't break the window,' I say again, stronger this time.

Grant turns to face me. 'You don't know that.'

As much as I want to defend him, it most likely *was* Ash. He was probably looking for me. He's intense, and has darkness coiled under his skin like it's part of his bloodstream. If he was feeling emotional, he would certainly do something reckless like this.

'Let's not jump to conclusions,' Mum says quickly, attempting to be the peacemaker.

Grant gestures toward the glass. 'You think this is random?'

Isla makes a sound of agreement and I glare at her. Wearing my top that she never asked to borrow, she looks at the window with smug satisfaction on her face.

'Guess he didn't take the breakup very well,' she states. There's something pointed in the way she says it that makes my paranoid mind spiral.

'Enough,' Mum says. 'Both of you. We don't even know if this has anything to do with Ash.'

Grant mutters something under his breath that absolutely means he thinks it does.

'I'm going upstairs,' I mutter, because if I stay here another second, I'm going to explode.

My skin prickles with anger as Isla follows me all the way up the stairs and into my room.

'It's probably for the best, you know,' she says. 'He's not exactly long-term material, a boy like that.'

'You're unbelievable,' I say, rounding on her, anger spearing through me.

She leans against my dresser like she owns the room. 'What did I do?'

'You know exactly what you're doing.'

She looks down at herself. At my top. 'Borrowing clothes?'

'Sending him messages like that. You couldn't stand that I was happy and had something that you didn't.'

'I can't help it that he wanted me,' she says, and my fingernails bite so hard into my skin, I wouldn't be surprised if I've drawn blood. 'I mean, he's pretty hot. If you're not going to talk to him, I will.'

Her words land like a slap to the face and I physically jerk backwards, unable to process what she just said to me. 'What?'

She pushes off the dresser, stepping closer. 'He's interesting. Intense. I get why you liked him.'

'You don't get to talk to him,' I snap.

'Why not?' Her eyes flash. 'You're not, and it's pretty clear he likes me.'

The words lodge under my skin. My brain betrays me instantly. I see it: Ash standing over her, the two of them moving in closer, Isla reaching up on her tiptoes to meet him. She always draws people in. Her beauty attracts them, and because she's outgoing, she can talk to them more easily than I can. I'm too quiet, too wrapped up in my own head. Isla laughs, flirts, and makes people feel like they're important to her.

What if he was tired of me? What if he wanted someone who was flirtier and more fun? My chest tightens as comparison after comparison stacks up in my mind. Her hair is shinier, her teeth are straighter, her presence is effortless. Maybe he did look at her. Maybe our love wasn't the once-in-a-lifetime thing I thought I was.

'He's all yours, sis,' she continues, rolling her eyes. 'He's a creepy stalker. I've seen him looking through our windows – my window. The guy's weird. Honestly, I've probably done you a favour.'

Stalker? Looking through our windows? What is she talking about? Is this the truth, or just another lie? I can't tell anymore.

'Why do you swoop in every time I have something and try to make it yours? Is your own life so pathetic that you need to take from me to make yourself feel better?'

Her eyes narrow into slits, making her look like the mean girl she really is. 'I don't do that.'

'You do,' I insist. 'The friends I bring over. The clothes I buy. The hobbies I start. You slide into everything like you're entitled to it.'

'You're insane.'

'Am I?' I gesture at my shirt on her body. 'You couldn't even let me have this. I'm sure you think it looks better on you, which means it's yours to claim.'

'You act like you're so special,' she says. 'But you're not. In fact, you're desperate and fucking embarrassing.'

The venom in her voice shocks me.

'Embarrassing?' I repeat, like if I say it again it'll make more sense.

‘Yes.’ She steps closer, like she wants the word to land properly. ‘You build these dramatic little love stories in your head and then act devastated when reality doesn’t match them.’

‘You don’t know what you’re talking about.’

‘I know exactly what I’m talking about,’ she snaps. ‘You are desperate for attention.’

My heartbeat is loud in my ears. ‘He loved me, and you hated that he did. You couldn’t stand the spotlight being on me.’

She laughs, and it’s a sharp, bitter sound. ‘Loved you?’ she echoes. ‘God, Bryn. You’re so naive. Getting in your pants and love are two very different things.’

Something cracks inside me, like a hairline fracture running through glass, invisible, but impossible to mend. Something deep and foundational shifts out of place. It’s not just my heart, but something tied to how I see myself, how I believed I was seen. All this time, I thought what we had was rare. I thought it was intense because it was real, and physical because it meant something. Now her words slither in and twist my perception. What if I misread it? What if I was just convenient? She says it like she knows something I don’t, as if she’s seen something I haven’t. I can’t tell if what’s breaking inside me is trust in him, or trust in my own judgement.

‘You weren’t there,’ I say, but my words come out quieter than I wanted them to.

‘No,’ she says. ‘I was.’

‘What does that mean?’

Her chin lifts slightly, a sign of her usual offensiveness. ‘We talked. A lot. Really got to know each other. Intimately *and* emotionally, just like you did.’

The floor seems to tilt beneath me.

‘About what?’

‘About lots of things. Sometimes about you.’

You. The word slices clean through me.

‘You’re lying. Ash loves me, and he wouldn’t do that to me.’

‘I’m not,’ she says coolly. ‘And once I actually had a taste of him, I understood the appeal.’

The air leaves my lungs suddenly, as if I’ve been punched. Her eyes flash in triumph and something uglier.

‘You act like he’s untouchable and devoted to you. He’s not. He’s just a guy, and he didn’t exactly push me away.’

Heat crawls up my neck and across my cheeks, humiliation blooming slowly under my skin. I feel stupid, as if she’s reached inside my heart and dragged something private into the light just to pick it apart. My mind turns against me, replaying every touch, every look, every whispered promise, twisting them into cheap lies. I don’t know what makes me sicker: the image of him near her, or the possibility that I was never as irreplaceable as I thought.

‘You’re disgusting,’ I whisper.

‘No,’ she fires back. ‘You’re just mad that you’re not the only one he looks at like that.’

My heart feels like it’s physically tearing apart.

‘He wouldn’t,’ I say again, but now it sounds like I’m trying to convince myself.

‘You don’t know that,’ she says softly, and the little twitch in her eye releases a level of rage inside me that I’ve never felt before. ‘And that’s what’s killing you.’

Tears burn behind my eyes, but I refuse to let them fall in front of her.

‘Why are you like this?’ I ask, and this time I don’t sound angry. My voice is broken and raw. ‘Why do you hate me so much?’

Something flickers across her face, and I feel for a second I might have gotten through to her, but her expression hardens instantly.

‘I don’t hate you,’ she says. ‘I just hate how you always get everything. It’s always easier for you. Everyone treats you nicer. You’re the younger sibling, the victim, the one everyone loves. You haven’t experienced the hard side of life because you live in this protective little bubble.’

‘I don’t understand what the hell you’re talking about.’

‘He never did it to you.’

I stare at her. ‘Who? Ash?’

‘Why did he never do it to you?’ she whispers.

Confusion swirls in my brain as I try to understand what she’s saying. What did Ash do to her?

‘Do what?’

She looks at me like I’m the one being cruel, like I’m forcing her to spell out something obvious, but I genuinely don’t know what she means.

‘You really don’t see it,’ she says, almost to herself.

‘See what?’ My voice comes out sharper than I intend. ‘If you’re going to say something, just say it.’

Her hands curl into fists at her sides. She says nothing; she just studies me like she’s searching for something beneath my skin.

‘You’re talking in riddles,’ I exclaim, throwing my hands in frustration. ‘If this is about Ash, just say what you’re accusing him of.’

She barks out a laugh. ‘I’m not accusing *him*.’

‘Then who?’

Silence stretches between us, almost unbearable. I wait for her to explain, to make it make sense, but she just stands there looking at me like I should already know. Her gaze drifts toward the hallway, then back to me.

‘You wouldn’t get it,’ she says finally. ‘You’ve never had to.’ Frustration spikes through me. ‘Stop saying that. Had to what?’

The vulnerability that crossed her face for only a moment is already gone, and she’s shutting down again. I can see it happening: the wall sliding back into place behind her eyes.

‘It doesn’t matter,’ she mutters. ‘Forget I said anything.’

‘I can’t just forget—’

‘Yes, you can,’ she says, firmer now. Offensive again. ‘That’s what you’re good at.’

‘I don’t know what you think happened to you,’ I say, my voice shaking. I’m exhausted and frustrated by this conversation. ‘But don’t drag me into whatever this is.’

‘You wouldn’t have survived it if he’d gone to your room first,’ she says quietly. ‘You’re too fucking weak.’

She strides out of the room, slamming my bedroom door shut behind her. I stand there, my heart racing, trying to piece together what just happened. My room first? I knew Ash long before we ever moved here. My mind spins, dizziness washing over me until I can barely stand on my feet.

I didn’t realise she resented me, that she looked at me and saw someone who had more.

Once I had a taste of him ...

He didn’t exactly push me away.

I press my hand to my chest as though I can physically hold my heart together. Inhaling a steadying breath, I move to the door and open it, peering down the hallway to see Isla’s door closed. I need to go get some water and calm down, but I don’t want to face my parents either.

Downstairs, a cupboard slams. Mum's voice floats up the staircase.

'We're heading to the shop before it gets busy! Both of you, shoes on!'

The normalcy of it feels obscene, like the world shouldn't be allowed to continue after what just happened between us. I was already facing the possibility of losing Ash. Now I know I've lost Isla. There's no repairing the damage that's been done.

Grant calls out something about needing milk. The mundanity of it scrapes against my nerves, but honestly, getting out of this house, even for something as simple as grocery shopping, might stop my thoughts from eating me alive. They've taken my phone, my laptop, everything. I'm bored as hell. Reading is usually my escape, and I have enough books to build a fortress around myself, but it's hard to lose myself in fictional love stories when my own feels like it's been detonated.

'Girls?' Mum calls out, stomping up the stairs as she often does when she's got things to do. She opens Isla's door and pokes her head in. 'Come on, we're all going. I don't want you girls here on your own after the break in.'

I nod, stepping out without argument. I can't stay in this room, not with memories of him pressed into every corner and Isla's words threatening to close in on me like a tightening noose.

Isla emerges from her room with a surly expression, wiping at her face quickly, like she hadn't realised she was crying until she was around others.

'I'm not going,' she says flatly.

Mum turns slowly and sets her hands on her hips, the universal sign she's run out of patience.

'I feel sick,' Isla replies, already moving back inside her bedroom. 'Headache.'

Mum sighs, weariness settling into her shoulders. She doesn't argue with her anymore, and I can see she's resigned herself to waiting it out.

'Fine. Bryn, you coming?'

I hesitate. Part of me wants to stay, to demand answers and force Isla to finish whatever she started, but I don't think she will, and I don't know if I want to hear it if she does. I can't stand to listen to her speak about Ash anymore. It hurts too much.

'Yeah,' I say, my voice steadier than I feel. 'I'm coming.'

Isla pauses in her doorway. For a second, I think she might look at me, but she doesn't. She retreats inside her room, shutting the door softly this

time. I swallow, blinking back the hurt, and take a small step toward her door, but the weight of everything presses down on me. I feel suffocated by her words, the anger, and the tension that's always between us. My fingers curl at my sides. I want to fix this. I want to make it right, but I can't. I don't think she will let me.

Taking a deep breath, my shoulders heavy, I turn toward the stairs. Grant is already at the door and Mum is digging through her bag. Following them outside, I step into the cool air and drag in a breath. It doesn't help.

The grocery store is loud and bright, the fluorescent lights and crowded aisles a strange contrast to the storm still twisting in my chest. I push the trolley along mechanically as Mum rattles off the list of things we need, and Grant complains about the prices of things as usual, even though he makes more money than he knows what to do with. I try to let the normalcy wash over me, to focus on the mundane, but my mind keeps replaying Isla's words. I can't help but wonder where Ash is and what he's doing. I miss him terribly.

When we finally pull into the driveway, I let out a long, tired sigh. Robotically, I move around the kitchen, packing things away, feeling more depressed as the day goes on. I try to distract myself with TV, flipping through channels half-heartedly, but nothing appeals to me. I pull a book off the shelf, trying to sink into someone else's world, but the words blur on the page. My thoughts keep sneaking back to Ash, to Isla, and to the fight. I can't quieten the questions and the what-ifs. Every sentence I read seems hollow. I'm here, but I'm not. Time drags by as I gaze out the window, imagining over and over again Ash appearing and offering to take me away. Then my mind spirals and pictures him with Isla, and my fantasy shatters in pieces around me.

'Isla,' Mum calls out. 'Dinner is almost ready.'

There's no sound from upstairs. I feel on edge waiting for her arrival, but it doesn't come.

'Bryn, can you get her please? She's probably got that bloody music cranked up to a deafening volume again.'

My stomach knots. I nod, pushing my fear down, forcing myself to climb the stairs. Each step feels heavier than the last, and my heart thuds in my chest. I reach her door and knock softly.

'Isla?' My voice trembles more than I want. No answer. I try again, a little louder. 'Hey ... you okay?'

Still nothing. Sighing, I open the door. She's in her bed, her head resting awkwardly against the pillow, her arms limp by her side.

'Isla?' I whisper. I sit softly beside her, and when the mattress dips under my weight, she doesn't stir. Gently shaking her arm, I wait for her response. Her skin feels cold under my fingers, and her eyes stay closed.

'Isla?' I shake her again, speaking louder this time. Panic swells inside my chest. I stumble back to the door. 'Mum! Grant!' I yell, my voice breaking.

The sound of their footsteps racing up the stairs fills me with dread. I can't think. I can't breathe. All I know is the fear clawing through me and the helplessness pressing down so hard I can barely stand.

Mum and Grant reach her side in seconds, panic written on their faces. They hover beside her, shaking her, calling her name. Her head lolls to one side, and her arm is splayed across the mattress, her body utterly limp. I stand there, frozen, watching in a haze of numbness and horror. It's like seeing her through a fog; I can see, but it feels unreal, as though none of this is actually happening. Mum's voice cracks as she yells Isla's name, and Grant's hands shake as he lifts her slightly, trying to get a reaction. I press my hands to my face, unable to tear my eyes away, my heart hammering, stomach twisting. Every second stretches endlessly, and I feel like I'm watching from outside my own body, powerless to do anything.

'Isla! Come on, wake up!' Mum pleads, and for a moment, the terror in her voice cuts through my numbness.

My knees threaten to buckle, but I force myself to stay, to witness, to be here for her even when everything inside me wants to disappear. My hands cover my mouth, trying to stop the sob that threatens to escape me as Mum's desperate pleas fill the room. Grant shouts her name again, and I realise with a cold certainty that nothing will ever be the same after this.

38

ASH

Now

The clatter of weights echoes through the gym. I grip the barbell, my muscles straining with each press. The burn is a welcome distraction from the thoughts that refuse to leave me alone. Sweat drips down my face, stinging my eyes, but I barely notice it. Every rep is mechanical and practiced. I push harder, forcing my body to take the punishment my mind can't. The clang of the weights, the rhythm of my breathing, and the ache in my arms calm me.

I set the barbell down, my chest heaving, and stare at my reflection in the mirror. The gym is quiet, the fluorescent lights harsh. I'm exhausted from my late night at work, but I pushed myself to the gym before heading home for the night. I rack the barbell and take a deep breath, still feeling the burn in my arms.

'Hey,' a voice chirps from behind me. I glance over to see the girl from the front desk, clipboard in hand, her hair pulled into a messy bun. 'Mind if I spot you sometime?' She flashes a smile that's supposed to be playful but lands somewhere between too eager and rehearsed, like she's been hyping herself up to do this for a while.

I shake my head. 'I'm good,' I say, returning my focus to the mirror.

'Oh, come on,' she teases, leaning a little closer. 'Don't be like that. I just want to help you push yourself a little more.'

I glance at her briefly, then back at my reflection, my jaw tight. My expression is flat and controlled.

'I said I'm good,' I repeat, firmer this time.

Her smile falters for a second, but she recovers.

‘Oh ...’ she trails off as she retreats, her cheeks burning red, the clipboard clutched to her chest.

I exhale sharply, rolling my shoulders. I don’t hate the attention; I barely notice it. My mind isn’t here. It isn’t anywhere near her, because she’s not Bryn.

The gym is nearly empty now. My muscles scream from the last set, but I push through a final one, letting the burn ground me and the rhythm of my movements drown out the thoughts clawing at the edges of my mind. I grab my towel, wipe the sweat from my face, and sling my gym bag over my shoulder.

Outside, the night air hits me like a splash of cold water. The car park is mostly deserted, and streetlights cast long shadows across the asphalt. My headlights catch movement before my brain fully registers it. Two figures lean against a wall: Trent and Vince. My brother’s name is enough to draw people like them out of the woodwork.

I get out of the car and walk over. I stop a few meters away, my hands slack at my sides, and wait for them. They straighten, smirks plastered across their faces. They think they’re untouchable.

‘Well, well,’ Trent drawls, pushing off the wall and stepping forward. ‘Look who it is. Thought we’d have a little chat.’

I study them in silence. They both know my brother – know his reputation – but they’re betting on me being softer. They’re betting on fear.

‘About what?’ I ask. My voice is controlled, though my chest tightens just slightly, preparing for something to go down.

Vince lets out a snort. ‘We heard Kaine might be getting out sooner than expected. Thought maybe you could give us some inside info. Something we can work with.’

My fists clench without me thinking. ‘I don’t know what you’ve heard, and I don’t know what you think you can get from me,’ I say, dropping my voice lower. ‘But let me make this very clear: if you try anything, and if you don’t back the fuck off right now,’ I step closer, slow and deliberate, shrinking the space between us without breaking eye contact, ‘I will come for you, and you do not want to see what I am capable of.’

Trent blinks, and I see uncertainty flicker across his face. Vince scoffs, trying to mask his fear, but my glare silences him. They know Kaine is violent and psychotic – they probably suspect I’m the same.

‘I’m not my brother,’ I continue. I speak at almost a whisper now, but every word lands heavy, like iron. ‘I don’t play your games. I don’t deal in threats, but I can fight my own battles, and you do not want to be on the receiving end when I’m angry.’

They exchange a glance, clearly hesitant now, and for a long moment, no one moves. I don’t blink. I don’t flinch. My heartbeat is steady, but there’s a storm brewing beneath the surface, and I let them feel it.

‘If you say so, Ash,’ Vince finally says.

‘I do,’ I reply.

‘Pretty little girlfriend you’ve got,’ Trent says, a slow, malicious smile creeping across his face. The comment plants a bad seed in my gut and anger spikes through me. I somehow manage to keep my face neutral.

‘Careful,’ I say quietly.

Trent’s brows lift; he’s amused. ‘What?’

‘Bryn isn’t something you get to comment on.’

Trent’s grin fades slightly, but only for a second. His eyes flick to Vince, and something unspoken passes between them. Vince leans back, rocking on the ball of his heels, studying me. The corner of his mouth twitches with satisfaction, like he’s just solved a puzzle.

‘Right,’ he says slowly.

Trent’s grin returns, wider this time. ‘Relax, man,’ he murmurs, lifting his hands in mock surrender. ‘Just making conversation.’

I can see it in the way they’re looking at me now. They’ve figured it out: Bryn is the one thing I actually care about, and that makes her the one thing they can use against me.

They both leave, moving into the shadows and disappearing into the night. Watching them go, the tension in my shoulders eases only slightly. Swinging into my car, I put the key in the ignition, the engine rumbling to life beneath me. My thoughts drift automatically to Bryn, and I hope those dimwits aren’t going to put her in danger.

Nobody crosses me. Nobody touches what’s mine. People have learnt that the hard way before.

The engine purrs as I drive, and streetlights flash rhythmically across the windshield. My grip on the steering wheel has loosened now that the adrenaline of confrontation has worn off, but my mind is still alert and restless.

My phone lights up in the console.

Bryn: are you here

I exhale slowly. She doesn't need to clarify. I know what she means: outside her building, watching. I type back without hesitation when I pull up at the next red light.

Ash: No. Do you want me to be?

The three dots appear almost instantly. Disappear. Reappear.

Bryn: I'm going for a run.

Ash: It's late.

Bryn: And? You think someone might be out there?

I wonder where she is going with this.

Bryn: I just thought if you were nearby ...

A corner of my mouth lifts.

Ash: Yes?

Bryn: Thought you might want to follow me

The words stir something deep and instinctive inside me. Protectiveness. Possessiveness. Darkness.

Ash: Where will you be running?

A second later, an address pops up on my screen. I recognise the area. It's the beginning of the woods on the edge of town. I don't hesitate. I make a sharp turn at the next intersection, the engine growling as I accelerate.

Ash: Start running. Let's see how far you make it before I catch you

I can almost feel the way her pulse would jump on reading that.

Ash: When I catch you, you're not leaving until I'm done with you

Bryn: Then I guess you better hurry ...

My grip tightens on the wheel, adrenaline sharpening my senses. She has no idea what she does to me. I turn into the street slowly, my headlights sweeping across parked cars until I spot hers near the entrance to the trail that cuts into the trees. I swing into a park, killing the headlights immediately. The night wraps around me, cool and still. For a second, I just listen to the wind rustling the leaves, and then I hear footsteps, light and quick. I step onto the path, scanning the area. She mustn't have gotten very far yet. She probably didn't realise how close I was.

Up ahead, I catch sight of her: black leggings; oversized hoodie; hair pulled back, swinging behind her as she runs. She looks over her shoulder once and when her eyes land on mine, a slow smile pulls at my mouth. I start jogging. Her pace quickens. The smack of my footsteps grows louder. She glances back again and when she realises how easily I'm closing the distance, her shoulders tense, her stride faltering for half a second before she pushes harder.

She runs faster, but I don't. I want to wait this out. I let her think she's gaining something. Let her believe the distance means control. I keep my

pace steady and unhurried, my shoes striking the ground in an even rhythm that doesn't waver. I don't need to sprint. I know exactly how this ends. Her breathing grows louder in the quiet night – sharper, more urgent. She glances back again, checking the gap. I hold her gaze when she does.

In the moonlight her shadow stretches long across the path, and mine swallows it slowly, inch by inch. It's late, almost two in the morning, and the world feels empty except for us. I could close the distance now, but I decide against it. I want her breathless, and her pulse racing from more than just the run. I lengthen my stride instead, narrowing the gap. Twenty feet. Now ten.

She's breathing harder now, the sound carrying on the still night air. When she dares to look back again, I'm close enough that her eyes widen slightly before that familiar smirk curves her mouth. I surge forward and catch her around the waist, my momentum spinning her lightly off balance. She laughs as I pull her back against me, both of us slightly winded.

'Not bad,' I murmur near her ear, tightening my grip just enough to make my point. 'You almost made me try.'

Her pulse is racing beneath my hand. So is mine.

Turning her slowly to face me, I keep one arm firm around her waist. Only the glow of the moon lights us, casting shadows across her face. She's flushed from the run, her lips parted and eyes bright.

'You didn't really think I wouldn't catch you,' I say quietly.

She lets out a shaky laugh, still breathless. 'Maybe I thought I could outrun you,' she murmurs, though her smirk betrays her.

I let my hand linger at her neck, my thumb tracing the delicate curve of her throat. The night air smells faintly of pine and damp earth. The heat radiating off Bryn makes it hard to think straight.

'You can try all you want,' I reply, a teasing edge to my voice. 'But you're not leaving. Not until I say so.'

Her eyes flick down to my grip then back up to mine, and I see the spark – the mixture of challenge and excitement – that never fails to thrill me.

'Is that supposed to scare me?' she teases.

I tighten my arm slightly, enough to make the point without hurting her.

'It's not supposed to scare you,' I whisper, leaning just close enough that my breath fans across her lips. 'It's supposed to make you remember: I get what I want.'

She swallows and the smirk returns, telling me how much she is enjoying this. I pull back a fraction, my hand still bracketing her throat, and let the tension hang between us, heavy and electric. Only our breathing and the faint rustle of leaves above are the only sounds in the night.

My fingers, feather-light, trace the edge of her jaw. She shudders under my touch. It's intoxicating. I could watch her for hours, knowing this moment belongs only to us. No one else will ever know this version of Bryn exists. The one who likes the chase. The one who likes the danger. I drift to the edge of her hoodie, tugging it down just enough to expose the curve of her shoulder. She stiffens for a fraction of a second, that small shiver racing through her again, and I can't hide the grin tugging at my mouth.

Leaning closer, I press my lips to her bare skin, biting lightly, just enough to make her gasp and tilt her head instinctively. Her pulse leaps beneath my touch. I pause, just long enough to let her notice the effect. I watch the way she reacts: a slight stutter of breath, widening eyes, flushed cheeks. It's addictive, making her respond. It's proof of everything I already know. She's mine in ways she hasn't admitted, and I intend to remind her at every chance I get.

Bryn's lips part slightly, and I bite again, just enough to make her shiver. My hand tightens subtly at her waist, and I feel the thrill of her pulse under my fingers. I pull her hoodie up over her shoulders and tug down her strappy running top. Her breasts bounce out, barely contained in her lacy, *very-inappropriate-for-a-run* bra. Her nipples pebble in the cool wind, the prettiest of pink, delicate and soft under my hands as I palm them greedily. My mouth moves to one nipple and I circle it with my tongue, enjoying the sound she makes when I tug on it. Drifting my lips across her chest, I move to the other one and repeat the movement.

Her chest is rising and falling, her silky hair slipping through my fingers before I brush it back off her face and behind her shoulders. It has come loose on her run, and I quite enjoy the dishevelled look she has going on. I get down on my knees. Kissing down her stomach, I ease my fingers into her leggings, tugging them down her creamy thighs, her pale skin striking against my tanned hands. Inhaling, I breathe her in. Every instinct in me sharpens; every nerve ending comes alive. I can feel her pulse beneath my fingers, quick and uneven, and it drives me wild how much control I have over just that simple reaction.

I lean a fraction closer, brushing my lips against the edge of her underwear, teasing her, not touching fully. She shivers again, and I let out a low noise that sounds a hell of a lot like a growl. She's aware of me, aware of every movement, and I love it. I love the way she reacts, the way she can't hide what she feels, even when she tries.

Her eyes flick down to mine, a spark of mischief in them.

'You're not getting away,' I murmur, almost whispering. 'Not tonight, not ever.'

Her chest rises and falls quickly, and I feel that rush again: the pulse; the thrill; the dark, electric tension between us. Tantalisingly slow, I push to my feet, towering over her once more. She tilts her head up toward me, her cheeks coloured with warmth. Her hair clings to her forehead, the strands dampened by sweat. She tries to catch her breath. Her lips are slightly parted, and there's a wild, unsteady look in her eyes that makes my knees threaten to knock together.

Slowly, I rotate my finger, and she eyes it. 'Turn around, Cherry. Hands on the tree. Let me look at those pretty red fingernails of yours while I fuck you.'

She lets out a soft, sharp gasp that catches in her throat, a laugh tangled with surprise. Her back presses lightly against me as she twists, her shoulders tense. Her palms press against the tree and her fingers splay, her bright red nails contrasting so beautifully with her skin.

'I see you're wearing a red set for me,' I purr, stroking her hair, enjoying the little whimper that escapes her. 'And matching red nails. You know they're my favourite.'

'I did it for you,' she confesses, leaning forward and arching her back, her ass pressing straight into my raging hard on. Precum leaks out of me as my eyes trace over her rounded ass, the red, lacy thong covering nothing. My finger wraps around it and pulls it so that it slaps against her skin. She shudders, a gasp leaving her. This time, I bring my hand down and slap her ass before I grab a handful of it. She moans, pushing back into me. I slip a finger into her, and she is hot and wet, soaked for me.

'Always so eager for me, Cherry,' I drawl. 'Practically dripping.'

Hooking two fingers around the flimsy thong, I push it to the side, lining up my tip between her cheeks.

'Are you ready for me?' I ask.

'Yes.'

‘How much do you want it?’

‘Really bad.’

‘Oh yeah?’

‘Just fuck me already, Ash,’ she demands, her voice heavy with lust, impatience trickling through each word. I will never get over hearing my name in her mouth. She bends over a little more as I push myself into her, both of us exhaling at the sensation.

‘You take me so well,’ I groan. ‘Always have.’

‘Harder,’ she pants.

I thrust harder as asked, and she cries out, gripping the tree in front of her. I pound into her relentlessly, not holding back this time. The way she arches her back and moves back into me tells me how much she is enjoying this. Just about as much as me, I suspect.

‘Touch yourself,’ I tell her.

She leaves one hand on the tree for support, slipping the other between her thighs, doing as I demand. Her breathing grows fervent and ragged as I grip her hips and fuck her mercilessly, loving the mewls that escape her.

‘I’m coming,’ she practically sobs, and hearing those words leave her makes me reach my climax too. I thrust one last time, long and slow, ensuring every single drop settles inside her before I pull out, panting and exhausted. She falls back into me and I catch her, collecting her bridal-style and holding her to my chest.

‘My God,’ she whispers, sweat dotting her forehead as she closes her eyes, leaning heavily into me. ‘Better than my fantasy.’

‘Oh yeah?’

I lean down, brushing my lips against hers with a deliberate gentleness I rarely let myself show. The kiss is tentative at first, testing the moment. I savour the way she breathes in response. Every part of me wants to linger here forever, close enough to feel her heartbeat against mine, to memorise her warmth in this quiet, suspended space. It’s possibly the softest kiss I’ve ever given her, and somehow, it carries everything I’ve wanted to say but never could.

Grinning, I rest my forehead lightly against hers. ‘The next game you want to play, maybe don’t choose something I’m exceptional at.’

She tilts her head in that cute way of hers.

‘Maybe that’s the whole point,’ she whispers, her eyes sparkling in the dim light.

I let out a low chuckle, brushing my thumb over her jaw. ‘That’s pretty hot, Cherry.’

Holding her against me, I let her head rest lightly on my chest and tighten my arms just enough to keep her close. The world around us falls away until it’s just us. Her heartbeat presses against my side, fast and uneven, and I can feel every shiver, every inhale, every subtle movement she makes. I wish I could freeze this moment, bottle it up, lock it away, and keep it forever. The thought makes my chest ache in a way I’ve never felt before. Just holding her, feeling her respond to me, knowing she trusts me enough to let herself be held – it’s enough to make the world outside vanish.

I brush a strand of hair from her forehead, my thumb lingering against her cheek. Her eyes close for a moment, and I press a soft kiss to the top of her head. If I could, I’d stop time right here. I’d keep her in my arms, in the quiet dark, and let nothing else exist.

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ASH*Five Years Ago*

The library is exceptionally quiet tonight. The music in my headphones drowns everything out as I slide books into place, row after row, each one a reminder that I'm supposed to be here doing a job and living a life. But all I can think about is Bryn. My calls aren't going through to her. She's blocked me and removed me from her life and it's like someone has ripped a piece of me out and left a gaping wound.

I lean over the cart of returned books and stack them mechanically, but my hands are shaking slightly. Every title I touch feels meaningless compared to the thought of her, the sound of her laugh, and the way she looked at me like I was the only person in the world. The music shifts to a song she once liked, and it hits me like a sledgehammer to the chest. I almost drop the books. I try to focus, I really do, but every novel I put back, every step I take between the shelves, is haunted by her absence. I pace a little, pretending the library is enough to distract me, but it's not. I'm spiralling and I can't tell anyone. No one gets it. No one knows her like I do. No one can understand what she takes from me just by not being here.

Yanking off my headphones for a second, I let silence flood me. It's worse. The quiet presses against my skull, reminding me that she's out of my life now. My throat tightens and I run a hand over my face, wishing I could do more than just stand here, trapped in the library with this spiralling ache. I need her, and the worst part is there's no way to make her see it. My knees buckle and I sink to the floor, my head in my hands. A soft shuffle of feet interrupts me. I lift my head slightly and see Mrs Callahan, the older

librarian I sometimes help, leaning against the shelf, her expression gentle but cautious.

‘Ash, are you okay?’ she asks, careful not to draw attention from the few patrons scattered around. Her hands are folded in front of her.

I shake my head, trying to shove my emotions down, but it’s useless.

‘I just ...’ My words die in my throat. How could I explain it? How could I make her understand that it’s not just a bad day, but a hollowing – a desperation that nothing can fix?

Mrs Callahan bends down beside me, her eyes soft. ‘Up you get, let’s go out the back.’

I stare at the floor, every muscle tense, feeling ridiculous. My hands shake slightly as I push myself to my feet. She slips an arm around my shoulders, steadying me, and guides me toward the back. We head into the library’s small tearoom. Warm light and the faint scent of herbal tea wrap around us. The quiet clink of cups and the soft hum of the kettle fill the space. I sink into the corner chair, letting the tension in my shoulders ease slightly. Mrs Callahan slides into the chair across from me, setting her bag at her feet. The kettle sings softly and she pours herself a cup. I watch her, feeling the weight of everything press down on me, knowing I can’t just unravel in front of her. Instead of asking me what’s wrong, she reaches into her bag and pulls out a magazine.

‘Here,’ she says lightly, pushing it toward me. She drops a newspaper in front of herself. ‘I didn’t have a chance to read this earlier today. I might read now for a bit, if you’d like to join me.’

I glance at her, surprised. The magazine is trivial, but the gesture itself is kind. She unfolds the newspaper she’s brought and scans the page. She doesn’t look at me. She lets me have the space to just sit there, to collect myself without pressure. I pick up the magazine, brushing the pages without really reading, and for the first time in hours, I can breathe without feeling like I’m suffocating. Her presence alone is a relief I didn’t know I needed.

My eyes dart toward the door, some tension still coiled in my shoulders.

‘Do we need to go back out there?’ I ask quietly, not sure I’m ready to.

She looks up from her paper, her gaze calm and steady. ‘Don’t worry about it,’ she says.

For a moment, the ache in my chest eases just a fraction. I sink back into the chair, sipping warm tea. She goes back to her reading, flipping the pages

with quiet concentration. My phone buzzes on the table. The screen glows with an unknown number. I frown, picking it up.

Unknown: Ash. I need you. Only you can make him pay.

My knuckles are white, curled around the phone. A sudden spike of unease spreads through me as I try to make sense of the words.

Unknown: I'm sorry for everything I caused. I'm leaving it in your hands. Bryn needs you.

I freeze, staring at the screen and trying to process the words.

Unknown: I can't explain now. I can't stay, but you have to do this. Please. Without me here, he's going to her next. You know what you need to do.

She's disappearing, and she's leaving it all to me.

My eyes narrow. I don't need explanations – not fully. The weight of the responsibility is enough. I have the chance to make things right. Bryn's lost her sister: Isla is running away and leaving her behind. She'll be alone with him, Grant, to comfort her. My stomach twists and blood rushes in my ears. I can't think straight. I shouldn't be thinking like this. It's ridiculous. He's not me; he's her stepfather. Thinking of him touching her and comforting her makes my chest burn. My fists clench at my sides. I can feel my nails digging into my palms. My heart is hammering so hard I'm sure Mrs Callahan can hear it.

It's irrational, but I can't stop the heat rising in my chest and the way my thoughts spiral, the way every part of me screams that I should be the one there, holding her, telling her it's going to be okay, that I'm here. That I always will be. But I can't. I have no way to reach her. No way to touch her. I'm far away, knowing things and unable to help, and that's worse than anything. Worse than any punch, worse than any insult, worse than any fight I've ever had with anyone in my life.

I glance across the table at Mrs Callahan reading, completely unaware of the vicious and dark thoughts entering my mind. I settle back into my seat, my mind going into overdrive.

Ash: I'll handle it.

I won't stay a ghost forever. I know there's distance between us and rules holding me back, but they won't matter. Not for long. I can feel it in the tight coil of tension along my spine and the relentless drum of blood in my temples. Something is coming. Something is inevitable. It's something I've been waiting for, planning, and imagining in countless ways.

I'll be back, and I'll make sure no one is going to stop me.

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BRYN

Now

The faint sounds of the espresso machine and murmur of conversation fill the space around me. I sit with my hands wrapped around a warm mug, staring into the steam. Enough is enough. The grief, the past, the weight of everything that used to define me – I can't carry it anymore. I pull out my laptop and take a deep breath. It's time to cut ties, time to let my old life go. The first email is to my office manager, who I've been dodging for weeks, letting her calls go unanswered. My fingers hesitate over the keyboard.

Dear Leslie,

I hope this message finds you well. I am writing to formally resign from my position at Crescent Media, effective immediately. I understand this is abrupt, and I sincerely apologise for any inconvenience this may cause. Recent circumstances have made it clear that I need to step away from my current responsibilities to focus on personal matters and redefine the path I want to follow.

I am grateful for the opportunities, guidance, and support I have received during my time here. I have learnt a great deal and appreciate the trust placed in me.

Thank you for your understanding. I wish the team continued success moving forward.

Sincerely,

Bryn Carmichael

Minutes later, my phone is ringing, and when I don't answer, the reply rolls in. It's laced with anger, confusion, and frustration. I read the words with a lump in my throat, but I don't back down. Taking a long sip of my coffee, I stare out the window at the darkening streets.

The past, the life I've been running from, the expectations, the rules – they don't matter anymore. I've chosen a new path, one where I decide the rules. One where I can finally start living for me. For a long time, I lived in the shadow of others. I was quiet, careful, always bending to whatever people around me expected, but I'm done not having a voice. I'm done not being true to myself. For the first time in a long time, I'm not waiting for someone else to tell me what comes next. I'm choosing it myself.

Next, I dial Mum's number, trying to steady the nervous flutter in my chest. It rings twice before she picks up.

'Hello?' Her voice is warm and comforting, and for the first time since coming here, I feel a small spark of homesickness.

'Hi, Mum,' I say, taking a deep breath. 'How are you?'

'I'm good, love, how are you?' she asks, and I can tell from her tone that she's expecting something from me, as though she's already aware of the conversation about to unfold.

'I want to stay here for a while. Would that be okay?'

There's a pause on the line.

'I had a feeling this was coming,' she says finally, her tone a little wistful, a little sad. 'I won't lie, Bryn. I wish things were different, but I understand. You need this. I just can't be back there. Everything reminds me of what we used to have.'

'I know,' I murmur. 'I'll visit all the time, I promise.'

'I know, love. You do what you need to do, as long as you don't forget to check in with me.'

'I won't, I promise.' Relief hits me in waves, but it's mixed with guilt. 'I'm sorry if I've caused any trouble.'

'You haven't,' she says softly. 'Just promise me you'll take care of yourself. Don't disappear completely, okay? I miss you.'

'I promise,' I whisper, feeling the tension in my shoulders start to ease. For the first time in months, I feel like I can breathe a little. She's sad, yes, but she's not angry. She knows I need this, and somehow that makes it easier to step into my next chapter. We continue talking for a long time,

catching up on things, chatting in that easy way we always have. When I hang up, I feel a little lighter.

The bell above the cafe door jingles softly, pulling me from my thoughts. Ash. He slides into the seat across from me, the scrape of the chair against the floor enough to make a few heads swivel our way.

‘Hey,’ he says.

‘Hey.’

He watches me for a moment. The intensity of his gaze makes me feel like he has a window into my mind and is sifting through it.

‘I decided something today,’ I say. ‘I’m leaving my old life behind. I’ve told work, I’ve answered the emails I’ve been avoiding, and I’m staying here. I want to start over. With you.’

There’s a pause, the kind that stretches long enough to feel almost awkward. I can feel him shifting slightly. The corner of his mouth quirks up, and he leans back in his chair, propping his arm on the back of it.

‘Good. I’d been hoping you’d decide that.’

‘I don’t know how to start,’ I admit, almost whispering. ‘I feel like I’m leaving so much behind and here I don’t know where to begin. The girls’ apartment is already too small for them, but I don’t want to blow all my money on renting alone either. Then, for work, I don’t even know where to start.’

‘You can stay with me, if you want. For as long as you need.’

The offer hangs between us. I don’t say anything for a moment. The thought of staying with him, of not having to tackle all of this on my own, makes me feel relieved.

‘Really?’ I ask finally, my voice barely audible.

He nods. ‘Of course.’

I feel the sharp edges of my anxiety begin to dull. This is probably too soon. So many years have passed that we are practically strangers once more, though we never truly could be. Once, we knew each other inside and out, so intimately that perhaps it was inevitable we would find our way back into each other’s lives after all this time. Taking a sip of my coffee, I let the warmth settle in my chest.

‘Thank you, Ash. I appreciate that.’

Ash’s hand brushes mine briefly. It’s casual, but the heat behind it speaks more than either of us can say.

‘Good,’ he murmurs. ‘Because I’m not letting you go that easily.’

I laugh softly, shaking my head, and for the first time in a long while, I let myself imagine a life that isn't weighed down by the past. A life that starts here, in this quiet cafe, with Ash beside me.

For now, that's enough.

The cafe door closes behind me with a soft chime, and the cool evening air brushes my flushed cheeks. Ash's words linger longer than the taste of the coffee on my tongue.

I'm not letting you go that easily.

Part of me should be unsettled by that, but instead a strange sense of contentment swirls inside me as I make my way down the street toward the girls' apartment. The building is an old brick structure with narrow windows. Soft, warm light spills out from behind a patchwork of mismatched curtains, some faded, some patterned, each hanging a little differently. The bricks are darkened by age in places. Inside, the apartment smells faintly of vanilla candles and the pasta Elodie was making earlier. The TV drones quietly in the background.

'Finally,' Elodie announces the moment I step through the door.

She's sprawled across the couch, her dark hair piled on top of her head and a blanket draped dramatically around her shoulders. Tess sits beside her with a book in her lap and fluffy slippers on her feet.

'You were gone a while,' Elodie states.

'I ended up quitting my job and telling Mum I want to stay for a bit,' I say, shrugging out of my jacket.

They exchange a glance as Tess marks her page and sets the book aside gently. 'How did that go?' she asks.

I hesitate.

'Not good?' Elodie probes.

Dropping my bag onto the chair, I release a heavy exhale. 'No, not great. Ash stopped by the cafe.'

Elodie sits up straighter. 'Of course he did, since he stalks you.'

Tess tilts her head slightly, studying me with curiosity. 'What happened?'

'I told him I'm staying and he offered for me to stay with him.' Silence falls over the room.

'You're moving in with him?' Elodie finally says, her voice climbing an octave.

‘I didn’t say moving in,’ I protest. ‘He just offered for me to stay with him while I figure things out. Temporarily.’

Elodie lets out a laugh. ‘Temporarily. Right.’

Tess shifts slightly on the couch, and her voice is soft when she speaks. ‘So you two are going all in then?’

Shrugging, I move to sit on the armchair opposite them, folding one leg over the other. ‘We haven’t defined anything, but I suppose so, yeah.’

Elodie nods slowly. ‘Well, I’m glad you’re staying. We’ve both loved having you back. I just hope you know what you’re doing when it comes to Ash.’

Tess watches me for another quiet moment, her expression thoughtful rather than judgemental.

‘We’re not saying it’s a bad thing,’ she says gently. ‘It just might be a little soon, since you’ve only just reconnected. We can make it work here, if that was a concern of yours.’

Elodie snorts. ‘A *little* soon?’

Sinking further into the armchair, I’m suddenly aware of how reckless it must sound. Maybe they’re right, maybe it *is* too soon, but when I think about Ash, and the certainty in his voice when he said he wasn’t letting me go again, the decision doesn’t feel rushed.

It feels inevitable.

41

BRYN

Five Years Ago

I stand beside the empty hospital bed. Through the window, the sky is a dull sheet of grey. I keep trying to remember the last thing I said to her. I don't want to think about the fight, so I try to remember something before it. Something good. A laugh, a joke, the way she used to shove my shoulder when I was being annoying, but my mind keeps sliding back to the fight, the bitterness, and all the things that went wrong between us.

The last time we spoke, we were yelling. Now the bed she was in is empty, and there's nothing left to say, because she's gone. Everything we fought about seems so irrelevant now. Inside I feel quiet and hollow, like a house after the family has left and the furniture's been taken out.

My parents stand a few steps behind me, stiff and silent. They've barely looked at me since Isla left us. I don't know if they're just lost in their own grief or if some part of them blames me. They must have heard us fighting – or at least known something was wrong between us.

A doctor begins speaking, but their words slip right past me. All I can think about is the last time I saw her alive and how angry we both were. A shaky breath slips out of me as the doctor's words continue to drift past, soft and meaningless. I stare at the bed where she lay only hours earlier and think about everything that led us here: every stupid suspicion, every jealous thought, every condescending word that turned into a fight.

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If Ash had never come between us ... The thought stops there, heavy and bitter. It's easier to leave it unfinished, because if I follow it all the way through, I might have to admit that I helped break things too, and that the tension and pain was already there between my sister and I, while his involvement just escalated things. My fingers curl into the long sleeves of my dress.

I loved him, I still do, but loving him now feels like pressing on a bruise – something tender and painful that never quite fades. Now every time I think about my sister, I see him, how close they were standing, and the photo ... It flashes through my mind without warning, recalling the way my stomach dropped when I first saw it. I remember how my jealousy burned hot and ugly, spreading through me before I could stop it. The hurt now lives deep in my chest, heavy and restless, crawling under my skin. The anger simmers inside me relentlessly, like heat trapped under ashes. On the outside I feel cold – numb, even – but underneath, something still burns, raw and impossible to put out. The thought of him makes something inside me twist until it hurts to breathe.

I push my hair back off my face, staring at the bed one last time. Closing my eyes for a moment, I make a decision. Whether it's for her or for me, I'm not entirely sure, but I'm going to let it all go. The anger. The questions. *Him*. I'm going to start over somewhere far away from this day, from this hospital, and from the memories that keep circling like ghosts.

It's the only way I can think to survive it.

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42

ASH

Now

Leaning against the kitchen counter, I watch Bryn move through the apartment. She sits on the floor beside the couch, her bag open in front of her. It's smaller than I expected: a soft, worn thing that looks like it's been dragged through too many places already. She pulls things out slowly, one at a time, like she's not sure where they belong yet. Wordlessly, I observe. I enjoy watching her.

My apartment has always looked the same, with its black countertops, dark floors, and black-out curtains. Everything is in its place, and there's no clutter or anything unnecessary. It's cold, sleek, and untouched, which is how I like it, but Bryn is sitting in the middle of it now, cross-legged on the rug, and the place already feels different. She pulls out a knitted cardigan first, soft and pale blue, and drapes it over the arm of the couch. Then a small toiletry bag, a book with a bent spine, and a pair of worn sneakers that she nudges toward the wall with her foot.

Little pieces of her start appearing around the room, and I like it more than I should. I like the way her things interrupt the careful order of the place, how the soft colours lighten all the black and grey. The apartment suddenly looks lived in. Bryn pushes a loose strand of hair behind her ear while she digs through the bag again, and my chest tightens in a way that's almost unfamiliar.

A slow, quiet satisfaction settles deep inside me as I watch her stand and carry the blue cardigan toward the coat rack. When she passes me, she doesn't even notice that I'm staring. She brushes past me like it's normal – like being here with me is normal. My eyes follow her around the space.

She's safe here with me. For years the world has had access to her – crowded streets, strangers, people who don't know how easily things can be taken away. I've watched from a distance longer than anyone would understand, waiting for the right moment, the right time. When I lost her, it nearly drove me insane. Now she's here, unpacking the small pieces of her life across my apartment floor.

The black surfaces in the room catch the warm light shining through the windows, but Bryn is the only real colour in the place. It's as if I'm watching paint spread across a blank canvas, as though a part of me is finally coming to life. Pushing away from the counter, I walk slowly toward the couch, my gaze drifting over the things slowly being spread around my space. A small smile pulls at the corner of my mouth before I can stop it. I've waited years for this – years of wondering if she would ever come back into my life. Part of me still can't believe she has.

Her fingers hover over a small framed photo before she sets it carefully on the shelf beside the lounge. It looks strange there, soft and personal against the dark wood. I like that pieces of her are starting to appear everywhere I look.

'You don't have to unpack everything tonight,' I say, noticing that she seems a little overwhelmed.

She glances over her shoulder at me. A small smile touches her mouth. 'I know,' she says, brushing her hands on her jeans as she stands. 'I just hate living out of a bag.'

Her eyes drift around the apartment like she's seeing it properly for the first time. 'You really live like this?' she asks.

I raise a brow. 'Like what?'

'So minimal.' She gestures vaguely around the room. 'You could probably pack up your entire life in ten minutes.'

I laugh quietly. 'I do like being efficient.'

'Seems a little lonely,' she counters softly.

For a moment, neither of us speaks. She's close enough now that I can see the faint freckles across her nose, the slight crease between her brows when she's thinking. I've spent years remembering details like these. My gaze drifts to her mouth before I can stop it. She shifts slightly, like she feels the change in the air. Her fingers toy with the hem of her sleeve.

'You said we were going out tonight,' she murmurs.

'Yes. I'm taking you to dinner.'

Her eyes bounce back up to mine. 'Okay.'

The silence stretches between us again, and I take a step closer. She doesn't move away, but tilts her head up slightly to keep looking at me.

'You should finish getting ready,' I suggest, but I don't move, and neither does she.

'Ash ...'

My name leaves her mouth, soft and uncertain, and something dark stirs in my chest. I reach out and brush my fingers lightly against hers. I slide my hand a little higher, my fingers curling gently around her wrist. I feel the warmth of her skin against mine.

'I've loved you ever since I met you,' I whisper. Her eyes widen in surprise at the confession. 'But you already know that, just as you know I'm still in love with you. I always will be.'

I step back before she can speak, leaving the words hanging between us. I reach for the jacket draped over the back of the chair, my fingers curling around the leather without hesitation. I shrug it on in one smooth motion, settling its weight over my shoulders.

'Go get your jacket,' I say, my voice rougher now. 'We'll miss the reservation.'

She studies me for a moment, like she's trying to read something in my face. Then she nods, hesitant.

'Okay.'

When she turns and walks toward the bed, I stay exactly where I am, staring at the spot where she was standing. My hand still feels warm. I flex my fingers slowly, the thought of them running over her body later striking me in a way that has my composure slipping and heat crawling up my neck. I grab my keys from the counter. Bryn emerges from the bedroom, jacket in hand, her hair falling lightly across her shoulders. She catches my eyes for a second, the small curve of her mouth telling me she's aware of the tension lingering between us.

We step outside, the cool night air washing over us. I close the car door behind Bryn. The engine roars to life, and I settle into the driver's seat, glancing at her beside me. The evening lights pass in a blur, warm and soft against the windows. Bryn is quiet, her hands folded in her lap, pensively staring out the window.

The restaurant is only a few blocks away, a modern place with soft lighting and tables spaced just far enough apart to feel private. I don't dine

out often, so I hope the reviews weren't exaggerating by saying the food lives up to the elegance of the place.

Red and blue lights flashing ahead catch my attention. I slow the car instinctively. Bryn leans forward slightly, curious.

'Oh, what's happened?' she murmurs.

I look at the scene. Two men are being led toward a squad car, their hands cuffed. It's them: the ones who've been breathing down my neck for weeks, threatening me and poking at my life in ways I won't tolerate.

Bryn turns to me. 'Do you know them?'

Vince flinches as an officer grabs his arms, and I feel a slow, quiet satisfaction settle in my chest. My hands tighten around the steering wheel.

'Ash?' she asks.

I give her a slight shrug. 'Yeah, I know them. They got what was coming to them,' I mutter lightly. My voice is calm and controlled.

Nothing about this is accidental. I never leave anything to chance.

Bryn glances down at her lap, maybe sensing the tension I won't explain. She doesn't ask, and I don't offer. Some things don't need to be put into words. I keep cruising down the street, and the flashing lights fade behind us.

Soon enough, she'll understand there's almost nothing I wouldn't do to keep her safe.

43

BRYN

Now

It's been a month or so since I moved in. A month that feels like it's passed in both the blink of an eye and a lifetime. Living here with Ash has been incredible. I catch myself smiling for no reason at all. He's sweet and romantic, and I adore that side of him just as much as the darker one. I love the way he makes coffee exactly as I like it, the notes he leaves on the counter wishing me a good day, the quiet mornings when we lie tangled in the sheets, laughing at nothing and everything all at once.

Evenings blur together in the best way. We go for dinners at tiny restaurants and walk through the streets under soft lamplight, his hand always finding mine without me having to search for it. The apartment feels alive now, filled with his warm presence and his scent lingering on my clothes, on the lounge, and in the kitchen.

There have been nights I can barely breathe because of him and the way he looks at me when he thinks I'm not paying attention. There are quiet, heated moments that leave me flushed and trembling; laughter and teasing and whispered words that feel like they could hold the world together. I've never been this comfortable with someone. Never this happy.

I like the way he lets me pick the movie even though he complains the entire time, the way he insists I sit closer to him on the couch, his little touches that linger just a second too long. Living with him has become ordinary in all the right ways. It's the kind of ordinary I never knew I wanted but now can't imagine living without.

Glancing around the apartment at the scattered clothes, the mugs left out, the soft light that spills across the counter where we sit for breakfast, I

realise how much has changed. This place used to feel cold and empty, but now it holds warmth in every corner. His black walls and sleek furniture are softened by the colours I've brought in, the little things that mark my presence, but it's more than that. The atmosphere itself feels lighter; it's as if *he's* lighter. He's different. I watch him now, and the way he moves through the apartment is relaxed. He smiles when I catch him staring at me, and his laughter spills more easily than I ever thought it would. He's gentler, more open, and his possessiveness is tempered by tenderness, as if living with me has blunted some of the sharp edges I thought would never soften. There's a warmth in his eyes I didn't see before, and it feels as if even the apartment is holding onto that, shining it back at me.

Every corner of the place is filled with pieces of him, and every piece of him is now a part of me. I never want this phase of our relationship to end, because this life, this apartment, and this man here with me, are more than I ever dreamt of. I'm tired of pretending he wasn't my missing piece all this time.

He pulls on his hoodie then ties his sneakers, appearing calm and focused.

'Leg day,' he mutters, mostly to himself. 'I'll see you later.' He glances up just long enough to catch my eyes.

'Have fun,' I reply.

He kisses the top of my head, and then he's gone. The door clicks shut behind him, and a quiet hush settles in the apartment. I sink onto the lounge and stretch out, letting my thoughts drift, and for a moment, the apartment feels like a sanctuary. I stretch, rolling onto my side and pushing myself up off the couch. The apartment is tranquil, and the soft light of mid-morning spills through the windows. I clear some mugs and a stray pair of socks from the coffee table, ready to start my day.

That's when something catches my eye: a journal, wedged inside a pile of his clothes on the chair. It's been tucked away slightly, as if he didn't want it in plain sight. I pick it up. *Pieces of You* is written across the cover in a messy scrawl. Curiosity takes over. I carry it to the couch and open it, the pages soft beneath my fingers. My eyes roam over the words.

I've loved her from the very beginning. Even when I didn't know what it was, even when I told myself to walk away, she lingered in my chest and in my thoughts – in the spaces I

thought were mine alone. Every smile, every glance, and every laugh I stole without her noticing, they were all pieces of her I didn't realise I'd been collecting for myself.

I pause, my heart hammering. This isn't just a journal. This is ... *us*. It's our story from his eyes, written down and laid bare; it's the very story he mentioned when we first reunited after I got into town. I swallow, my fingers tracing the edges of the pages. Flinging myself back onto the lounge, I settle in and start reading.

Hours slip by almost unnoticed. The sunlight shifts across the apartment as I become lost in his words. He remembers every glance, every touch, the teasing, the laughter, the stolen nights, and the small moments. It's as if I'm living it all again, but from the perspective of the man who's been so impossibly in love with me all this time.

When my stomach growls, I get up reluctantly and wander into the kitchen for snack. I let myself stretch, take a quick break to relieve myself, and then return to the couch, sliding back into the folds of the afternoon as if nothing exists outside the pages in front of me.

I keep reading. I can't stop. It's just Ash and me, his voice whispering to me from the paper, reminding me how much he's been holding inside, how fiercely he's loved me, and how long he waited. My eyes freeze on a page.

I watched him, studied his schedule, and observed the way he touched her. He smiled at her in ways that a stepfather shouldn't. Every move he made, every glance, I tracked it. Now that her sister was no longer around, nothing stood between him and her.

But I would not allow anyone to come between us again. Nothing that belongs to me will ever be harmed, challenged, or taken. So I ended it. Not carelessly, and not in a moment of anger. I made sure it was done right, and once it was over, the world fell silent in the way it should have always been. The danger was gone, and she was safe – entirely, perfectly safe.

It should have been enough. I thought that once the danger was gone we would be able to be together, but she disappeared. Just like that, she vanished into the world, taking

herself to a place I couldn't reach as she cut me out of her life. I was powerless.

I waited. I kept watching, kept hoping, and in the quiet moments, let myself imagine her face, her smile, and her laugh. She belonged to me even when she was out of reach. Every day without her burned like a fire I couldn't put out.

Now, finally, she's here.

Finally, she's mine once more, and I won't let the world, or anyone in it, take her from me again.

The words blur. For a moment I think my eyes are just tired from too many hours of reading and the sunlight fading from the windows, but then the meaning slams into me all at once. My fingers go numb. The journal slips from my hands, hitting the floor with a dull thud. I stare at it there on the rug like it's something alive, something dangerous that might spring back open and swallow me whole.

My stepfather's death. The *accident* at work. The one everyone talked about in hushed voices at the funeral. The one people shook their heads over and called tragic and unfortunate.

Ash did it.

The thought lands in my mind like a stone dropped into deep water, its ripples spreading outward to touch every memory I have. My breath comes too fast. It can't be. He couldn't have ... But I saw the words. I read them. *His* words. He didn't describe how, but he didn't have to; the certainty in his writing is unmistakable.

'Oh my God,' I whisper, the words barely making it out of my throat.

I push up from the couch so quickly the room tilts. The apartment suddenly feels smaller, and the air too thick to breathe.

Ash killed him.

My mind scrambles to catch up as pieces of the story rearrange themselves in ways that make my stomach twist. Every page I read drips with devotion and obsession, with that fierce certainty that nothing could threaten what was his.

What was his.

Me.

I press my hand to my mouth as another thought slides in, quiet and poisonous. If he did that – if he was truly capable – then what about Isla?

The breath leaves my lungs in a sharp gasp.

‘No,’ I murmur, shaking my head, as though I can physically throw away the idea. ‘No, no, no ...’

But the thought is already in my mind, planted deep and spreading its roots. Her death, the suicide. Was it suicide? I mean ... of course I didn’t question it at the time. I saw her buying the pills. I knew how unhappy she was, and how volatile things had become in the house. It all seemed to line up so neatly back then. The world handed us a tragic explanation and we accepted it, but it was so sudden, and the more I think about it now, the more I feel like something is wrong.

My sister was dramatic, yes. She loved attention, and loved being the loudest person in the room, the one everyone noticed. She thrived on getting a reaction. Good or bad, it didn’t matter, as long as people were looking at her. But even at her worst, death never seemed like something she would choose. She liked the spectacle too much. She was too full of life, chaos, and the need to be seen. Taking a handful of pills alone in her room, slipping quietly out of the world without an audience, without a fight, without even a goodbye, doesn’t seem like her.

He claims everything she told me was false, that she was the one who came between us all along. A cold shiver crawls up my spine. I can’t stop the question, ugly and terrifying, forming in the back of my mind. If Ash could do that to Grant, if he could watch someone, decide they were a threat, and calmly remove them from the world, then what else is he capable of?

My stomach twists so violently I feel bile rise up my throat. My thoughts spiral faster, racing through every memory of him, every moment from the past month. I think of the warmth in this apartment. The way he looks at me like I’m the centre of his universe. The intensity in his voice when he says my name.

The love.

The possession.

The terrifying certainty.

‘Oh God,’ I breathe.

I need to get out.

I fumble for my phone on the coffee table, nearly knocking over my mug in the process. My hands shake so badly I almost drop the phone. The screen blurs as I scroll to my mum’s name and hit call.

‘Bryn?’ she answers, surprise lacing her voice. ‘Everything okay?’

‘Hey, Mum,’ I say, trying and failing to keep my voice steady. ‘I know I said I’d come down this weekend, but I think I’m going to come sooner,’ I rush out. ‘Like ... today. Is that okay?’

‘Today?’ she asks gently. ‘Is everything all right, love?’

My eyes flick toward the journal on the floor. Ash’s words stare back at me from the open page.

‘I just miss you.’ That part isn’t a lie.

‘Oh,’ she says softly. ‘Well, of course you can come. You never have to ask.’

Relief crashes through me so suddenly I feel my knees weaken.

‘I’ll leave now,’ I tell her. ‘See you soon.’

We hang up a minute later, and I move fast, my mind still racing.

Bag. Keys. Shoes.

Just *go*.

I rush toward Ash’s bed to grab the overnight bag I brought when I first moved in. My shoulder clips the edge of the dresser in my haste and a photo frame topples over, hitting the floor with a clatter. I peer down, trying to work out what the hell just came crashing out of it. It’s a small black device, about the size of a matchbox. A tiny red light blinks on its surface. For a second, my brain refuses to understand what I’m looking at, but then the realisation settles over me. It’s a camera. My stomach drops straight to the floor. Cold horror spreads through me like ice water.

I lift my eyes slowly, scanning the room with new awareness. I see them on the bookshelf, the corner near the ceiling, the vent above the doorway. How many are there? Is he watching me right now? My heartbeat roars in my ears.

He’s been watching me.

Not just today, but possibly right now, and possibly always.

‘Fuck,’ I whisper. Panic surges through me, hitting me in a dizzying wave. Clutching my bag with trembling hands, I rush toward the door, my breath coming in short, frantic bursts.

There’s a distinctive clicking sound and the front door opens.

I stop dead in the middle of the living room. Ash steps inside. For a moment, neither of us moves. His gym bag hangs loosely from one hand. His hair is slightly damp with sweat. He had errands to run today, so I

didn't think about when he would come home. His eyes linger on me before they sweep the apartment in one slow, controlled look.

The bag in my hand. The camera. The journal on the floor. His face stills. Understanding settles over his features with frightening calm.

My chest rises and falls rapidly, panic clawing its way up my throat. He quietly pushes the door shut behind him. The click of the lock sliding into place echoes through the apartment like a gunshot. Ash looks again at the journal before meeting my eyes. Something dark and unreadable flickers across his expression before his mouth curves into an unsettling smile.

'Well,' he says softly, in a tone that makes my blood run cold. 'I guess you're finally caught up.'

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BRYN*Now*

I sit on the edge of my mum's lounge, coffee cooling in my hands. I should feel peaceful. It should feel normal being back here, but my body feels heavy, and my mind is tangled in everything I learnt about Ash last night. I keep seeing the cameras in his apartment. He watched and recorded me. He told me it was not to control me, but to *protect* me. Every lens, every frame, every angle ... he was always there, even when I didn't know it. Then there's the journal, and his confession. I shiver.

He killed him.

I don't know what to think. I remember Ash's words from last night, and how those eyes I love so much stared down at me.

'It's time you finally listen to what I have to say.'

He explained everything about my sister: the lies; the horrific knowledge he learnt was happening in our house; how my own insecurity poisoned me, poisoned *us*; how he took action when I never did. He never chose her over me. He wasn't cruel. He was obsessed with keeping me safe, keeping me alive. It was always me.

'Say it,' I whisper. 'Admit what you did.'

'I killed him.'

The words bounce through my mind; I can't absorb them. 'You don't get to just drop that and expect me to – what? Understand?'

'I expect you to hear me.'

Ash is calm and composed, the opposite of how I feel.

'He wasn't just hurting her,' he says. 'He was abusing her in cruel, unforgivable ways, and then she got out. He was going to you next.'

'That doesn't—' I shake my head. 'You don't know that.'

'I do. I saw him going into her room late at night, and I saw the way he looked at you. I knew what he was capable of.'

A nauseating wave rolls through me.

'No ... no, she would've said something. This can't be true.'

But even as the words leave my mouth, they're without conviction. Memories flash through my mind: Isla's change in behaviour, the way she avoided touch, her anger, the resentment, the questions she asked me that I never understood. All the small things I dismissed, filing them away as moods, as phases, as anything but this. All that time, she needed me, and I was there, but not really at all.

'How did I not see it?' I whisper. I press a hand to my mouth, as if to stem the bile threatening to climb up my throat. 'I was right there. I was right there and I had no idea—' My voice fractures. 'I thought she was just going through something. I never expected this.' All-consuming guilt claws at me, suffocating me.

'She was living with that, and I was blinded by my own problems. God, I didn't try hard enough.' I shake my head and back away from the thought, from him, from all of it, but there's nowhere to go.

'I should've known,' I say, quieter now. 'I should've done something.'

'You couldn't have known,' he says. 'These things are often very well hidden. That's how men like him get away with it.'

'So you decided to murder him?'

'I decided to stop him.'

'That's not the same thing!'

'It is when no one else was going to.'

'This is completely insane. You don't get to decide who lives and dies because you think you're protecting me.'

His gaze locks onto mine. 'The lines don't exist when it comes to you. I'll cross every one of them, Bryn, because you're mine, and I won't let anything touch you.'

There it is: the devotion, now twisting into something I never expected, something harmful.

'I never asked for that.'

'You didn't have to.'

'That's the problem. You decided this. You act on impulse and emotion, and then you stand here like you did something good, like you didn't murder

a man.'

'Impulse?' His mouth twitches faintly. 'No. I gave it a great deal of thought.'

'So this wasn't an act of irrationality. That's supposed to comfort me?'

He blinks, his face remaining impassive.

'Do you hear yourself? Do you hear the words coming out of your mouth?'

'I was protecting you.'

'I know,' I whisper. 'That's what scares me.'

There's a long silence as we stare at each other. My heart is pounding. He looks far too calm.

'Look, I know how this sounds,' he says. 'I know it sounds crazy—'

'Because it is.'

'Isla knew. She knew what he was and what would happen after she left that house. What he'd turn his attention to. Who he'd start watching. She asked me to do this. For you. For her.'

'She wouldn't—' The words die on my lips. All at once, it starts to line up. I remember the way Grant hovered around her, seemingly always on edge, the tension in his shoulders whenever her name came up. He was controlling of Isla in a way he wasn't of me. I think of her behaviour. The silence. The distance between us.

'Why didn't he go to your room first?' she once asked me, and at the time, I was so consumed with Ash, I didn't consider that she might have been talking about someone else. Someone under our own roof. Someone who was supposed to keep us safe.

It hits me hard enough I have to steady myself, bracing my hand against the edge of the table as the weight of it crashes down. It's true. A sick, hollow feeling opens in my chest.

'I didn't see it,' I whisper. 'Any of it.' I was right there, but I was so blind, so naive.

'I felt like I didn't have a choice,' he says. 'Not if I wanted to make sure it stopped. Not if I wanted to make sure you were safe.'

'That wasn't your choice to make,' I say, but my words come out a whisper. I don't feel as angry as before.

'It became mine the second no one else did anything.'

'That's not justice, Ash.'

'Call it whatever you want. I don't regret it.'

His eyes never leave me. His words are fierce and unapologetic.

'I would do anything for you,' he adds, quieter still. 'You've always known that.'

And I have. That's the problem. Because standing here now, I don't know if that's something to hold onto, or something to be afraid of.

Grant can't touch her again. He can't touch me. A thought settles in, heavy and shameful: a part of me, a part I don't want to look at too closely, is grateful. My stomach turns at my own thoughts.

'I get why you did it,' I admit. 'I do, but that doesn't make it right. Now I have to live with the knowledge that you did this, that you're capable of this, but also that part of me is relieved you removed him from our lives. I don't know what that says about me.' I exhale, dragging both hands down my face and putting pressure on my eyes. 'I need space. I need time to understand what I'm even supposed to feel about any of this.'

'Space,' he repeats finally, quieter than before.

I nod once, knowing this decision is final, even though nothing between us is. Something shifts in his expression, and he looks as if he's weighing up whether to argue, to close the distance anyway, to undo what I've just said simply because he can, but he doesn't. Instead, he exhales slowly.

'All right,' he says. He looks at me for a long moment. 'If that's what you need.'

I don't answer, because I don't know if space will fix this.

I lean back against the cushions at Mum's, the memory of our conversation playing through my mind on a constant loop. My fingers trace the rim of the coffee mug. I remember him standing there, calm and quiet, but absolute. His words echo in my head.

'The lines don't exist when it comes to you. I'll cross every one of them, Bryn, because you're mine, and I won't let anything touch you.'

All these years I spent angry, thinking he betrayed me in the most targeted way he could have, and yet the truth, horrifying as it is, is that he didn't. He never did. My sister never hurt me like I thought. I was trapped in my own web of fear and lies.

Ash loves me. He's always loved me.

I take a deep breath and let it out slowly. Cinnamon drifts through the air, the scent warm and familiar. My mum is in the kitchen singing under her breath, and for a moment I forget the chaos in my own life. She's doing

well, despite everything she's been through, and it's nice to see her smile again.

Ash is giving me space. Letting me breathe. Letting me choose. That's how much he loves me: he's letting me walk away, knowing I might never return. I clutch the mug a little tighter, a heavy exhale escaping me. I've loved him for so long. Even when we're apart, I can't imagine my life without him. He holds a piece of me, and nothing fills the void but him. I've always understood the danger, the obsession, and the morally grey nature of his devotion, but now, I see it more clearly than ever.

He did what he thought he had to do. He chose to make his own justice, even if it meant bearing the weight of darkness alone, and yet, he let me leave. He let me come here. He hasn't followed me. He hasn't called. He hasn't demanded anything of me. He trusts me to come back on my own terms and understands if I don't.

I close my eyes and I can hear his voice clearly, telling me about things I never understood, things that happened right under my nose in the house I slept in every night. I know what he did is wrong. It's not right in any way, and I should be terrified of him. But I'm not. I'm beginning to realise I would follow him anywhere. I would stand in the fire with him. I would accept all the darkness, all the moral greyness, all of it, because love like this is all-consuming.

45

BRYN

Now

The week drifts by almost unnoticed. Days bleed into each other.

I have morning coffee with Mum, take twilight walks, and share quiet evenings. Sometimes I can pretend I'm a normal girl living a normal life, but ninety percent of the time my thoughts circle back to Ash and everything he's done. The world feels oddly peaceful here, despite the darkness in my own heart. It's a darkness so like his, in ways I don't quite understand.

My phone buzzes. A number I don't recognise flashes on the screen.

Unknown: Can we meet?

Staring down at it, I frown.

Bryn: Who is this?

Unknown: Meet me at Riverside park at 12

I glance up from my phone, instinctively looking around the street, as if the sender might be standing nearby. Who would text me from an unknown number? A thought creeps in before I can stop it.

Ash?

My heart races, but just as quickly as the idea formed, I try to shake it away. That doesn't make sense. If Ash wanted to see me, he wouldn't do it like this. He wouldn't hide behind an anonymous message. He would just show up and stand there with that quiet certainty in his eyes, like he always does.

Still, the thought lingers in my mind. Who else could it be? I stare down at the message again, a knot tightening in my chest. It could be anyone. It could be someone messing with me, but who would be bothered? My thumb hovers over the screen, ready to delete the message, but it doesn't move.

What if it's him?

The thought remains, quiet but persistent. I tell myself it's ridiculous, that Ash wouldn't do this, wouldn't need to. A question hits me, making my stomach twist in a way that makes me feel nauseous. What if someone knows? What if they know what Ash did, and now they know that *I* know? My mind spirals, looping through possibilities faster than I can process them. Could it be someone trying to warn me about him? To see what I know? Could they want to scare me?

I swallow, my throat dry, my fingers trembling slightly around my phone. I should ignore the message, block the number and pretend I never saw it, but if I don't go, I'll never know. I know myself well enough to understand what that means. The questions will scratch at the back of my mind, growing louder and more annoying as time goes on. I won't be able to let them go. I've never been good at walking away from something unfinished.

I exhale. They want to meet in a public place, and it's the middle of the day. There'll be people around. Surely I'll be safe enough. That's what I tell myself, anyway.

Noon feels like it takes forever to come around and when it's finally almost time, I leave the house. My steps feel heavy as I make my way to the park, my stomach fluttering with a mix of fear and anticipation. The park is quiet, and sunlight spills over the playground and benches. I hear kids laughing faintly in the distance.

My heart plummets to my stomach when I see her.

She's nothing like the sister I remember, but I recognise her instantly. Her hair falls in soft waves, but it's lighter now, and her eyes hold a calm I've never seen before. I stop a few feet away, unsure if I should run to her or away.

‘Bryn,’ she says softly.

‘I ... I can’t believe it’s you,’ I whisper.

We sit on the bench together. Words tumble out slowly at first, then faster as the years of silence and misunderstanding unravel between us. I tell her about everything: moving away, the life I’ve built, the shadows that followed me. She listens quietly and I realise how much I’ve missed her, despite the fact we didn’t get along in those final months living together. There was once a time when we were everything to each other, and I miss that more than words can say.

She tells me the same story Ash did. After she ran away from the hospital, she reached out to him. She was terrified Grant would move on to me next, and she hoped Ash would take care of it in the way she knew he could. She understood him in a way I didn’t back then. She saw him for what he was from the very beginning and knew what he was willing to do for me. Then she disappeared. In the years that followed, she spent a long time in therapy, working through everything and trying to heal. Now, she finally feels ready to face pieces of her old life again.

She just ... vanished. One minute we were waiting for updates, and the next she was gone.

‘What happened after you left?’ I ask softly. ‘Where did you go?’

Isla looks down at her lap for a second before answering. ‘All over the place. I stayed with a women’s support program for a while.’

‘Did Ash know where you were?’

‘No, but he knew I was safe. Eventually I made it to Melbourne and stayed there for a few years, but I moved back up here about a month or so ago. I live about an hour from here. I do social and youth work now.’

I blink slowly, trying to process everything. Somehow it hurts worse, knowing she built an entire life while the version of her in my head stayed frozen at seventeen. And now, knowing she’s been living so close by.

‘Why reach out now?’

‘Because of Ash.’ I wait for the familiar, stabbing jealousy to slice through me, but it never comes, because I know better now. Nothing was as it seemed. ‘He messaged me.’

‘What did he say?’

“‘Hope you’re doing okay. Bryn knows everything now.’” I didn’t answer at first,’ she admits. ‘But I couldn’t stop thinking about it. About you knowing, what that must’ve been like, and how you must have been feeling.

I spent so many years trying to survive what happened that I never stopped to think about what disappearing might've done to you.'

I don't know what to say to that, because part of me wants to cry, and another part wants to ask why she never trusted me enough to take me with her. I want to ask why she never confided in me or asked for my help. Realistically, I know she couldn't have taken me, but that doesn't stop me wondering.

'Why didn't you tell me?'

Her eyes fill with moisture, and she wipes at the corners of them.

'Because I thought if you knew the truth, it would destroy you too.'

I sit with her words for a moment, letting them settle. Nothing feels real to me. It's as if she's describing someone else's life, someone else's choices, but then reality starts to sink in.

'You knew,' I say finally. 'That he'd do something like that. To protect me.'

'Yes,' she admits. 'I did.'

Something twists inside me. It's not anger, exactly, but something heavier and more complicated. It's the strange, aching sense I was left out of a decision that shaped my entire life.

'And you still didn't come back,' I say quietly.

Her expression falls. 'I couldn't come back. I wasn't okay. I finally feel strong enough to see you again. I know it's been a long time.'

She's here. Sitting in front of me, real and changed, but still the person I used to know, too.

'I spent a long time trying to make sense of it,' she continues. 'Of what happened. Of what I allowed myself to be part of, even indirectly. I thought if I stayed away long enough, I could get myself back to a place where I could think about it without falling apart.'

'You're here now,' I say. 'None of us can change the choices we made.'

'Yes,' she says softly. 'You're right.'

My thoughts are racing. It doesn't feel real to be sitting beside her after all this time. She seems calmer and more at peace than I've ever known her to be. I suppose the monster under her bed is finally gone, and she's free to be herself.

By the time the sun begins to dip behind the trees, there's a sense of closure between us, but also a beginning. I blink a few times, but it doesn't

stop the sting building behind my eyes. Five years of silence, anger, and confusion suddenly feel too heavy to carry anymore.

‘I want us to be in each other’s lives again. If you’ll have me,’ she says.

‘Of course,’ I choke out, my voice wavering despite my attempt to keep it steady. ‘I’d like that.’ A shaky breath escapes me and before I can stop them, tears blur my vision. I let out a small, breathless laugh, quickly brushing beneath my eyes.

‘I’ve missed you,’ I admit quietly.

For the first time in years, I feel like the weight of old rivalries and pain has lifted, and even though part of me still aches for Ash, for the dark obsession and love that I crave, I know that this connection with my sister is real, and it’s ours to rebuild.

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ASH

Now

The park is alive tonight. Fog curls over the pavement, crawling around people's ankles as they move through the entrance gates. The lights glow dimly, and music pulses somewhere in the distance while screams echo from the maze. Fright Night: my kind of environment, and the perfect way to get my mind off Bryn.

I stroll down the Haunted Midway beside Jett, my coworker, holding my mask loosely in my hand for now. The smell of smoke machines and caramel popcorn hangs thick in the air.

'Seems quiet tonight,' Jett mutters.

I glance at him. Even without the mask, he looks like he stepped out of one of the scare zones, with dark hair falling over his eyes, his black tactical vest half unzipped, and sleeves rolled up to show the tattoos running down his forearms. People stare at us when we walk past.

'It's still early,' I reply.

My circle is small. Deliberately so. I've never been the type to surround myself with people just for the sake of it. Most of the time I prefer my own company, but Jett slipped into my life somehow.

We met a couple of years ago at the gym. It was one of those unspoken things where you notice someone across the room and recognise your same discipline in the way they move. Same focus, same intensity. We started spotting each other on lifts and talking between sets, which somehow turned into working Fright Night together when the park needed more actors who could handle the physical side of the job. Turns out we work well together. The scares are better when there are two of us moving

through the maze, coordinating without even needing to talk, and somewhere along the way we started filming masked TikToks during quiet nights like this one. We made short clips of us stalking through the fog, appearing out of the dark, and disappearing again before people can react. For some reason the internet loves us, two masked guys who look like they belong in a horror movie. The videos have set us up pretty comfortably.

He catches someone staring at us now and smirks slightly. 'Told you,' he says. 'Too quiet.'

I glance toward the maze entrance as another group of guests hesitates at the gate.

'Give it a minute,' I reply.

The screams start again a few seconds later. He sends me a wolfish grin and shrugs, dragging a hand through his hair. Ahead of us, a group of teenagers shrieks as one of the actors jumps out from behind a crate. Jett laughs under his breath, clearly entertained.

'Amateurs,' he says.

I smirk. My attention drifts, though. It does that a lot lately. To Bryn. I haven't called or followed her. Every instinct I have screams to check on her, to make sure she's safe, to watch from a distance the way I always have when I know she's here, but I won't. She deserves the space. If she walks away from me after everything then that's her choice to make. Even if it kills me.

'She still hasn't come back?' he asks casually, like he can read the direction my thoughts just went. I shoot him a look. 'You're thinking about her again, right? I can always tell. You go silent and get this broody look.'

Rolling my eyes, I shrug. 'I'm always thinking about her.'

That part has never changed, but this time, I'm doing the hardest thing I've ever done. No cameras. No watching. No following her movements. Just waiting. Because loving Bryn means giving her the freedom to decide if she still wants me after learning the truth.

And if she doesn't ... My stomach tightens uncomfortably at the thought. Jett studies me for a moment before letting out a quiet laugh.

'Man,' he says, shaking his head. 'You're down bad.'

'You have no idea.'

A scream cuts through the air as we approach the entrance to the maze. Fog pours out from the doorway in thick waves, swallowing the path ahead. Orange lights flash inside the structure, and shadows jump across the walls

while guests hesitate at the entrance. Jett's joining me in my section tonight. We thought teaming up would be fun.

He stops beside me, rolling his shoulders like he's warming up for a fight. 'You taking left side tonight?' he asks.

'Yup.'

I slide the mask over my face. The world shifts instantly. Out here, I'm not just another guy walking through a theme park; I'm the nightmare waiting for them around the corner. Jett pulls down his mask next. It's a sleek, angular, almost predatory, and darker than mine. It fits him too well, like it was made specifically for his face and the way it moves. Some girls walking past slow down immediately, whispering to each other. One of them nudges her friend.

'Those two are hot,' she whispers loudly.

Jett tilts his head slightly, showing he's heard her. The first group of guests enters the maze. He cracks his neck.

'It's showtime.'

We step into the maze together. Inside, the air is thick with smoke and red light. The music pulses through the speakers, bass-heavy and unsettling. Guests creep through the narrow hallways, clutching each other and jumping at every movement. I lean against the wall, waiting and watching. A couple rounds the corner first. They're already nervous, whispering to each other as they move forward. Jett disappears into the shadows beside me.

Three.

Two.

One.

He launches forward and scrapes his prop blade against the wall, causing a sharp metallic screech. The girl screams instantly, grabbing her boyfriend's arm as they bolt down the hallway. I step out to block their path. They never see it coming. I slam my hand against the wall beside them and tilt my head slowly, my mask inches from their faces. The girl shrieks, taking off, and even her boyfriend curses under his breath before sprinting after her. Jett strolls out of the fog behind me, completely relaxed.

'Ten seconds,' he says. 'New record.'

'You're getting lazy.'

He laughs in amusement, adjusting the skeleton-printed gloves on his hands.

Another group approaches the entrance. Jett leans back against the wall, his mask angled toward me.

‘You hear from her yet?’ he asks. ‘A text, anything?’

‘No.’

‘Think she’ll come back?’

I glance toward the maze entrance, watching people disappear into the darkness.

‘I hope so, but I’m not chasing her this time,’ I say quietly.

Jett studies me for a moment, then he nods, something like respect in the movement.

‘Good.’

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Another scream echoes through the maze. I push off the wall. ‘Let’s get back to work.’

Jett disappears into the fog first, melting into the shadows. I take the opposite corridor, my boots quiet against the floor as the next group creeps inside. They move slowly, clutching each other and whispering nervously. I stay perfectly still as the strobe light flashes across my body when they pass me. The moment they notice me, they scream. I stare them down for a long moment before slowly strolling after them, sending them squealing toward the exit. One by one, they disappear around the corner until the last couple steps through the entrance, and that’s when I notice him.

Ryan. I recognise him immediately. He’s got his arm slung casually around a girl I’ve never seen before, leaning close to say something in her ear. She laughs. She’s clinging to him already, clearly nervous about the maze. My head tilts slightly. Interesting.

It makes me laugh to remember he asked Bryn out, thinking he had a chance with her. Some people spend their lives looking for the one person meant for them. I found mine a long time ago.

He’s here. In my maze. On a date.

A slow grin spreads across my face beneath the mask. I slip silently into the hallway ahead of them, positioning myself where the light is lowest. The maze music pulses through the walls, low and distorted. Their voices drift closer.

‘See?’ Ryan says confidently. ‘It’s not even that scary.’

The girl laughs nervously. ‘Yeah, it’s not as bad as I expected.’ They round the corner. Ryan walks straight into me. I step forward slowly, letting the overhead light catch the mask. He freezes. For half a second he doesn’t move. Then the girl screams and jumps behind him. I tilt my head slowly, locking my eyes with his. Ryan clears his throat, trying to recover.

‘Yeah, okay,’ he mutters to her, side-eyeing me as he steps around. ‘That one got me a little.’

I follow them, dragging my fingers down the wall beside us. The screeching sound echoes through the corridor. Ryan flinches. I step closer, close enough that the girl presses fully into Ryan’s back now, her eyes widening as real fear takes over.

‘You’re supposed to scare us,’ Ryan says, trying to sound amused, clearly attempting to show off in front of this girl. ‘Not breathe down our necks.’

I lean in slightly, enough that the mask fills his vision. Then I step aside without a word, letting him think that’s it. They move past quickly. Ryan glances back with a smirk like he’s achieved something. The girl clings to him.

Jett glances at me and I signal him, gesturing to the couple. I slip around another corner and wait, right where they’ll have to pass me again. The girl is talking quickly now, her adrenaline high.

‘Oh my God, I hated that one. The way he just stared was super creepy.’

They turn the corner, and Jett drops down from a beam overhead, landing with a loud bang. The girl shrieks. Ryan jumps so hard he nearly collides with the wall. I step out from the opposite side at the same time. Now they’re trapped between us. Ryan’s eyes widen.

‘Oh, come on,’ he mutters, glancing between us and beginning to look nervous.

Jett lets out a low chuckle.

‘Run,’ I say calmly, wishing I could mess him up a little, but also very aware I’d lose my job if I touched him.

Ryan practically drags the girl down the next corridor. Jett watches them disappear, shaking his head.

‘That guy almost pissed himself.’

‘I know,’ I scoff. ‘Deserved it. He asked Bryn out. Danced with her right in front of me.’

Jett turns his masked face toward me. ‘Oh. Should have fucked with him a bit more.’

I laugh, adjusting my mask. Another group enters the maze, unaware of us waiting in the shadows. Jett cracks his knuckles.

‘You want the next one?’

I glance toward the exit through which Ryan just fled. A quiet satisfaction settles in my chest.

‘Yeah,’ I say, slipping back into the darkness. ‘I think I’m in a mood tonight.’

‘Let’s scare some fuckers.’ He grins, and we both disappear into the darkness.

The roads are almost empty when I leave the park. The mechanical creaking, the music, the voices, and the screams all become quiet as I pull on my helmet. Only the low rumble of my bike cuts through. The air is cooler now, carrying that stillness that only exists in the hours just before dawn. Most of the town is asleep. I like it that way. I’ve been itching to get back out on my bike.

The engine growls beneath me as I pull onto the road. The moment the wind hits my chest, something inside me loosens. Riding has always done that for me. There’s a kind of peace in it. It’s just the road, the engine, and the night air around me. Streetlights streak past in glowing lines as I pick up speed, the town blurring in my vision. A few cars pass here and there, but mostly I’m alone gliding through empty streets. The rush settles in quickly. I feel freedom in the quiet thrill of moving fast through a sleeping world.

But still there’s something hollow in me that the ride doesn’t quite fill. I’m lost once more without Bryn. She slips into my thoughts as always, relentlessly and unavoidably. I haven’t heard from her in nearly two weeks now. I meant what I told myself that night when I decided to let her go. Every instinct in my body has fought against it since, but love doesn’t mean trapping someone. It means letting them choose, even if the choice breaks you.

I take the winding road out of town, and the engine roars louder as the hill climbs higher. Trees blur past on either side, their shadows long and

black in the moonlight. Up ahead, the lookout comes into view. It's a place I've stopped at a hundred times over the years, a quiet stretch of road that opens up to a view of the entire town below.

Slowing the bike down, I pull into the gravel shoulder, the engine rumbling softly before I finally kill it. Silence settles instantly. Swinging my leg off the bike, I lean back against it, my helmet resting on the seat beside me. Below me, the town stretches out in a sea of tiny lights. From up here, everything looks peaceful.

A slow breath leaves my lungs as I stare out over the view. There's a loneliness that creeps in during hours like this. It all leads back to her. Bryn has always had that effect on me. She sits in the centre of my mind like gravity, pulling every thought back to her eventually. I think about how she looked the last time I saw her. There was uncertainty in her eyes. Fear was there too, mixed with something else I hope might've been understanding. I told her everything: the honest, ugly truth. My fingers tighten slightly around the bike seat. I don't regret what I did to protect her, and I don't regret telling her the truth about it. She deserves the choice, even if it means she never comes back.

The wind moves through the trees, rustling the branches softly. A few clouds drift across the moon. I tilt my head back slightly, letting the cool air fill my lungs.

God, I miss her.

It's not just her physical presence I miss; it's everything about her. The way she looks at me like she sees every part of who I am. The way she understands the darkness in me without pretending it isn't there. The way the world feels brighter and more alive when she's close. Without her, everything feels dull, as if colour has been drained from the world. I spent so long without her only to have her back for a moment, and now she's gone again. This could be the worst kind of torture.

My phone buzzes in my pocket. The vibration startles me slightly, pulling me out of my thoughts. Slowly, I pull the phone out and glance at the screen. It glows softly in the darkness. I open the message.

Bryn: So ... how's the weather where you are?

For a moment, I forget to breathe. The wind moves across the lookout again, cooler now. I lift my head slowly, staring out over the sleeping town,

a slow smile spreading across my face.

No matter the distance, no matter the chaos around us, she always finds her way back to me.

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THANK YOU

Thank you so much for reading *Mine After Midnight*. I hope you enjoyed Bryn and Ash's story. I love writing romance stories with emotional, angsty characters that draw you in. I had so much fun exploring the dark romance genre and had the best time with my morally corrupt bad guys. I loved creating this world and I hope you enjoyed reading it as much as I enjoyed writing it.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Lauren Jackson lives in Gold Coast, Australia. Her hobby of writing stories developed into a passion when she discovered the website Wattpad at fourteen. Since 2012, she has garnered thousands of followers and millions of views on her stories, which helped her grow and develop her love for writing. Lauren loves to write sweet (sometimes dark ... you never know which you're going to get), steamy romances, and is always writing a new book.

Stay tuned for more!

If you'd like to keep up to date with me, please follow me on social media!

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BY LAUREN JACKSON

Standalone

Meant to Be

Red Thorne series

Die for You (#1)

Live for Me (#2)

Fight for Us (#3)

Stratton University series

Break the Rules (#1)

Cross the Line (#2)

Know the Score (#3)

Masked Devotion series

Mine After Midnight (#1)

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A HUMAN SEARCHING FOR HER SISTER,
A GRUMPY VAMPIRE BODYGUARD,
AND A PREDATOR ON THE HUNT.
WHAT COULD GO WRONG?



DIE FOR YOU

A RED THORNE NOVEL

LAUREN JACKSON

AUSTRALIA'S OWN ROMANCE WRITING SENSATION

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RED THORNE BOOK 1

Twilight meets *The Vampire Diaries* in this steamy new adult romantasy.

A girl searching for her sister, a grumpy vampire bodyguard in charge of keeping her alive, and a malicious creature hunting them down. What could go wrong?

THE SURVIVOR

The death certificate says my sister died two years ago in the accident, but her body was never found. I was the sole survivor. Then I saw her. Someone lied. Now, I must travel across the country to find answers from a blood-thirsty vampire with one thing on his mind. I will find out the truth. Even if it kills me.

THE PROTECTOR

I didn't mean for this to happen. I didn't mean for any of it to happen. Now Raya is here. She is mine, and I must protect her at all costs. If she dies, I die. It doesn't add up, and it's all a mess. It's my job to fix it and find my brother. She knows I'm hiding something, but I'm terrified to tell her the truth.

THE PREDATOR

It's been years since I had a lead. Now, I have one. I will watch. I will wait. I will strike. He will be mine.

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A VAMPIRE UNCOVERING SECRETS,
HER TORMENTOR TRYING TO BREAK A CURSE,
AND A PRISONER WHO WON'T TALK.
HOW WILL THEY SURVIVE?



LIVE FOR ME

A RED THORNE NOVEL

LAUREN JACKSON



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RED THORNE BOOK 2

A dark, spicy vampire romantasy for lovers of *True Blood* and *The Vampire Diaries*, from the bestselling author of *Die for You*.

A vampire uncovering dark secrets to save the town, her tormentor trying to break a witch's curse, and a prisoner who won't provide any answers. How will they survive?

THE FIGHTER

I'm being hunted while trying to save a town that wants me dead. No one is safe from him. I know what I need to do to secure their safety, but I don't know if I can end him. My tormentor, my nemesis, the one who consumes me. He hurt me in so many ways, so why do I find myself wanting to save him?

THE ENFORCER

It's always been my duty to stop vampire hunters. But since being cursed to die by a coven of witches, I can't focus on my mission. To make matters worse, someone is hunting Cora. No one touches what is mine. I need to keep her safe without letting her know all my secrets.

THE PRISONER

They want information from me. I can't remember what they're after. Or maybe I never knew in the first place. I need to escape, but it's impossible when my mind is what's trapped.

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A CAPTIVE CRAVING FREEDOM,
A HOST UNMASKING LIES,
AND A STALKER WAITING IN THE SHADOWS.
CAN THEY SURVIVE A WAR?

FIGHT FOR US

A RED THORNE NOVEL

LAUREN JACKSON

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RED THORNE BOOK 3

The dark, steamy and compelling conclusion to the bestselling Red Thorne series.

A captive craving freedom, a host unmasking a lifetime of lies and a stalker waiting in the shadows. Can they survive a war that started long before their story began?

THE CAPTIVE

My life has been stolen. I've been locked away, hidden from the world that I know. They're attacking my memories and everything is unravelling, but I know enough. I'll fight for my freedom. I'll fight for her. Even if it destroys us both.

THE HOST

I thought my life was ordinary, until I found him. Now I'm questioning where the lies end and the truth begins. My fate is no longer my own. I've become bound to the very thing I was raised to fear, and forced to pick a side in a war I don't understand. Protecting him will cost me everything ... but walking away isn't an option.

THE STALKER

They're mine. All of them. I've waited, I've watched, and soon the war will come to an end. Together, we'll bring the world to its knees.

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